

One



A sky of the brightest, palest blue imaginable vaulted over the Great Desert. Beneath it, the golden sands spread for thousands of miles in every direction, swept by the desert winds into crisp patterns of tall crests and rolling valleys. The sun stood high in the sky, a brilliant gold disc, shining down on Shirazar, the City of Butterflies, crown jewel of the Seventeen Kingdoms.

Shirazar was built on top of an enormous stone plateau. The ten-mile wide tabletop of sunset pink stone rose up out of the desert like an island from the sea. From somewhere far below it, water bubbled up through the plateau's natural tunnels and wells, feeding the city that was built over every

inch of it. Shirazar was a rich garden city, its wealth shown by the golden domes and tall spires that filled its skyline. Every building was painted white to reflect the sun and in the morning light, the city streets shone like snow. In dozens of green parks and gardens, millions of butterflies, in every shade of every colour of the rainbow fluttered between fruit trees and flowers.

In the tallest spire of the Royal Palace, the ruler of Shirazar, Empress Haju, was holding her morning meeting with her ministers. Ten men were sitting around a long table, with the Empress' throne at the head. Built at the top of the spire, the council room did not have walls. Instead, tall windows overlooked the whole of Shirazar on every side, to remind everyone who governed there that their decisions reached far beyond the council room and so should always be made with compassion and justice. The First Minister of Shirazar, a tall man with a large moustache, was speaking.

“And so the crime wave finally seems to have come to an end, Your Majesty,” he was saying. “There have been no more reported thefts or burglaries anywhere in the city since the Vessel of

Tears and the Mirror Curtain were stolen from the Shirazar Museum two weeks ago.”

“Oh, good. That’s a relief,” said Empress Haju. “But are they any closer to catching them yet? Thieves on the loose are the last thing we need.”

The Empress was young and beautiful, with creamy pale skin and curly chestnut hair. She was dressed in a long gown made of purple silk and decorated with peacock feathers. The silver crown of Shirazar sat neatly on her brow. The Empress was twenty-three and had come to the throne just two years ago, after her father – a fanatical butterfly collector – had run straight off the edge of the plateau while chasing a large and beautiful tiger moth. The Empress still wished, almost every day, that he had had the time to teach her just a little bit more about being an empress.

“I’m afraid not, Your Majesty,” said the Second Minister of Shirazar. “I spoke to the captains of the Royal Protectors this morning. The thief, or thieves – whichever they may be – are extraordinarily good at not leaving any clues behind.”

“Well, please tell the captains to redouble their efforts anyway,” said the Empress. “Even if the crime

wave seems to be over, we can't have wanted criminals running around the city during the Champions' Race."

The ministers all nodded. The Champions' Race was the pride and joy of Shirazar. It was held once every three years, when the finest flyers of all the Seventeen Kingdoms gathered in Shirazar to compete for the title of the greatest flyer in the Great Desert: the Champion of Champions. This would be the first race of Empress Haju's reign and she was determined that it should go well.

"On the subject of the Champions' Race, Your Majesty," said the Third Minister of Shirazar, "I have good news to report."

"Wait a minute!" said the Fourth Minister. "Is it the same news I've got?"

One of the pieces of advice Empress Haju's father had given her was never to have more than ten ministers to help her govern. This ensured that they were always overworked and therefore too busy to try anything underhand with their authority. It had the added advantage of discouraging anyone unscrupulous from applying for the job and brought to government only hard workers who thrived

on pressure. The only problem was, the Empress reflected, that they always ended up competing with one another over everything, from who could be the most helpful to who could wear the largest turban and grow the longest moustache.

“How should I know if it’s the same news you’ve got?” said the Third Minister, who was currently winning the largest turban competition. “What is it?”

The Fourth Minister leaned close and whispered it into his ear.

“Camelpat!” said the Third Minister. “Where did you hear it? When did you hear it?”

“Over breakfast this morning.”

“Ha! Then I heard it first!” said the Third Minister. “Over dinner last night and from the man himself!” He turned back to the throne. “Paradim Nocturne is going to compete this year, Your Majesty.”

“Oh!” The Empress sat up. “Really? The Red Squirrel is going to race again?”

Paradim Nocturne was the Champion of Shirazar, the reigning Champion of Champions, and possibly the greatest flyer who had ever lived. Flying under his nickname “the Red Squirrel” he had won the

Champions' Race an astonishing nineteen times in a row. The Empress had had a huge crush on him since she was thirteen.

"He's decided he wants to race one final time before he retires, Your Majesty," said the Fourth Minister.

"Didn't he say that last time?" said the Fifth Minister.

"Yes. And the time before that," said the Sixth Minister. "And the time before that."

"Even so, this is very good news," said the Empress. "Having Paradim involved should really help this race go well."

"Of course it will go well, Your Majesty. You're worrying unnecessarily," said the Seventh Minister. "The preparations are nearly complete. The race track has been marked out through the desert. The judges have been selected and they've agreed on this year's rule book. The extra seating for the spectators is under construction and we've even found someone to sell discounted ice creams. Everything will be ready by the big day."

"The contestants are all here as well, Your Majesty," said the Eighth Minister. "The last team

arrived yesterday: Zal Thesa and Zara Aura and their dog, Rip. The Champions of Azamed.”

“Oh, I think I remember them,” said the Empress. “Aren’t they the ones who discovered how to weave flying carpets using all seven colours of magic six months ago?”

“Rediscovered, Your Majesty, yes,” said the Ninth Minister. “In the Great Race of Azamed they left all the other contestants standing. It made all the international news scrolls. Now they’re here to race with us.”

“Oh, good,” said the Empress. “More celebrities on the starting line can only be a good thing.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Your Majesty,” said the Tenth Minister. “You’ve thought of everything. There is nothing at all that could go wrong.”

Above their heads, the ceiling of the council room had been painted with a beautiful fresco. It showed the Celestial Stork, the goddess of Shirazar and most of the other Seventeen Kingdoms, flying around the world through space, followed by her flock of children. The craftsmanship was exquisite. Real silver lined the birds’ wings, diamonds were set into the ceiling to represent the stars and colourful

gemstones marked the birds' eyes. If the Empress or any of her ministers had bothered to look up, they might have noticed that the eyes of the Stork of Fire had been carefully and silently removed. In their place, a pair of real eyes stared down into the room. The eyes were muddy brown and alive, flicking back and forth between the faces, following the conversation. At the mention of the Azamedian team and their magic carpet, the eyes blazed with a deep and burning fury.

“By all the Cosmos Vulture’s tail feathers!”

In the tiny attic above the council room, a thin young man rose to his knees and angrily shoved the two large fire opals back into the Stork of Fire’s eye sockets.

“Even here they’re famous!”

He jumped to his feet and started to pace back and forth, grinding his fist into the palm of his hand. His movements made the candles flicker and his feet stirred up dust from the floor.

“Zal Thesa and Zara Aura! Everywhere I go, it’s Zal Thesa and Zara Aura!”

The man was dressed entirely in brown. His

brown tunic was tucked into his brown trousers, which were tucked into brown socks inside brown shoes. He wore brown gloves and had a brown scarf wrapped entirely around his head, concealing all but his eyes. Around his neck he wore a bronze medallion on a long chain, carved with a symbol made of two elongated “S” shapes inside a circle. Pushed through his brown waist sash, he carried a large black dagger with a thick, wavy blade.

“Six months! Six months and they’re still living on the glory of their supposed triumph!”

The young man was not alone in the attic. Sitting against one wall and watching him with respectful silence were two tall, muscular and dangerous-looking women and a young, nervous-looking boy. They all wore the same brown clothes, medallions and scarf-masks. Both the women wore long scimitars and the boy was clutching a crossbow.

“They’ll pay! Oh, they’ll pay! I swear, by all the Cosmos Vulture’s dark and putrid toenails, they shall pay for every one of their crimes against me and my—!”

“Excuse me,” said another voice. “Is this going anywhere?”

The man turned around. On the other side of the attic, sitting on an old crate and biting into a pear, was Sari Stormstrong. Sari was about twelve years old, though she did not know her own birthday and so could not be sure. She was a small, nimble girl, with the long, strong muscles of a rock climber. Her jet-black hair was pulled back into a long ponytail that hung down between her shoulders, apart from two strands that framed her face. Four long, thin, white scars, from an encounter with the claws of a hungry leopard, were drawn across her right cheek. She was dressed in a plain, rough woven tunic and trousers in rainforest green, with tough moccasins on her feet, and she watched the young man with her large, dark green eyes.

Sprawled on the floor around her were three full-grown tigers, two males and a female. The huge cats were lounging, resting their heads on their paws and lazily sweeping their tails back and forth across the floor. Their orange fur glowed in the candlelight as they looked on with big, yellow eyes.

“Of course it is, my dear,” said the man, smiling behind his scarf. “Forgive me. I do have a tendency to ramble on. But you have no idea how much

trouble those two have caused me.”

The man was known as the Leader, though right at that moment, he was not the leader of very much. Six months ago, he had been the master of the Shadow Society, the secret organization founded in ancient times in Azamed by Salladan Shadow, magician, warrior, spy and prophet of the Cosmos Vulture. Over the centuries, the Society had grown into a vast and powerful crime syndicate, and the Leader had dreamed that under his leadership the Society would finally become powerful enough to overthrow the Caliph of Azamed and take over the city-kingdom. But that was before the Shadow Society’s team – led by that almighty fool Haragan – had been caught cheating in the Great Race of Azamed. Afterwards, the Caliph – outraged at the Shadow Society’s behaviour – had unleashed his guardsmen on them. In less time than the Leader had thought possible, the guards had dismantled every single part of his Society they could find. The rest of it had swiftly collapsed around him. With most of his men in jail, the Leader had had no choice but to flee Azamed, just hours after the race had ended. The only people he took with him

were his two female bodyguards, Hara and Mira, and Etan, the sole member of Haragan's racing team who had managed to escape capture at the end of the race.

"You said you wanted to hire me, Mr Leader," Sari yawned. "Is there a job here or not? I've got other clients to see today."

"Yes, my dear, there is," said the Leader, rather frostily. "It's nothing complicated. Just something we won't have time to do ourselves. It should be child's play for someone like you. Etan?"

"Yes, sir!" Etan jumped to his feet and pulled out an old, yellowed scroll. He turned to Sari and then hesitated, looking at the tigers. Holding the scroll out at arm's length, he inched sideways across the room to hand it to her.

"You'll find that in room four hundred and seven, third floor, east wing of the Shirazar Museum," said the Leader, as Sari unrolled the scroll and Etan scurried back to his place. "Bring it to me intact and unopened. That's important. Five thousand gold pieces if you're successful."

"Twelve thousand," said Sari, studying the scroll.

"Six," said the Leader.

“Twelve.”

“Seven.”

“Twelve.”

“Seven and a half!”

“Twelve,” said Sari. “Or can’t you afford it?”

“Mind your tongue, girl,” said Hara. She and Mira rose to their feet, as smooth and graceful as panthers, placing their hands on their sword hilts. “If you want to keep it, that is.”

“GGGGGGRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!”

Teeth, claws and orange fur flashed across the room. Hara and Mira gasped as the tigers knocked them over backwards and pinned them to the floor with a thud that made the Empress and her ministers look up at the ceiling in the council room below.

“Vulture’s beak!” yelled the Leader, jumping out of the way.

“Waaah!” Etan dropped his crossbow and scrambled backwards against the wall as the third tiger cornered him.

“Do you know how hard it’ll be to break into the Shirazar Museum at the moment?” said Sari, who hadn’t moved from her seat or looked up from the scroll. “They’ve got extra guards, better door locks

and a whole new team of magicians.”

“Yes,” said the Leader. He straightened his clothes and composed himself. He stepped around the tiger holding Mira. “I’m aware security has been tightened since the Vessel of Tears and the Mirror Curtain were stolen two weeks ago. But I’m surprised that it matters. You see, I thought you were meant to be Sari Stormstrong.”

He folded his arms and looked Sari in the eye before continuing.

“I thought you were the only person ever to break into the Impenetrable Vault of the Imperial Bank of Pursolon. I thought you raided the Royal Tombs of Hothath and stripped a hundred dead kings of their burial treasure. I thought you were the one who stole the Diamond Crown of Endsali, right out of the throne room, and the Rajah of Gothopar’s moustache – literally from under his nose. I thought you were meant to be the greatest thief in the Seventeen Kingdoms.”

“I am,” said Sari, with a smile, “so I’m also the most expensive.”

“Eight thousand,” said the Leader.

“Twelve,” said Sari. “If you want someone cheaper, Mr Leader, go and find them. Someone who’d do

it for five thousand might even make it over the museum's garden wall before they get caught. But if you actually want this," she held up the scroll, "it's going to cost you twelve thousand."

There was a long pause. Hara and Mira watched from under the tigers.

"All right! Fine!" said the Leader. "Twelve thousand it is. But only when you bring it to me! You're not seeing a single coin in advance, young lady! And don't expect me to pay for expenses!"

"Sure. We have a deal," said Sari. She rolled up the scroll and stood up. "Come on, Sheertooth, Cloudclaw, Jeweltail. Time to go."

The three tigers crept backwards, releasing the Shadows, and followed Sari towards the door.

"Excuse me!" said the Leader, who had expected to spend at least an hour telling Sari exactly how he wanted her to carry out the theft. "Where are you going?"

"I told you. I've got another client to see today," said Sari. "Don't worry, Mr Leader. You'll get your box."

"It's not a box! It's a... Never mind," said the Leader. "But I'd better get it! Don't even think of

coming to find me without it, young lady! I've got no guarantee you can do this, after all!"

"Oh, I can," said Sari. She looked back and smiled. "Who do you think broke into the museum two weeks ago to steal the Vessel of Tears and the Mirror Curtain?"