

# Where Virtue Lives

## Saladin Ahmed

"I'm telling you, Doctor, its eyes—its teeth! The hissing! Name of God, I've never been so scared!"

Doctor Adoulla Makhslood, the best ghul hunter in the great city of Dhamsawaat, was weary. Two and a half bars of thousand-sheet pastry sat on his plate, their honey and pistachio glazed layers glistening in the sunlight that streamed into Yehyeh's teahouse. Adoulla let out a belch. *Only two hours awake. Only partway through my pastry and cardamom tea, and already a panicked man stands chattering to me about a monster! God help me.*

He brushed green and gold pastry bits from his fingers onto his spotless kaftan. Magically, the crumbs and honey-spots slid from his garment to the floor, leaving no stain. The kaftan was as white as the moon. Its folds seemed to go on forever, much like the man sitting before him.

"That hissing! I'm telling you, I didn't mean to leave her. But by God, I was so scared!" Hafi, the younger cousin of Adoulla's dear friend Yehyeh, had said "I'm telling you" twelve times already. Repetition helped folk talk away their fear, so Adoulla had let the man go on for a while. He had heard the story thrice now, listening for the inconsistencies fear introduces to memories— even honest men's memories.

Adoulla knew some of what he faced. A water ghul had abducted Hafi's wife, dragging her toward a red riverboat with eyes painted on its prow. Adoulla didn't need to hear any more from Hafi. What he needed was more tea. But there was no time.

"She's gone!" Hafi wailed. "That horrible thing took her! And like a coward, I ran! Will you help me, Doctor?"

For most of his life men had asked Adoulla this question. In his youth he'd been the best brawler on Dead Donkey Lane, and the other boys had looked up to him. Now men saw his attire and asked for his help with monsters. Adoulla knew too well that his head-hair had flown and his gut had grown. But his ghul hunter's raiment was unchanged after decades of grim work—still famously enchanted so that it could never be dirtied, and quietly blessed so that neither sword nor knife could pierce it.

Still, he didn't allow himself to feel too secure. In his forty years ghul hunting he'd faced a hundred deaths other than sword-death. Which deaths he would face today remained to be seen.

"Enough," Adoulla said, cutting off yet more words from Hafi. "I've some ideas where to start. I don't know if your wife still lives, young man. I can't promise to return her to you. But I'll try my best to do so, and to stop whomever's responsible, God damn them."

"Thank you, Doctor! Um...I mean...I hereby thank and praise you, and beg God's blessings for you, O great and virtuous ghul hunter!"

*Does he think I'm some pompous physician, to be flattered by ceremony?* A ghul hunter shared a title but little else with the haughty doctors of the body. No leech-wielding charlatan of a physician could stop the fanged horrors that Adoulla battled.

Adoulla swallowed a sarcastic comment and stood up. He embraced Hafi, kissing him on both cheeks. "Yes, well. I will do all I can, child of God." He dismissed the younger man with a reassuring pat on the back.

*O God, Adoulla thought, why have You made this life so tiring? And why so full of interrupted meals?* In six quick bites he ate the remaining pastries. Then, sweets in his belly and a familiar reluctance rising within him, he left Yehyeh's teahouse in search of a river boat with painted eyes, a ghul, and a bride whom Adoulla hoped to God was still alive.



Raseed bas Raseed frowned in distaste as he made his way down the crowded Dhamsawaat street his guide called the Lane of Monkeys. Six days ago Raseed had walked along a quiet road near the Lodge of God. Six days ago he'd killed three highwaymen. Now he was in Dhamsawaat, King of Cities, and there were dirty, wicked folk all about him. City people who spoke with too much speed and too little respect. Raseed brushed dust from his dervish-blue silks. As he followed his lanky guide through the press of people, he dwelt—though it was impermissibly proud to do so—on his encounter with the highwaymen.

*"A 'Dervish Dressed In Blue,' eh? Just like in the song! I hear you sons of whores hide jewels in those pretty dresses."*

*"Hawhaw! 'Dervish Dressed In Blue!' That's funny! Sing for us, little dervish!"*

*"What do you think that forked sword'll do against three men's spears, pup? Can your skinny arms even lift it?"*

When the robbers had mentioned that blasphemous song, they had approached the line that separates life from death. When they had moved from rough talk to brandishing spears, they'd crossed that line. Three bodies now lay rotting by the road. Raseed tried not to smile with pride at the thought.

They'd underestimated him. He was six-and-ten, though he knew he hardly looked it. Clean-shaven, barely five feet, and thin-limbed as well. But his silk tunic and trousers—the habit of the Order—warned most ruffians that Raseed was no easy target. As did the curved sword at his hip, forked to "cleave the right from the wrong in men," as the Traditions of the Order put it. The blade and silks inspired respect in the cautious, but fools saw the scrawny boy and not the dervish.

That did not matter, though. Soon, God willing, Raseed would find the great and virtuous ghul hunter Adoulla Makhslood. If it pleased God, the Doctor would take Raseed as an apprentice. *If* Raseed was worthy.

*But I am impatient. Proud. Are these virtues? The Traditions of the Order say, "A dervish without virtue is less than a beggar."*

The sudden realization that he'd lost sight of his guide pulled him out of his reflections. For a moment Raseed panicked, but the lanky man stepped back into view, gesturing for him to follow. Raseed thanked God that he'd found a reverent and helpful guide, for Dhamsawaat's streets seemed endless. Raseed had been the youngest student ever to earn the blue silks. He feared neither robbers nor ghuls. But he would not know what to do if lost amidst this horde of lewd, impious people.

Life had been less confusing at the Lodge of God. But then High Shaykh Aalli had sent him to train with the Doctor.

*"When you meet Adoulla Makhslood, little sparrow, you will see that there are truths greater than all you've learned in this Lodge. You will learn that virtue lives in strange places."*

Before him, his guide came to a halt. "Here we are, master dervish. Just over that bridge."

*At last.* Raseed thanked the man and turned toward the small footbridge. The man tugged at Raseed's sleeve.

"Apologies, master dervish, but the watchmen will not let you cross without paying the crossing tax."

"Crossing tax?"

The man nodded. "And the bastards will charge you too much once they see your silks—they respect neither piety nor the Order. If you wish, though, I will haggle for you. A half-dirham should suffice. Were I a richer man I'd cover your tax myself—it's a sad world where a holy man must pay his way over bridges."

Raseed thanked the man for his kindness and handed him one of his few coins.

"Very good, master dervish. Now please stay out of sight while I bargain. I will return for you shortly. God be with you."

Raseed waited.

And waited.



Adoulla needed information. Ghuls had no souls of their own—they did only as their masters bade. Which meant that a vile man had used a water ghul in his bride-stealing scheme. And if there was one place Adoulla could go to learn of vile men's schemes, it was Miri's. There was no place in the world that pleased him more, nor any that hurt him so.

*Though God alone knows when I'll get there.* Adoulla walked the packed Mainway, wishing the crowd would move faster, knowing it wouldn't. Overturned cobblers' carts, dead pack animals, traffic-stopping processions of state—Dhamsawaat's hundred headaches hurried for no man. Not even when a ghul stalked the King of Cities.

By the time he reached Miri's tidy storefront it was past midday. Standing in the open doorway, Adoulla smelled sweet incense from iron burners and camelthorn from the hearth. For a long moment he stood there at the threshold, wondering why in the world he'd been away from this lovely place so long.

A corded forearm blocked his way, and another man's shadow fell over him. A muscular man even taller than Adoulla stood scowling before him, a long scar splitting his face into gruesome halves. He placed a broad palm on Adoulla's chest and grabbed a fistful of white kaftan.

"Ho-ho! Who's this forgetter-of-friends, slinking back in here so shamelessly?"

Adoulla smiled. "Just another foolish child of God who doesn't know to stay put, Axeface."

The two men embraced and kissed on both cheeks. Then Axeface bellowed toward an adjoining room, "The Doctor is here, Mistress. You want me to beat him up?"

Adoulla could not see Miri, but he heard her husky voice. "Not today, though I am tempted. Let the old fart through."

For one moment more, though, Axeface held him back. "She misses you, Doctor. I bet she'd still marry you. When're you gonna wake up, huh?" With a good-natured shove, he sent Adoulla stumbling into the greeting-room.

One of the regular girls, wearing a dress made of sheer cloth and copper coins, smiled at Adoulla. The coins jingled as she shimmied past, and he tried to keep from turning his head. *Just my luck*, he thought not for the first time, *that the woman I love runs the whorehouse with the city's prettiest girls.*

Then she was there. Miri Almoussa, Seller of Silks and Sweets, known to a select few as Miri of the Hundred Ears. Her thick curves jiggled as she moved, and her hands were hennaed. Adoulla had to remind himself that he was there to save a girl's life. "When one is married to the ghuls, one has three wives already," went the old ghul hunter's adage. *O God, how I wish I could take a fourth!*

Silently, Miri led him to a divan. She glared at him and brushed her hand over his beard, ridding it of crumbs he hadn't known were there. "You're a wonderful man," she said by way of greeting, "but you can be truly disgusting sometimes."

A man's slurred shouts boomed from the next room. Irritation flashed across Miri's face, but she spoke lightly. "Naj is usually so quiet. Wormwood wine makes him loud. At least he's not singing. Last week it was ten rounds of 'The Druggist, the Draper, and the Man Who Made Paper' before he passed out. Name of God, how I hate that song!" She slid Adoulla a tray with coffee, little salt fish, and rice bread. Adoulla popped a fish into his mouth, the tiny bones crunching as he chewed. Despite the urgency of his visit he was hungry. And Miri was not a woman to be rushed, no matter what the threat.

She continued. "Unlike *some* people, though, Naj can be counted on to be here every week, helping to keep me and mine from poverty. It's been a while, Doullie. What do you want?" She set her powder-painted features into an indifferent mask.

“I’m wondering, pretty one, if you’ve heard anything about a stolen bride in the Quarter of Stalls.”

Miri smiled a disgusted smile. “Predictable! Of course you already have your gigantic nose in this nonsense! Well. For the usual fee plus...five percent, I might remember something my Ears have heard.”

“A price hike, huh?” Adoulla sighed. “You know I’ll pay what you ask, my sweet.”

“Indeed you will. We may be more than friends here and there, ‘my sweet,’ but we’re not man and wife. *Your* choice, remember? Our monies are separate. And this, Doullie, is about money. Now, according to my Ears...”

A name would’ve made Adoulla’s task easier, but Miri’s information was almost as good. A red riverboat with eyes painted on the prow had been spotted only two hours ago at an abandoned dock near the Low Bridge of Boats. And Hafi’s wife may not have been the first woman taken by the ghul. Two of Miri’s Ears said the ghul served a man, one said a woman, but none had gotten a close look.

Still, Adoulla had a location now. Enough to act on. And so, calling himself mad for the thousandth time in his life, Adoulla prepared to leave a wonderful woman’s company to chase after monsters.

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Raseed approached the well-kept storefront and allowed himself to hope. This was not Adoulla Makhslood’s home, but after Raseed’s “guide” had absconded, an old woman had led Raseed to this storefront, insisting that she had just seen the Doctor enter.

Raseed paused at the threshold. He had journeyed far, and if it pleased God he’d have a new teacher. *If* it pleased God. He took a measured breath and stepped through the doorway.

Inside, the large greeting-room was dim. Scant sunlight made its way through high windows. Tall couches lined the wall opposite the door, and a few well-dressed men sat on them, each speaking to a woman. And at the center of the room, on a juniper-wood divan, sat a middle-aged woman and an old man in a spotless kaftan. They stared as a massive man with a scar ushered Raseed in. Raseed looked at the man in white. *Doctor Adoulla Makhslood?*

It had to be him. He was the right age, though Raseed had expected the Doctor to be leaner. And clean-shaven. This old man had the bumpy knuckles of a fist-fighter. *Can this rough-looking one really be him?*

Raseed bowed his head. “Begging your pardon, but are you Doctor Adoulla Makhslood? The great and virtuous ghul hunter?”

The man snorted a laugh. “‘Great and virtuous’? No, boy, you’re looking for someone else. I’m Doctor Adoulla Makhslood, the best belcher in Dhamsawaat. If I see this other fellow, though, I’ll tell him you’re looking for him.”

Raseed was confused. *Perhaps he’s testing me somehow* He spoke carefully. “I apologize for disturbing you, Doctor. I am Raseed bas Raseed and I have come, at High Shaykh Aalli’s bidding, to offer you my sword in apprenticeship.” He bowed and waited for the Doctor’s response.

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*Old Shaykh Aalli?* The only true dervish Adoulla had ever known? Adoulla had assumed that ancient Aalli had gone to meet God years ago. Was it really possible this Raseed had been sent by the High Shaykh? And might the boy be of some help? The Doctor sized up the five-foot dervish. He was yellow-toned with tilted eyes and a clean-shaven face. He looked like one who had killed but did not yet value life.

A scabbard of blue leather and lapis lazuli hung at the boy’s waist. Adoulla smiled as he thought of the bawdy song that poked fun at an “ascetic” dervish’s love for his jeweled scabbard. The tune was as catchy as the words were blasphemous. Without meaning to, Adoulla started humming “Dervish Dressed In Blue.” The boy frowned, then bit his lip.

*God help me, he looks so sincere.* Adoulla sighed and stood, avoiding Miri’s glare. “We’ll talk as we walk, boy. A girl’s life is in danger and time is short.” He paid Miri her fee, mumbled his inadequate goodbyes, and herded the boy out onto the street.

*A dervish of the Order.* Adoulla decided he could not ignore the advantages of having such a swordsman at his side. After all, who knew what awaited him at the Low Bridge of Boats? He was easily winded these days, and he had no time to stop by his townhouse for more supplies. He needed help, truth be told. But first the boy had to be set straight.

“The name of Shaykh Aalli goes far indeed with me, boy. You may accompany me for now. But we’re not in a holy man’s parable. We’re trying to save a poor girl’s life and keep from getting ourselves killed. God’s gifts and my own study have given me useful powers. But I’ll kick a man in his fig-sack if need be, make no mistake. A real girl has been stolen by a real monster. God forbid it, she may be dead. But it’s our job to help however we can.”

The boy looked uncomfortable, but he bowed his head and said “Yes, Doctor.” That would be enough for now.

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The thoroughfare the Doctor called the Street of Festivals was lined with townhouses separated by small gardens. A girl hawked purple pickles from a copper bowl. Raseed smelled something foul, but it wasn’t the pickles.

Two houses down a human head had been mounted above the doorway.

The Doctor spat. “The work of ‘His Greatness’ the Khalif. That is the head of Nassaar Jamala. Charged with treason. He made a few loud speeches at market. Meanwhile, young brides are abducted by ghuls and the watchmen do nothing.”

“Surely, Doctor, if the man was a traitor it was righteous that he should die,” Raseed said.

“And how is it that *you* are a scholar of righteousness, boy? Because you’re clean-shaven and take no wine? Shave your beard and scour your soul?” The Doctor squinted at Raseed. “Do you even need to shave yet? Hmph. What trials has your mewling soul faced, O master dervish of six-and-ten-whole-

years? O kisser of I-am-guessing-exactly-zero-girls?"

The Doctor waved his big hand as if brushing away his own words. "Look. There are three possibilities. One, you're a madman or a crook passing yourself off as a dervish. Two, you are a real Lodge-trained holy man—which in all likelihood still makes you a corrupt bully. Three —" he gave Raseed a long look. "Three, you are the second dervish of the Order I've ever met who actually lives by his world-saving oaths. If so, boy, you've a cruel, disappointing life ahead."

"“God's mercy is more powerful than all the world's cruelties”" Raseed recited. But the Doctor merely snorted and walked on.

As Raseed followed through the throngs of people, his soul sank. Despite years of training he felt like a small boy, lost and about to cry. His long journey was over. He had made it to Dhamsawaat. He had found the man Shaykh Aalli named the Crescent Moon Kingdoms' greatest ghul hunter.

And the man was an impious slob.

Doubt began to overwhelm Raseed. What would he do now? He knew that he needed direction—he wasn't so proud that he couldn't admit that. But what could he learn from this gassy, unkempt man?

And yet Raseed could not deny that there was something familiar about Adoulla Makhslood. A strength of presence not unlike High Shaykh Aalli's that seared past the Doctor's sleepy-seeming eyes. Perhaps...

He didn't realize he'd come to a halt until a beggar elbowed past him. The Doctor, a dozen yards ahead, turned and hollered at him to hurry. Raseed followed, and they walked on into the late afternoon.

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It was nearly evening when they finally approached the abandoned dock near the Low Bridge of Boats. *There should be watchmen here, keeping the street people from moving in, Adoulla thought.* But neither vagrants nor patrols were in sight. *Bribery. Or murder.*

"Doctor!" The boy's whisper was sharp as he pointed out onto the river.

Adoulla saw it too: the red riverboat. He cursed as he saw that it was already leaving the dock. The owner had seen their approach—a lookout spell, no doubt. Adoulla cursed again. Then two figures stepped out from behind a dockhouse twenty yards ahead.

They were shaped vaguely like men, but Adoulla knew the scaly grey flesh and glowing eyes. *Water ghuls. And not one of them, but two!*

Adoulla thanked God that he had the little dervish with him. "Enemies, boy!"

The ghuls hissed through barb-toothed leech-mouths, and their eyes blazed crimson. It was no wonder Hafi had run from them. Any man in his right mind would have.

Adoulla dug into his kidskin satchel and withdrew two jade marbles. He clacked the spheres together in one hand and recited from the Heavenly Chapters.

"God the All-Merciful forgives us our failings."

The jade turned to ash in Adoulla's palm, and there was a noise like a crashing wave. The water ghul nearest him lost its shape and collapsed into a harmless puddle of stinking liquid, twitching with dead snakes and river-spiders.

The drain of the invocation hit Adoulla and he felt as if he'd dashed up a hill. *So much harder every year!*

The other ghul came at them. Raseed sped past Adoulla, his forked sword slashing. The creature snaked left. The boy's weapon whistled through empty air. The ghul drove its scaly fist hard into the boy's jaw. It struck a second time, catching Raseed in the chest. Adoulla was amazed that the boy still stood.

Regaining his own strength, Adoulla reached back into his satchel. He'd had only the two marbles but there was another invocation... *Where is that vial?* The ghul struck at Raseed a third time —

And the boy dodged. He spun and launched a hard kick into the ghul's midsection. Its red eyes registered no pain, but the creature scabbled backward.

Adoulla marveled at the boy's speed. Raseed's sword flashed once, twice, thrice, four times. And Adoulla saw that his other invocation would not be needed.

Ghuls fell harder than men, but they fell all the same. The boy had finished this one. Its hissing shifted into the croaks and buzzes of swamp vermin. Its claws raked the air. Then, its false soul snuffed out, the thing collapsed in a watery pile of dead frogs and leeches.

Adoulla smiled at the puddle. *So he's not all bravado, then. Ten-and-six years old!* "Well done, dervish! I've seen stone-hard soldiers run the other way when faced with those glowing eyes. But you stood your ground and you're still alive!"

"It...it wouldn't die!" the boy stammered. "I cut it enough to kill five men! It wouldn't die!"

"It was a ghul, boy, not some drunken bully! Let me guess: for all your zeal, this is the first time you've faced one. Well, I won't lie. You did brilliantly. But our work isn't done. We've got to find that boat."

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*'Brilliantly,' he said.* Raseed sheathed his sword, trying not to feel pride. He had killed a ghul!

“Thank you, Doctor. I hope —”

He heard a noise from the dockhouse. To his surprise, a scrawny young woman stepped from the shadows. Except that there was not enough shadow there to have hidden her. *How could I not have seen her? Impossible!* The girl wore a dirty dress with billowy sleeves. Her face was a small oval, her left eye badly bruised.

“You killed them,” she said. “You *killed* them!”

The Doctor smiled at her. “Well, not *killed*, exactly, dear. They never truly lived. But we stopped them, yes.” He bowed slightly, like a modest performer.

“But he said they couldn’t be killed! He swore it!”

The Doctor’s expression turned grim. “Who swore it? Are you not Hafi’s wife? Did these creatures not attack you?”

The girl frowned. “Attack me? I...he *swore*,” she said dazedly. “They...gave me time.” She shook her head, as if driving some thought away, and raised a clenched fist. As she did, Raseed saw that she held two short pieces of rope, one white, one blue. His keen eyes noted intricate knots tied at the end of each. The girl raised the white rope—tied with a fat, squarish knot—to her mouth.

“Damn it! Stop her!” the Doctor shouted. There was an unnaturally loud whispery sound as the girl blew on the white rope. As Raseed stood there confused, Adoulla’s shout twisted into a scream. The Doctor hunched over, gripping his midsection in agony. He spoke around gritted teeth. “Get. Ropes.”

The girl blew on the knot again, and Raseed heard another whispery puff-of-air sound. The old man screamed again and dropped to his knees.

*Knot-blowing!* Raseed had never seen such wicked magic at work, but he’d heard dark stories. He charged as he saw the girl raise the blue rope—tied with a small, sleek knot—to her lips. *That one’s for me*, he realized. But Raseed was too swift. He crossed the space between them and palm-punched the woman flat on her back. The little ropes flew from her hand. Before she could get to her feet, Raseed’s sword sang out of its scabbard. He held its forked tip to her throat.

The Doctor shuffled up beside him, panting and still wincing with pain. “Let her stand,” he said, and Raseed did so. The Doctor’s tone was hard but strangely courteous. “So. Young lady. Blower-on-knots. Were these *your* pet ghuls we destroyed?”

The girl sounded half asleep. “No. Pets? No. Zoud said that... Said that....” She eyed Raseed’s sword fearfully and trailed off.

The Doctor took a deep breath and gestured to Raseed, so he brought the blade away from the girl’s throat. But he did not sheathe it.

The Doctor’s voice grew infuriatingly gentle. “Let’s begin again. What’s your name, girl?”

The girl’s eyes lost a bit of their glaze. She had the decency to look ashamed. “My name’s Ushra.”

“And who has hurt you, Ushra? The magus who made these ghuls? What’s his name?”

The girl looked at the ghuls’ puddle-remains. “He...my husband is called Zoud. He sent me to stop you while he got away. I’m his wife. First wife. I’ve...I’ve helped him catch others. Four...five now?”

*Wickedness*, Raseed thought. *This one deserves death.*

“Well, his girl-stealing days are over,” the Doctor said. “Whatever’s happened, we’ll help you, Ushra, but we also need your help.”

Raseed could not keep his disapproval to himself. “And why have you never run away, woman? Or used your knots on this Zoud?”

“I would never! I *could* never. You shouldn’t say such things!” Ushra looked terrified, and for a moment Raseed almost forgot that she was a wicked blower-on-knots who had just made the Doctor helpless with her magic. For a moment.

“I must go back!” she said. “He’ll find me. He’ll make more ghuls! He’ll feed my living skin to them! He did it with his stolen wives...”

The Doctor sucked in an angry-sounding breath. “We’ll stop him, Ushra. Where is he going in that riverboat? Where can we find him?”

Raseed could not let this interrogation continue. “With apologies, Doctor, this one has worked wicked magics and must be punished. It is impermissible, according to the Traditions of the Order, to twist information from one who must be slain.”

The Doctor threw his hands up. “God save us from fanatical children! We’re not going to slay her. We’re going to stop this half-dinar magus Zoud, and save Hafi’s wife. Whatever your Shaykhs taught you, boy, if you wish to study with me you will—”

The puff-of-air sound again.

*Another rope. She had another rope hidden in those sleeves!* As Raseed thought it, his vision went black.

*Blinded!* It was so sudden that he cried out in spite of himself. He felt a soft hand on his face. Then his stomach twisted up and his mind stopped working properly. All around him was darkness and his thoughts seemed wrapped in cotton. *What is this? What foul magic has she worked on me?*

Raseed could not ask the Doctor, because the Doctor was not there.



Adoulla heard the puff-of-air sound again, and suddenly he was alone on the dock. The girl had disappeared and, along with her, Raseed.

*Damn me for a fool!* A whisking spell, no doubt, used to travel from the location of one object to another. Adoulla had seen such magic before—leaving an ensorcelled coin at home and carrying its counterpart to provide a quick escape—but he hadn’t known knot-blowing could be used the same way. *She must have touched the boy, too.* The girl’s power was great, if feral. Adoulla himself avoided such spells. It only took one bad whisking to break a mind, and the caster never knew when it was coming. No quick trip home was worth a lifetime of gibbering idiocy.

He had to find them, and fast. Praise God, he had a name now. A crude tracking spell, then. He would have a splitting headache the next day from the casting, but it was his only choice. Standing on the still-quiet dock, Adoulla dug charcoal and a square of paper from his satchel. After writing the Name of God on the front of the paper and “Zoud” on the back, he pulled forth a platinum needle, pricked his thumb, and squeezed one drop of blood onto Zoud’s name. He rolled the square into a tube and placed it in his pocket. The mental tug he felt meant God had deemed Adoulla’s quarry cruel enough to lead His servant to the man. He followed it eastward, the half-sunk sun at his back.

He cursed himself five times as he crossed Archer’s Yard. Adoulla had shown mercy, and the girl had betrayed him. The dervish had been right. Adoulla was a soft old man who called for tea when he should be calling for the blood of his enemies. The Yard’s hay training targets stood abandoned now, a few arrows still sticking out of them. To Adoulla’s mind the arrows seemed accusatory fingers pointing at him—a fuzzy-headed fool whose weak heart had killed a boy of six-and-ten.

*No.* Not if he could help it. He had brought the boy into this mess. Now, if Raseed still lived, Adoulla would get him out of it.

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Raseed awoke blindfolded, gagged, and bound. During his training he’d learned to snap any bonds that held him, no matter how well tied. But something was wrong here. He was bound not with rope or chain, but with some fiendish substance that burned hotter the harder he tried to escape.

His struggles caused him a slicing pain in his wrists and ankles, but for an uncontrolled moment he thrashed like a madman.

*Calm yourself!* He was disgusted at how easily he lost a dervish’s dignity. He went into a breathing exercise, timing his inhalations and exhalations. The first thing was to figure out where he was. They had blindfolded him, which meant that the knot-blower’s blinding curse was not permanent. *Praise God for that.* Adapting quickly, Raseed let his other senses take over. He heard the cries of rivergulls and a splashing sound against one wall. He smelled water and felt himself swaying. A boat. *Zoud’s. The one we saw leaving.* Raseed was captive on a boat, and bleeding.

He wondered where the Doctor was. *I should not have listened to him. He is old and grown soft.* Raseed could have ended the girl’s life and ought to have done so. Now it was too late. Impermissible panic began to rise in him.

*Inhale...exhale.* He would not feel fear. He would find a way out.

Suddenly Raseed heard a sobbing sound. A young woman crying as she spoke. “I’m sorry, holy man. So sorry. The whisking spell could have killed you.”

*Ushra.* Perhaps a yard away from him. From the same direction he heard glass clink and smelled something acidic.

“What can I do?” the girl continued, her voice moving about. “I’m damned. I didn’t want to be his wife, master dervish. He...he took me and he made me need him. But the things he did to the other wives...” The girl wept wordlessly for a moment, then took a deep breath. “Please don’t scream,” she whispered, pulling down Raseed’s gag.

*Talk to her!*

Raseed felt that God was with him, for the words came quickly. “You can correct your wickedness, Ushra. You can make amends for your foulness. ‘In the eyes of God our kindnesses weigh twice our cruelties.’”

She untied his blindfold, and Raseed blinked at the dim lantern-light. Ushra crouched before him, a long glass vial in the crook of her arm. The look on the girl’s face gave him hope. *‘Our kindnesses weigh twice our cruelties.’* The scripture echoed in Raseed’s head.

“Zoud’s gone now, master dervish, but he’ll return soon. He left me to guard you.” She took a breath and closed her eyes. “I know I can’t fix everything. But I freed the girl, his new wife. That will weigh well with God, won’t it?”

Raseed would not presume to speak for Him. He said simply, “God is All-Merciful.”

The girl opened her teary eyes and spoke more swiftly. “He bound you with firevine. It can’t be untied. I’ve poisoned it, but it’ll take an hour to die. God willing, it’ll die before he returns.” More weeping. “I *am* foul, holy man. My soul is dirty. But, God forgive me, I want to live. I have to go. You don’t know the things he can do, master dervish. I have to go.”

Ushra went.

*But she’s freed Hafi’s wife!* Raseed praised God as he lay there captive, bleeding, alone.

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The red riverboat had docked near the High Bridge of Boats. Adoulla found the hatch open and thanked God. He made his way into the cabins without being discovered, which meant that this Zoud was either blessedly overconfident or waiting for him. For a moment Adoulla half-hoped that he’d find Raseed and the magus’s “wives” before Zoud found him.

But then, as he came to the threshold of a cabin that seemed impossibly spacious, he heard whistling. It was “The Druggist, the Draper, and the Man Who Made Paper,” Miri’s least-favorite song. *Not a good omen.*

The room *was* impossibly spacious, Adoulla realized. A magically-enlarged cabin, grown to the size of a tavern’s greeting-room. In a far corner the dervish lay bound on the floor. *Firevine!* Dried blood ringed Raseed’s wrists and ankles.

Between Adoulla and the boy stood Zoud.

The magus was gaunt and bald with a pointed beard. Raseed's sheathed sword lay at Zoud's feet, and beside the magus stood an oaf whose size made his purpose obvious—*bodyguard*. There was no way Adoulla could reach the dervish before those two did.

Zoud, disturbingly unsurprised at Adoulla's entrance, stopped whistling and gestured toward Raseed. "He is in great pain."

Adoulla frowned. "Why stage this gruesome show for me?"

Zoud smiled. "Simple. I'm no fool—I know your sort. I don't want you as an enemy. Hounding me across the Crescent Moon Kingdoms on some revenge-quest. No. All I ask is your oath before God that you'll leave me in peace. I'd hoped to take the boy with me—the Order has enemies who'd pay well for a live dervish. But if you'll be reasonable you may walk off this ship, and we'll put the boy off as well. That's fair, isn't it? You've taken much from me already. My new wife. Even my first wife."

*Ushra's not here? And Hafi's wife is free? How?* Adoulla could find out later. What mattered now was that his options had just increased. In the corner behind the magus and his henchman, Adoulla saw a small flicker of blue movement. *Impossible!*

He smothered a smile and silently thanked God.

"So," Zoud said. "Do I have your oath, Doctor?"

Adoulla cleared his throat. "My Oath? In the Name of God I swear that you, with your tacky big-room spells, are but a half-dinar magus with a broken face coming to him!"

Everything happened at once.

He heard a snapping noise and the boy was free. It was impossible to snap firevine. But Adoulla adapted quickly to impossibilities. As Raseed leapt to his feet Zoud darted behind his bodyguard and screamed "Babouk! Kill!" The magus clapped twice.

*Oh no.*

The flash of red light dazzled Adoulla for a moment. But his eyes knew and adjusted to the glamour-glimmer of a dispelled illusion well enough. Adoulla had to give this fool Zoud his due. The big bodyguard was gone. In his place was an eight-foot-tall cyklop.

*This is not good.*

A blue streak darted at the one-eyed, crimson-scaled creature. *Raseed!* The dimwitted monster grunted as the dervish barreled into it and knocked the mighty thing off its clawed feet.

Adoulla stood there for a stunned half-moment. *Half the monster's size, yet he topples it!* Dervish and furnace-chested cyklop wrestled on the ground until the monster wrapped its massive arms around the boy. Adoulla took a step toward the pair and shouted "Its eye! One sword-stroke through its eye!"

Then he whirled at the familiar sound of blade leaving sheath. Zoud stood before him with a hunted look on his face and a silver-hilted knife in his hand. *All out of tricks, huh? And now you think to buy your freedom with a knife?* Adoulla cracked his knuckles and took a step toward the magus.

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Raseed wriggled free of the cyklop's crushing hug. The monster pressed him again, closing its clawed hands around Raseed's fists. His wounds from the firevine burned, but he pushed the pain away.

As part of his training, Raseed had once wrestled a northern bear. This creature was stronger. Still, Raseed thought, as impermissible pride crept in, he would slay it. Then he'd know that he had fought a cyklop and won. He twisted his powerful arms, trying to get the leverage to free himself. But the cyklop held him fast. And the pain in Raseed's wrists and ankles grew worse.

Then he heard a small sound and his left hand blazed with pain. His little finger was broken. Another sound. His index finger. The rest would follow if he did not get free. But how?

The cyklop decided for him. Shifting, it hoisted Raseed aloft like a doll. The monster tried to dash Raseed's brains out on the floorboards.

Raseed twisted as he fell, somersaulting across the room. His sword hand was unharmed. He thanked God and forced away the pain of his wounds. He scooped up the blue scabbard, rolled to his feet, drew.

The cyklop grunted. It blinked its teacup-sized eye as Raseed rushed forward. With eagle-speed Raseed leapt, sword extended. He thrust upward.

With an earsplitting howl, the cyklop fell, blood seeping from its single eye. Watching the monster die, Raseed felt more relief than pride.

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Adoulla charged Zoud, making sure that his robed shoulder was his opponent's most prominent target. A sneer flashed on Zoud's face. The fool thought Adoulla was blundering into his dagger-path.

The silver-handled blade came down.

And glanced off the blessed kaftan, as surely as if Adoulla were wearing mail. Zoud got in one more useless stab before Adoulla let loose the right hook that had once made him the best street fighter on Dead Donkey Lane. With a girlish cry, the magus crumpled into a heap. Somewhere behind Adoulla, the cyklop howled its death-howl.

His tricks gone and his nose broken, Zoud lay bleeding at Adoulla's feet. The magus whimpered to himself like a child yanked from a good dream. Before Adoulla knew what was happening, Raseed was at his side.

"Magus!" the dervish said. "You have stolen and slain women. You dared demand an oath before God to cover your foulness. For you, there can be no forgiveness!" Raseed sent his blade diving for Zoud's heart. In a breathspace, the forked sword found it. The magus's eyes went wide as he gurgled and died.

Adoulla felt ill.

"What is wrong with you, boy? We had the man at our -" He fell silent, seeing the boy's firevine wounds.

Raseed narrowed his tilted eyes. "With apologies, Doctor, I expected Adoulla Makhslood to be a man who struck swiftly and righteously."

"And instead you've found some pastry-stuffed old fart who isn't fond of killing. Poor child! God must weep at your cruel fate."

"Doctor! To take God's name in mock is imper -"

"Enough, boy! Do you hear me? Fight monsters for forty years as I have—cross the seas and sands of the Crescent Moon Kingdoms serving God—then *you* can tell *me* what is 'impermissible.' By then, Almighty God willing, I'll be dead and gone, my ears untroubled by the peeps of holy men's mouths!" The tirade silenced the dervish, who stood looking down at the magus's bleeding corpse.

The problem was, Adoulla feared that the boy's way might be right. Adoulla thought of the girl, Ushra. And of Raseed's pain as the firevine had tortured him. And of Zoud's dead "wives." He sighed.

"Oh, God damn it all. Fine, boy. You're right. Just as you were about the blower-on-knots." Adoulla sat down with a grunt, right there on the bloody floorboards. He had fought a dozen battles more difficult than this over the decades, but he did not think he'd ever felt so weary.

Raseed spoke slowly. "No, Doctor. *You* were right. About Ushra, at least. She did what she did from weakness and fear of a wicked man. Yet I would've killed her." The dervish was quiet for a long moment. "It was her, Doctor. Ushra. She poisoned the firevine. She freed Hafi's wife. I'm ashamed to say it, but I must speak true—I wouldn't have escaped if not for her."

Adoulla was too tired to respond with words. He grunted again and clambered to his feet.



Yehyeh's teahouse buzzed with chattering customers. Raseed tried to ignore the lewd music and banter. Hafi and his tall, raven-haired wife sat with her grateful parents on a pile of cushions in the far corner. At a table near the entrance, Raseed sat with the Doctor, who was nursing what he had called a "God damned gruesome tracking spell headache". Lifting his head from his hands slowly, the Doctor fixed a droopy eye on Raseed.

"How many men have you killed, boy?"

Raseed was confused—why did that matter now? "Two. No...the highwaymen...five? After this villain last night, six."

"So many?" the Doctor said.

Raseed did not know what to say, so he said nothing.

Adoulla sighed. "You're a fine warrior, Raseed bas Raseed. If you're to study with me, though, you must know your number and never forget it. You took a man's life yesterday. Weigh that fact! Make it harder than it is for you now. Remember that a man, even a foul man, is not a ghul."

Again, Raseed was confused. "'Harder,' Doctor? I've trained all my life to kill swiftly."

"And now you will train to kill reluctantly. *If* you still wish an apprenticeship."

"I do still wish it, Doctor! High Shaykh Aalli spoke of you as -"

"People speak of me, boy, but now you've met me. You've fought beside me. I eat messily. I ogle girls one-third my age. And I don't like killing. If you're going to hunt monsters with me, you must see things as they are."

Raseed, his broken fingers still stinging, his wrists and ankles still raw, nodded and recalled the High Shaykh's words about where virtue lives. *Strange places indeed.*



A quiet settled over the table and Adoulla devoured another of the almond-and-anise rolls that Yehyeh had been gratefully plying him with. As he ate he thought about the boy sitting across from him.

He did not relish the thought of a preachy little dervish in his home. He could only hope the boy was young enough to stretch beyond the smallness that had been beaten into him at the Lodge. Regardless, only a fool would refuse having a decades-younger warrior beside him as he went about his last years of ghul hunting.

Besides, the dervish, with his meticulous grooming, would make a great house-keeper!

He could hear Miri's jokes about boy-love already.

*Miri. God help me.*



Raseed lifted his bowl of plain limewater and sipped daintily. Adoulla said nothing to break the silence, but he slurped his sweet cardamom tea. Then he set his teabowl down, belched loudly, and relished the horrified grimace of his virtuous new apprentice.

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