

PROLOGUE

The tidewind came every night.

It billowed in from the Marion Sea between the clock strikes of twelve and two, moving from one wave to another, from the sea to the sand dunes of the Farsai Desert. Salt air and blue sand collided within its swirling midst, weaponising each grain into something deadly.

It blew through the Wardens' Empire and the thirteen cities within, destroying everything in its path not strong enough to withstand it.

To the south, it swirled through the capital city, Nar-Ruta, running along the invisible seams that separated the citadel into four quarters. It weaved up towards the Keep, the smallest and most affluent quarter, where the four wardens, the leaders of the empire, slept soundly behind the iron walls of their fortress. Nothing entered the Keep without the wardens' knowledge.

In the Ember Quarter wreckage rolled through the cobbled streets, soiling the pristine courtyards of the nobility. The tidewind pounded on their lavish doors, but the metal shutters were steadfast.

The tidewind moved on to more fruitful ground, across the Ruta River that separated rich from poor, red blood from blue and clear. It battered the wooden doors of the Duster Quarter and thrust its tendrils through poorly repaired windows. Brooms stood ready for the morning's cleaning. The residents, worn down from the plantation fields, were used to back-breaking work.

The wind moved east towards the final district of Nar-Ruta, the Dredge: the impoverished ruins and rubble home to Ghostings and Dusters. It moved towards the maiden houses where the fake cries of the nightworkers' pleasure drowned out the tidewind's wails. It swept through the shadows of the joba seed drug dens where the small red seed was consumed under the cover of the Dredge's crumbling structures. There it lingered, ready to shred the skin of anyone who had the misfortune of finding themselves outside as the tidewind blew. Then gone would be their dark skin and

blood. The tidewind took it all, leaving nothing but bones and the tattered remains of who they once were.

And the wind had been getting stronger in recent weeks. Hungrier.

The residents of the Dredge not to be found in the maiden houses or joba seed dens could be found in the Maroon, the largest tavern north of the Ember Quarter. Set into the tunnels beneath the city, the tavern was protected from the tidewind's havoc.

Inside the Maroon, a drumbeat shook the blue particles of sand that had slipped through cracks and under shutters, until the sand danced like the plantation workers within.

They were all Dusters. The workers swayed, their brown faces smoothed by the fleeting freedom of the dance. Heels pounded the floor, turning outwards left and right with a flick of their wrists. Backs arched, not in pain now, but in defiance, their faces snapping to the rafters of the tavern. They stamped their scythes on the ground, adding to the cacophony of the drums. The blades were sharp enough to cut bark but blunt enough to make their Ember overseers feel safe. And if their limbs were covered with welts from the whip and their backs stooped from carrying heavy loads, the Maroon's shadows hid all that.

And if it didn't, the firerum would.

Griot Zibenwe took to the small wooden stage and signalled for the band to stop. He held a small djambe drum, and wore a shawl patterned in bright reds and greens, well-made if a little threadbare. His greying locs, which fell down to his waist, shimmied back and forth as he beat a new rhythm on his drum.

Griots were storytellers, Dusters who had taken it upon themselves to preserve their heritage in poetry, prose and rhythm. Many of them worked in the plantations during the day, but at night they came alive with their stories.

There was a collective inhale as the energy from the dance shifted into an anticipation of a new tale.

The drumbeat reached a crescendo and then abruptly stopped.

The audience stood on their heels, waiting with readiness for the griot's words. The silence pulled taut, the tension building, and just when the crowd thought they couldn't take it anymore the griot pounded the djambe three times.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Then he spoke:

"Listen well. Sit close. This story will be told once, and only once. So listen well. Sit close."

Thump.

“Too close!”

Those sitting closest flinched, then laughed as a wicked grin spread across the griot’s face.

He continued, “Let me take you to a time not too long ago, but not yesterday. A moment when the space between the peoples of the empire fractured a little more. Eighteen years ago. Not long ago at all.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“There is one thing in life that weaves us all together. No matter your blood colour, no matter your quarter—we are all birthed into this world as babes, naked under Anyme’s sky.”

“Absolve me of my sins, Anyme.” The prayer an instinctual reflex from the crowd.

“But when the babe cries the weave holding us together unravels. The coloured threads of the empire pull apart, pull away. But there are those who resist the patterns laid down for them. And so, to the story I promised you today.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“You may have heard of the Night of the Stolen, though the wardens tried to strangle the whispers on the wind. But for one night I will prise the wardens’ grip from our necks and let the story free. It is a story about thieves in the night; about a rebellion brewing; about our wardens’ home breached.”

Thump.

“Duty.”

The audience grumbled.

Thump.

“Truth.”

The audience booed.

Thump.

“Strength.”

Fists were raised in the air.

Thump.

“Knowledge.”

The audience screamed their dissent to the beat of the drum.

Thump-ba-da-thump.

The griot stopped and levelled his gaze at a newcomer. “My stories may fill your mind, but they don’t fill my coffer. Latecomers, pay up, stories aren’t free. One slab a piece.”

The griot paused until he heard the sound of a coin hitting his trinket box.

“Now, back we go. To the Wardens’ Keep, where the court resides and the patrons sleep. Here we find three unwelcome shadows: a mother with her child, and the leader of their crimes, sneaking through the gates.”

The griot’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Do you know who they were? The couple who crept in? Fleet of foot and quieter than a breath?”

“The Sandstorm!” a young Duster cried. Instead of a toy, she clutched her scythe.

“Eyoh! You have it right. Indeed, you have it right. The *Sandstorm*,” Griot Zibenwe whispered the word and winked. “Just in case the officers hear your cheers.

“The Sandstorm had a plan that night. They crept into Ember houses and the Keep and cut down anyone in their path. And so, the three shadows moved through the Keep, death in their wake. Blue was their blood, but that night the Keep ran red.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“Up and up the stairs they went. Towards the chambers where the nobility slept. Towards the chambers, where the babies were kept.”

The griot lifted his hands from the drum and sliced them through the air. “The leader slashed his scythe through the nursemaid’s neck. Blue blood stained the wall.”

“He killed a Duster?” the young girl in the front cried.

The griot nodded sadly. “Yes, my friends, he killed one of his own. But I tell you this: love may give you strength, but retribution gives you purpose.”

Thump.

“There in the centre of the bedchamber, another baby lay. A babe whose blood ran red unlike the blue-blooded child the mother held. Two years the Sandstorm had planned for this moment. The mother placed her Duster babe next to the other. Red and blue threads in the Sandstorm’s plan. The Duster a decoy for the other, a life sacrificed to allow them to escape.

“The leader lifted the other baby. The child whose blood ran red. This new child, swapped, was the key to bringing down the empire. Neither looked back at the Duster child they left behind as they ran from the wardens’ home.”

Thump.

“If you looked outside that night you might have seen other couples in flight. For the Sandstorm knew their craft. The craft of people wronged. Twelve children they stole and disappeared into the beyond.”

The griot's voice softened, grew weaker, like he spoke his musings to himself.

"And that is where their story is silenced. A tale with no ending. What happened to the children they stole? Their doom impending."

He raised his head, his eyes shimmering.

"Dead is what the wardens say, destroyed like every rebellion. But sometimes I wonder, what was the Sandstorm's plan? And that of the Stolen?"

The griot stood, the moroseness that had burdened him was vanquished with a mischievous grin. "Remember, my friends: love gives you strength, but retribution gives you purpose."

Thump-ba-da-thump.

The audience cheered and stamped their scythes as the tale came to an end. The griot stood and reached for his trinket box, now brimming with slabs. He looped the strap of the djambe over his other hand and made his way through the crowd who congratulated him on his tale.

As he ascended the steps to the street above he listened for two things. First, to check if the tidewind's wrath had quietened for the night, and secondly to hear the distinctive thud of an officer's boots. It was easy to know if an officer was nearby, as few people in the Dredge owned shoes.

When he heard neither, the griot pushed open the door to the Maroon and slipped out into the blackness of the night.

PART ONE



Trade

Each of the thirteen cities of the Wardens' Empire specialises in different exports, creating a sustainable cycle of resources within a single market. Every city must meet its trade quota each mooncycle, often resulting in a higher death toll of those who labour in the fields. Sacrifices must be made in order to ensure economic stability within the empire; blood will always flow when an empire thrives.

—Extract from *Economic Independence* by Sibul Abundo

CHAPTER ONE

The Day of Descent

I have been searching for any trace of the Sandstorm to complete my tale. Though the wardens claim to have killed them some years ago, I have no confirmation of where or when. It may be my ageing eyesight, but I can't see the end of the story. The rumours are thin, wisps of smoke that I can't grasp. I will continue to search. I will continue to hope.

—Note found in Griot Zibenwe's villa

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

The drumbeat still thrummed through Sylah's veins as she weaved her way back home.

The raw pink of dawn promised a blistering heat, and Sylah tilted her head to bask in the sun's rays. The trinkets in her braids chimed.

She ran her tongue over the joba seed tucked in the gap between her front teeth. The warmth induced by the seed was dissipating, leaving her cold. Hugging her arms to her chest, she noticed for the first time that she held an empty bottle of firerum. She threw it at the wall of a derelict villa, which was filmed with blue sand. It had been a strong wind last night. At times its pounding had even eclipsed the drums.

But not the drumbeat in her memory.

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

The sound came again and with it an unmistakable tremor of fear that woke people from their beds. Now Sylah listened and realised she knew the cadence of the rhythm, and it wasn't from the song in her mind. It was the pounding of the Starting Drum, indicating the beginning of a trial.

It was the sound of death.

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

Dredge-dwellers began to seep out of their decrepit homes and stream

towards Dredge Square. Sylah found herself being carried along in the current.

The Square was full of Dusters and Ghostings, blurry-eyed from a night of drugs, sex or alcohol. Or in Sylah's case, all three. A dozen officers of the warden army stood to attention in front of the rack, the wooden device used for executions. Like ripe bruises, the army's purple uniform was enough to instil fear in anyone north of the Ruta River—anyone without red blood.

Sylah spotted Hassa in the crowd and pushed her way towards her.

"How's it hurting?" Sylah greeted the Ghosting girl.

Like the beetle she had been named after, Hassa was small with dark eyes. The colour was unusual for a Ghosting, as light-coloured eyes were often a feature of their translucent blood. But it didn't matter if you were a Ghosting or Duster, everyone who lived in the Dredge had the same hollowed-out look. It was a mandatory uniform, an expression of squalor and poverty enforced by malnutrition and childhood labour.

You look like shit. Have you even slept? Hassa signed.

Sylah ignored Hassa's observation and pointed towards the officers. "Have you seen this guy's talent?"

Hassa followed Sylah's gaze to the officer with the Starting Drum strapped to his chest. He was beating the rhythm with absolute dedication, his muscles clenching and releasing with military precision.

He was born to play the drums, Hassa agreed.

Sylah snorted. "Bet he wanted to join the Playhouse, but his mother made him enlist in the army. Poor little Ember."

Hassa smiled, revealing the spongy flesh of her severed tongue. Her tongue, like her severed hands, had been taken from her at two mooncycles, like every Ghosting in the empire. Their limbs and tongues were cut off and sent to the wardens to tally against the number of Ghosting births. A penance for a rebellion four hundred years old. As a result, Ghostings had developed a complex language that used all elements of their body. It was a subtle language, one invented in defiance of the rulers that still condemned them.

The drum stopped, though the vibrations of dread rippled out for moments afterwards. The captain, identified by his striped green kente epaulettes, stepped forward.

"In the name of the four wardens, blessed by Anyme, our God in the Sky, we bring forth the accused."

A prisoner in shackles was brought forward between the officers' ranks. Sylah inhaled sharply between her teeth. "A griot."

They raided his villa a few strikes ago, no warning, Hassa signed. He told his final story last night.

Sylah vaguely remembered a griot entering the Maroon, but she had been preoccupied with chewing a record number of joba seeds.

“What did they get him for?”

Writing letters.

“Bastards.”

Bastards, Hassa agreed, using her left wrist against her shoulder in a slashing motion.

Sylah scowled up at the podium where the officers stood. How she hated them and everything they represented: fear, oppression, pain. She rubbed her neck as the captain continued.

“The accused deliberately and maliciously plotted and engineered acts of rebellion against the Wardens’ Empire through the written word. A crime punishable by death. May Anyme be our guide. May Anyme absolve you of your sins.”

The griot’s head hung low, his grey locs trailing the dirt in front of him.

“We pronounce you guilty of treason.”

Sylah muttered, “They’re *always* guilty.”

Hassa nodded sadly. The trials always ended the same way.

A hush fell over the crowd as a ripper was spotted.

Rippers were Dusters, forced to turn on their own kind. It was their job to turn the lever that separated the two jaws of the rack. Their uniform was deep blue. Less washing that way.

Sylah shivered and ran her tongue over her teeth probing for any residual joba seed juice, but the husk was dry. She spat the remains onto the ground.

“Ach.” Hassa bared her teeth at the globule on the ground.

It’s turning your teeth Ember.

“Ember?”

Hassa signed the word again. Sylah had been learning to understand the Ghosting language since she’d met Hassa six years ago, but she still stumbled now and then. “Ah, red.” The two words were differentiated by an additional turn of the elbow. “Well, I don’t care.”

You should. The drug is very bad for you, it could kill you. The sign for “kill” was a wrist across the throat. For some reason the gesture made Sylah smile.

It’s not funny.

Sylah met Hassa’s stare and reached into the satchel at her waist. She

pulled out her final seed and, with precision, squished it into the gap between her front teeth. The bitter juice took effect immediately and she closed her eyes for a blissful moment.

The euphoria vibrated through her veins faster than the tidewind. The feeling was so loud, so all-encompassing, that she was carried away from the scene before her.

But she'd seen enough rippings to know what happened next.

The prisoner would be chained to the rack's wooden bed with four manacles separating their limbs wide. Then the ripper would turn the lever, and with each turn spread the wooden bed—and with it, the prisoner's limbs—even wider. First you would hear the prisoner's joints popping, then the cartilage tearing. Eventually, the skin would rupture, blue blood dripping. Sometimes a larger chain was wrapped around their midriff, so that their limbs were left intact, but their vital organs cleaved apart with each *click, click, click* of the lever.

Embers were never subjected to the horror of a ripping; their trials involved courtrooms and juries. Although occasionally Embers would cross the Ruta River to watch those who had been condemned for doing something particularly nasty. The rack was tilted towards the audience for this very purpose. Nothing better than a family outing to watch a rapist get ripped to shreds.

If Sylah were in charge, the rippings would be the first thing to go, the racks broken, the splinters scattered like confetti.

Sylah opened her eyes, her blissful contentment at odds with the horror: fourteen turns of the rack and the griot was still alive.

Sylah whistled softly. "This griot's got some real stomach." A laugh burst out of her. "Well, no, I guess he hasn't." She gestured to the entrails on the ground.

People around her murmured sounds of dissent.

"Oh fuck off, it's not like you haven't seen it before. They do it once a mooncycle."

Sylah, Hassa tugged on Sylah's arm. *Be quiet, you're going to draw the officers' attention.*

But the joba seed saturated Sylah with confidence.

"Why should I be quiet? What's the point when it could be *any of us next?*"

Hassa turned to Sylah and pushed her backwards through the crowd. Though Sylah stood two handspans taller than Hassa, the joba seed robbed her of her stability and Sylah drifted backwards like a feather.

Sylah, get up. Hassa was standing over her.

“When did you get up there?” The warmth of the joba seed enveloped her, and as exhaustion settled within her bones she lay backwards, her plaits fanning out.

They were braided with trinkets, fragments of a family she no longer had and that carried with them the frayed threads of memories and so were cherished above all else. Some she wove lovingly in her hair each mooncycle. Others, a leaf, a melon rind, had simply appeared uninvited and masqueraded as a valued token.

Two sheer pebbles of glass dangled from her fringe. The mottled remains of a woven scarf that had been absently stroked to tatters. Strands of a bow string and a quill knotted side by side at the end of two braids. The shell of a sand snail behind her ear. When she tilted her head, her hair clacked like aching bones knocking together.

The skeleton of all the pieces of her.

No lice though. Sylah was proud of that.

The braids were shorter, the hair coarser, angrier, where they frizzed around the scar that ran ear to ear across the back of her neck. A puckered smile from the officers who had cut her.

That had cut them all down in the end.

She rubbed the keloid skin absently. Six years and still the scar refused to fade.

Hassa kicked Sylah in the shin.

“Ow, go away. Can’t you see I’m sleeping?”

Sylah, you can’t sleep here.

“Why not?”

Because you’re in the middle of the street.

Sylah turned her head left and right, and saw, through the molasses of her daze, that she was indeed in the middle of the street. The crowds from the ripping had already begun to disperse, some stepping over Sylah without a qualm.

Sylah, get up. Hassa offered her wrist and Sylah reluctantly took it.

As much as she wanted to sleep, the officers were still on patrol and despite her earlier outburst, Sylah didn’t want to be their next victim. Though sleeping on the streets wasn’t an offence, she was sure the officers wouldn’t simply step over her. And their boots were *heavy*.

Come on, let’s get you home.

Hassa began to lead the way through the Dredge towards the Duster Quarter, Sylah resting her elbow on Hassa’s shoulder.

Are you going to go to the Descent later? Hassa asked.

Sylah growled low in her throat. For a moment she had forgotten it

was the Day of Descent. But now she looked around and spotted the signs of the holiday sprouting like weeds in the streets. Limp kente cloth flags and dirty rope streamers were strung from roof to roof. The breeze carried the smell of candied plantains, boiled in sugar that had been hoarded just for the occasion.

But no matter how hard the bakers tried, the aroma couldn't mask the Dredge's pungent smell of unwashed bodies and filth. Even if you were lucky and the wind blew the other way, you'd get the acrid smell of raw latex from the rubber plantation fields outside the city's walls. Depended if you preferred spoilt cheese or shit, really. Sylah barely noticed either scent anymore.

"The Descent? Ha! No. I'm not going to watch four people walk down some stairs and call it a festival."

It's not just four people walking down some stairs, it's the changing of the government. The disciples taking their holy seats as wardens. Hassa's eyebrows pulled her shaven head towards her ears as she frowned.

"Blah blah blah."

It only happens every ten years. I don't remember the last Descent Day.

"Course you don't, you were only seven."

You were only ten, Hassa shot back, mischief alight in her dark eyes.

"Exactly, so I don't need to go again. I remember it all." In fact, she'd tried to forget it many times.

Sylah ran her tongue over her teeth. "Hassa, I've run out of joba seeds." *I'm glad.*

"I need to buy more."

Sylah, I'm not trading with you anymore. You're taking too much.

"It's not for me, it's for my friends."

You don't have any friends.

Hassa's eyes were hollow. Sylah reached for them, and Hassa batted her away with her wrist.

Promise me, promise me you won't take any more this week.

"I promise."

Hassa was visibly torn. *Do you have any slabs?*

Slabs were the currency of the empire. They were made of whitestone and stamped with the faces of previous wardens, just in case the citizens forgot who was in charge.

Sylah did not have any slabs. She'd lost another apprenticeship the night before, and she'd been drinking and chewing away her troubles all night.

"Trade?" Sylah offered.

Trading was the Ghosting way, more so than their roles as servants, because they chose to trade. Servitude to Embers was thrust upon them.

Most traded and smuggled goods. Drugs, firerum, materials, kitchen utensils, if you needed it, a Ghosting could get it, and Hassa was one of the best.

Fine. What have you got to trade? Hassa turned to access her stash from her bag, the opening large enough for both of her forearms to rummage in. Sylah stumbled as soon as Hassa let her go. The joba seed juice would thrum through her blood for some time yet.

“I have this.” Sylah pulled out the runelamp from her satchel. Blown from the azure sand of the Farsai Desert, the lamp was a circular glass shell. It was no better than a fufu bowl without the bloodwerk that marked it: dark blood crafted into runes. Once activated, the runelamp created a deep red glow that was used instead of fire torches.

Bloodwerk was what really set Embers and the rest of the citizens apart. Red blood, when written into specific strokes and dashes, had the power to manipulate and move objects. It was the true power that placed Embers above the rest of them.

Sylah, that's broken.

“Shit, I must have smudged the runes in my bag.” She hadn't, she'd found it that way. The chain of crimson runes was damaged, rendering the lamp useless. Sylah copied them down anyway, maybe one day she'd figure out how to bloodwerk. She could then sell runelamps by the dozen, making her a lot of slabs.

And more slabs meant more joba seeds.

“Will you still trade it?”

No, I can't sell this, Sylah. If you want to get the bloodwerk fixed, I will trade for it. Not until then. I hear a new master of blood has moved into the Duster Quarter. Doing penance, I'm sure.

“Oh, come on, Hassa, you know every master of blood charges Dusters double.”

He charges Ghostings triple.

Sylah swore.

Find me something I can trade.

A couple of Ghostings emerged from their ramshackle villa and waved at Hassa. If the beige of their servant uniform didn't set them apart, then the grey-brown pallor of their skin did. Ghostings had always seemed like beautiful dolls to Sylah. Dolls whose hands and tongues the empire had severed and then discarded at the bottom of their toy chest.

Hassa signed back to them, then turned to Sylah. *I have to go. If I don't see you at the Descent, I'll see you at the Maroon later?*

Sylah scowled, frustrated that her friend wouldn't trade her for joba seeds. She'd have to find another dealer.