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Opening extract from

Zal and Zara and the Great Race of Azamed

Written by

Kit Downes

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Red

A spectacular dawn broke over the Great Desert. Sunlight exploded across the pale sky in a tide of glowing gold. The endless soft brown sand dunes were lit up like rolling seas, captured in time and held still. The light reached Azamed, the city of flowers and carpets, making its white buildings shine. The city was built on the sloping, ragged sides of an extinct volcano. The mountain's fiery heart was dead and cold, but the ashes provided rich soil, perfect for growing flowers in particular. Thousands of them, in myriad bright and beautiful colours, growing in gardens, pots, pools and window boxes, awoke and drank in the warm light as the new day dawned. Above the city's roofs and

streets, the first few magic carpets took to the air, gliding, rising and falling as their riders went about their business.

The Caliph Masat II of Azamed watched all of this with approval from the window of his throne room. He looked very old and wizened inside his golden royal robes, but his mind was still sharp and quick. He cared very much for his city and its people and that morning he could tell, just by watching the sunrise, that all was right within it. He nodded his head, wrinkle-faced and white-bearded, and turned his attention back to the throne room. This was a long white hall, his golden throne at one end, the rest filled with shimmering curtains, comfortable velvet cushions and a cool bubbling fountain carved from pale pink crystal. A few proud peacocks strutted around.

Painted behind the throne was a beautiful mural of Azamed's god: the Celestial Stork, breathing the world into existence as she cried to the first dawn she saw as she flew into this universe. Now she flew eternally around the world, the beat of her wings sweeping peace and harmony and happiness down onto its people.

This morning the hall was packed with the Caliph's viziers and ministers. They were all still discussing the last item on the agenda, which had allowed the Caliph to pause to enjoy the sunrise.

The Caliph cleared his throat, careful to make it as quiet and soft as possible. Only about three of his advisers in the crowd heard him, and the Caliph smiled at their frantic elbowing and kicking of their colleagues to bring them to attention.

"Now," the Caliph said. "What was the next matter?"

One of the Caliph's four Secretaries of Documents, Records and Important Lists snatched a scroll from the hands of a colleague and leapt forward to read from it. It was the Caliph's personal policy always to have at least two men doing the same job. The rivalry and suspicion this created ensured that everyone who reported to him was always absolutely truthful. If they were not, their colleagues would be quick to show them up. In Azamed's court, no bad news was dumbed down and no good news was embellished, and the Caliph always had accurate reports of what was going on.

"The next item, Your Excellency," said the secre-

tary, “is the upcoming Great Race.”

Approving murmurs ran around the throne hall. The Great Magic Carpet Race was something everyone enjoyed arguing about.

“Oh, splendid,” said the Caliph, who liked the race himself. “Please begin.”

Before the secretary could, one of his colleagues had snuck up behind him and snatched away the scroll. This secretary then recited what had been done in preparation for the race. Following this, one of the seven Ministers of Culture stepped forward and described the various race preparations that were still going on but would be finished by the big day. The eleven Viziers for Public Spectacles then had a brief, discreet fist-fight to determine who would list what still needed to be done before the race. When the bruised winner was finished, the arguing began in earnest, with plenty of shouting, foot-stamping and colourful insults. The Caliph again found himself looking out of the window and reflecting. He loved all things about his city, but the race was by far his favourite.

The race was Azamed’s greatest attraction. It was held once a year and travellers struggled across the

desert to the city from all directions just to witness it. Azamed's citizens alone were allowed to compete, but that made it no less of a draw. Thousands of magic carpets, exploding out of the city and flying along an obstacle-filled track through the desert at tremendous speeds was always a sight worth seeing. The only thing more spectacular than watching it, the Caliph mused, was participating in it.

He had done it only once, at the age of twenty. He had disguised himself as a tax-collector to ensure that anyone who might recognize him kept their distance, and had come last because of his carpet getting tangled in a palm tree. Still, despite the long hot walk back it had been one of the most fantastic days of his long life. Out over the desert was the only place where carpets could truly be flown. They were thrilling within the narrow streets and tall buildings of the city, to be sure – no one could make the zipping right hand turns necessary to get through the market district and not have their heart racing. But in the Great Race, pushing your carpet to a speed that made your eyes water and with thousands of other riders trying to outmanoeuvre and overtake you, you truly felt alive.

The Caliph brought his attention back to the loudest argument, between the Chief Respectable Revenuer and the Financier Bursar-in-chief.

"We will need those extra seats!" One of the three Respectable Revenuers stamped his foot.

"You can't afford them!" The first Financier Bursar said, whilst the second held out a scroll of complicated sums.

"That's why we're asking you to pay for them!"

"We can't afford to either!"

"Yes, you can!" The third Respectable Revenuer pointed to the sheet. "You just don't want to."

"Gentlemen," said the Caliph. They stopped in an instant and all bowed to him. The Caliph motioned the fourth Vizier of the Palace Treasury to step forward.

"Would I be right in thinking that the income from the race is always quadruple the expenditure?"

The fourth Vizier was a young, nervous man, and he hesitated for too long, allowing the fifth Vizier, who was older and more experienced, to push him aside and step into his place.

"It has done so for the past one thousand, eight hundred and fifty-four races, Your Excellency," he

said. "There is no indication that this year will be any different. Most of Azamed's hotels are already full up."

"Yes," said the Caliph. "I suspected as much. Have the royal stables opened up for the travellers' use. Be sure to put down some fresh straw. And with regard to the extra seating the Respectable Revenuers require …"

The Revenuers' faces lit up.

"…the Financier Bursars will pay for them …"

The Bursars' faces fell.

"…and the palace will repay the Bursars once the race is finished."

The whole court broke into approving, impressed murmuring. Several social climbers began clapping. Both the Revenuers and Bursars looked relieved, and the Caliph decided it was time for a little fun.

"Now," he said. "Who are the favourites for betting on this year?"

Several people tried to answer at once. There was a scuffle and the winner was the Eighth Irrigation Minister.

"Opinion is divided between two candidates, Your Excellency," he said.

"And they are?" the Caliph said.

"The Thesa family and the Shadow Society."

The Caliph knew of both, and had opinions of both, but he chose to keep them to himself.

"I see. And what has made them the favourites?"

The Ninth Irrigation Minister beat his colleague to the punch.

"They are both rumoured to have woven six-coloured carpets this year, Your Excellency."

The Caliph was impressed. There was a moment of awed silence in the court, then excited talk of odds and bets began.

"Well, well," said the Caliph, sitting back on his throne. "This year's race should certainly be spectacular then."

"Yes, sir!" said the Second Entertainment Minister, who was determined to be promoted to First. "It could only be more exciting if someone were to weave a Rainbow Carpet!"

Everyone in the throne room burst out laughing. The Third Entertainment Minister slapped his colleague on the back. A couple of the peacocks cawed. The Caliph smiled. Then one of the Catering Viziers began an argument with two Ministers of

Foodstuffs about a missing consignment of leeks and potatoes. The Caliph shook his head and began to sort it out.

The Caliph failed to notice, as did everyone else, a large wicker basket at the far end of the hall. As the debate continued, the basket's lid lifted a fraction and a pair of dark eyes peeped out. The figure hiding in the basket held a large red crystal, and tapped his left finger-tip against it in a fast, precise sequence. Each tap made light flash deep within the crystal, like a tiny star exploding in the night sky. No one noticed the basket, or its occupant, at all. As far as they were concerned, everything was as it should be. The race would begin in two days' time.

"The … Thesa … family … and … the … Shado– And us!"

In the attic of a building halfway down the mountainside from the Caliph's palace, an identical red crystal lay on a table-top. It was the twin of the one held by the spy in the basket, and light flashed within it at just the same time. Shar sat before the crystal and watched the flashes without blinking. He held a sheet of parchment that showed which

sequence of flashes corresponded to each letter of Azamed's alphabet, and he was translating the conversation in the throne room as the spy relayed it to him.

"Well, of course *we* are a favourite," said Haragan.

Both boys were fourteen and dressed from head to toe in the dark brown clothes of the Shadow Society. Brown scarves were wrapped tightly around their heads and faces. They wore gloves and even had their trouser legs tucked into their shoes. On chains around their necks, they wore gold Shadow Society medallions. All that could be seen of each of them was their eyes and the bridge of the nose through the eye-slit in their scarves. Haragan had burning green eyes and Shar, watery blue. Shar was kneeling on the floor before the low table and Haragan was behind him, seated cross-legged on a magic carpet woven of reds and browns that floated, rippling like lake water, in the middle of the room a few inches above the floor.

"What else are they saying?" he said, spinning a coin between his fingers.

The Thesa family was no surprise. Haragan had known he would have to face them since the proud

day when he had been commanded to win the Great Race for his Society.

He did not intend to fail.

The Shadow Society had been founded a thousand years ago by near-legendary and much-venerated Salladan Shadow: magician, soldier, intriguer and prophet. To him it had been revealed that the legend of the Celestial Stork was nothing but camelpat. The real creator was the Cosmos Vulture, the last survivor of an older universe. Picking the meat from the bones of the ancient gods, he had acquired their power to create substance from nothingness. Feeling obligated to use the power he had obtained, the Cosmos Vulture had created the new universe and everything within it. Now, he flew around the world every day; night came when his wings passed in front of the sun. He looked down on the people he had created and judged how well they were using the gifts he had given them.

The Shadow Society believed in using everything the Cosmos Vulture had given them to the full. They led lives dedicated to self-improvement – physical exercise, scholarship, the fulfilment of

potential and the overcoming of obstacles – all for the glory of the Cosmos Vulture. He would reward those who did not take his blessing for granted but strived to aid themselves. The most faithful were permitted to ride upon his wings in the next life.

Part of their necessary total discipline was secrecy. The Society had to be kept pure from the poisonous influence of everyday Azamed, or the members might become lax and lazy. The members of the Society (no one knew how many there were, as most were brought in at birth) hid in broad daylight. They never ventured from their secret headquarters without their protective brown clothes and scarves. All they desired and all they strove for was the blessing of the Cosmos Vulture and the continued glory of the Society – although not necessarily in that order. Most members saw nothing wrong with a little moderate breaking of the Caliph's laws. He did worship the false Celestial Stork after all.

Haragan was as dedicated to the creed as any of the teenage acolytes. His muscles were still aching from his morning's fitness training, which was a sign he was doing it well.

"The Thesas…" said Shar. "They … they have a … six-coloured carpet!"

Haragan's head shot up.

That meant only one thing.

She was helping them. It was the one possible explanation. There were too few people in Azamed capable of it. The Thesas were the only team she had reason to help. And who else would they ask? Beneath his scarf, Haragan's face twisted into an ugly grimace. It showed in his eyes and made Shar nervous enough to lean away from him.

She never seemed to be satisfied. *She* always came back to bite him again. Her hunger for his failure seemed to be insatiable…

He began to calm down. Getting angry would not help. Discipline was everything to the Society's members; to Haragan, it was one step removed from food. In fact, anger changed very little. *She* would not beat him.

"A six-colour carpet?" he said to Shar, a plan already forming.

"That's what they said." Shar's voice was muffled. He was a new member of the Society, sent to Haragan for mentoring, and was not yet used to

speaking with half a mouthful of scarf. "Six colours. Just like ours. They're going to be the biggest competition."

"No," said Haragan, holding up a gloved finger. "What does one do to a disadvantage?"

The question was an ancient piece of Shadow Society doctrine, and Shar's answer was perfect.

"Eliminate it," he said. "Do all you can to achieve victory before any game begins."

"And the race is no different," said Haragan. His plan was formed in his mind. "The Thesas have a six-colour. That *could* have made them our biggest competition…"

"But it isn't going to?" Shar said.

"Correct." Haragan smiled behind his scarf.

She would not beat him.