It was midnight when the group finally showed up at Abudir’s establishment. Everyone was parched and starving from the merciless sun and exacting journey. The desert was not a place for those that did not know her perils, even in this day and age. Jaro stepped forward from the crowd, but then hesitated. His head dropped down as he stared as his feet.

Something inside him stopped his advance and he shot a glace over his shoulder at the dying sun. The dunes of the wastes whispered softly in the cooling breeze and the silhouettes of his men and the buildings around him were black purple against the red light. He hadn’t seen Abudir for ages. There was no telling if the man would even recognize him. His worn shoes stared back at him, rough and weathered by years of abusive wearing grains. His clothes were only slightly better; they were bleached tan by the cloying dust of the winter storms. Like most decisions, this one was made for him. Abudir’s place was the only one that might take them in.

Jaro sighed and signaled for the group to follow him as he walked towards the modest residence. He hoped his presence and that of his followers would not impose too much on the once friend, but he had scraped up the money in case it cost them.

He ducked through the doorway.

Abudir reached low for a bottle, jostling Shera who happened to be passing behind him at the time of the maneuver. She snorted and smacked the offending body part. Abudir straightened quickly, but not quickly enough. The old-timers guffawed over their various glasses. Abudir did his best to hide the redness of his cheeks, but a smile ran across his face nonetheless.

He swung the alcohol on the table in front of him and poured the man’s drink. Off to his side, Shera did the same with a much more expensive variety. Once she was done, she slid by Abudir and whispered softly in his ear.

“We’re out again” her voice but her face betrayed none of her concern. “That’s the third time. Its getting harder and harder…” she conveyed before dancing off to entertain another costumer.

Abudir had none of his wife’s social skills and he saw Habilish’s quick eyes catch the momentary frown that appeared at the news. The man owned a mine some miles out of town so was not unwealthy but had seemed wary lately for reasons he would not share.

Luckily the entrance of a new party distracted the group.

“Welcome!” He shouted over the talking patrons. “Are you…” He stopped at the sight of the man leading the group. The nondescript man at the front’s face was almost indiscernible, but when Shera looked up she could have sworn she saw apprehension for some reason.

The noise of the establishment quieted a bit as the owner recognized the man and jogged around the bar to meet him in person. “Jaro?” Abudir asked in a warm deep voice, “is that you?”

Abudir grasped the man’s outstretched hand before it could be raised properly. “Its been a long time! Have you at last won your fortunes and seen the world as you wished? What brings you back here of all places?”

Jaro shrugged and the rest of the men seemed to take this as an indication to fall into the vacancies among the many tables.

“I’ve been here and there. I’ve won my fortune and lost it in time. But I still have my health. What a lovely place you have!” He said looking around at his surroundings.

“And what a lovely wife!” He added, winking at Abudir. Shera grinned and joined the two, shaking Jaro’s hand as well.

“I always thought you two made a wonderful couple. You’ve proven me right.” He said as a troupe of children burst in from the back rooms.

A black haired boy sprang from the doorway clutching something as an equally black-haired girl chased in close pursuit.

“Papa!” The girl yelled, still weaving among the chairs after the boy. “Ali took my toy!” The two came to a stop when they approached their parents though.

Ali looked up at the stranger but said nothing, hiding whatever toy he had stolen well out of sight.

Amina took the chance to snatch the thing back and looked at Jaro half accusatory, half defensive. “Who is this? He isn’t from here.”

Jaro made as if to answer, but Abudir cut him off.

“This is Jaro Quelman. He’s an old friend of your father and mother.” He replied.

The girl nodded, then just as quickly dashed back to the back room where they had come from. Ali tailed her, realizing that she still held the toy he wanted.

“They are wonderful children.” Jaro said with a sincere grin.

Shera thought she saw something pained in that expression but said nothing. Jaro’s history was his own business, and she knew not everyone was as fortunate as they.

“Yes, we are truly blessed” admitted Abudir, clasping his hands together. “Although they can be quite a handful sometimes,” he admitted. “But what brings you here? I haven’t seen you in years!” Abudir repeated.

Jaro’s grin diminished. He gestured questioningly towards a nearby table and Abudir nodded. The three of them sat at the round table and pulled themselves in close.

“It hasn’t gone well my friend. I…would hate to disturb you or your family for any length of time, but I have no options. We have to get back to the capital as soon as possible.” The grin was now gone.

“Then the rumors are true? Are they this close?” Shera asked almost a whisper.

Abudir’s face darkened but he said nothing yet, merely waiting for an answer to his wife’s question, the fireplace to his side casting shadows on his countenance.

“It is as bad as they say and worse. It wasn’t a fight, it was a slaughter. My men and I barely escaped.” He admitted.

Abudir growled exasperatedly. “I don’t want to hear about this right now.” He said leaning back from the conversation. “I have enough trouble to deal with as it is. I don’t need the business of nations on top of it all.”

Jaro sighed as well. “Like it or not its what’s happening friend. I doubt they would come in this direction since it would mean crossing the desert as well, but just to make sure, are you ok with me and my group staying here despite all that?”

“Of course” Shera said.

Abudir nodded in agreement, “I don’t care if you’re wearing brown or white or have riches or rags. I will house anyone who can pay.” Abudir pronounced. “That’s how I’ve always done it, and that’s how its going to be.”

“Thank you friend.” Jaro said. “Everyone will be very glad to hear that. Many of us haven’t had a good nights sleep in a while.”

“Don’t mention it.” Abudir said, but his emphasis sounded like he would actually like that to be the case.

Not an hour later though, the call of a man brought Abudir to his upstairs’ window. From there he could see out in the beginnings of the wastes. A sliver of sun remained and a line of men was visible on the approach.

Shera jostled him aside and looked as well, a long breath drew through her teeth. “This looks bad” She said underestimating the situation greatly.

“Do you think they’re looking for him?” Shera said.

“Perhaps.” Abudir said quickly. “I care not. Jaro’s business is his own. If they want a drink or a room they’re more than happy to them.”

His noncommittal attitude was unnerved though by the sounds of yells from the city limits.

Jaro and his men were now all at one table, the rest of the patrons had left quickly to get to their own homes.

It was then that Shera truly noticed their bedraggled condition and lack of weapons. It certainly had not gone well for them, she thought as she hurriedly closed the heavy storm shutters on the windows.

Abudir made sure that the children were asleep in the back before he joined his wife at the bar. They waited.

The yells were more and more frequent now, and Abudir could have sworn that he saw the red light of a fire from the crack in the windows. Jaro and his men were silent but Shera saw fear in some of their eyes. Abudir’s hand held her waist protectively. They waited.

The door burst open. A tall man in white emerged from the doorway. From behind him Abudir could see men fighting in the streets and more than one building was on fire. He could hardly believe his eyes.

The newcomer had a long gaunt face and a fresh scar across his left cheek. A weapon hung at his side. Although they had emerge from the desert, his uniform was spotless. The medals shone, the leather polished. A glare hung on his eyes.

“Welcome.” Abudir mustered. “Would you like…”

“Shut your mouth.” The other man said quickly and harshly. His eyes swung around the room and caught Jaro in their sights.

“Ah, I thought it would be you. Jaro Quelman, you’ve been quite the talk of the upper echelons. Who would have thought you’d have managed to escape our little…encounter?” Several thugs now filled the room.

Abudir stepped forward. “I will have no fighting in my establishment.” He said firmly. “I will have to ask you to leave.”

The other man switched his attention from Jaro and his men to Abudir. A fist lashed out and Abudir found himself on the ground nursing a swollen jaw. Somewhere far away he heard Shera swear and the sudden sliding of chairs. Jaro held her back and whispered something to her before letting her free.

“Stop. Stop at once. Raheem. You came here for me. Here I am. I will surrender to you.” He said striding towards the man before lowering his head to the man. “Leave the rest alone. This is not their fight.”

Raheem nodded to the men at his sides and they revealed their weapons as Raheem suddenly grabbed Jaro by the hair and started dragging him out the door. “No! No!” Jaro yelled and struggled at the other man’s grip but one of the thugs smashed his head with one of the chairs and Jaro went limp.

Abudir sat bewildered on the ground as the thugs began using their weapons on the defenseless men. Blood soon ran the length of the floor. He recalled Shera screaming.

He was aright once more. One man, clearly unsatiated with the killing being committed in the other part of the room had turned his attention to Shera and was grabbing her by the hand, fighting off her clawing responses.

Abudir, never a violent man, grabbed the thug by the shoulder and slammed his fist into the offenders face. He felt the other man’s nose break. Blood rushed from the man’s face joining what was already on the floor.

Some of Jaro’s men were fighting back now, but it was clear it was not a fight they were going to win.

Abudir felt the hands of several other men try to pry him off the one who had grabbed Shera. By now the man’s face was gone, broken under pillows of swollen tissue and a mask of blood.

He felt a sharp pain in his side and realized someone had hit him with a chair as well. Thankfully, that had not turned their weapons on him yet or he never would have survived that night.

Behind him, Shera had broken a bottle over one man’s head who was slumped on one of the tables and was fending back two more with the broken remains of her weapon.

As he blocked an attempt to smash his head he noticed a man going around behind Shera. He tried to yell a warning but a sudden blow ripped the wind from his gut. He doubled over in pain, redness flashing before his eyes.

Raheem stood over him. Anger took Abudir who rushed at the murder, who calmly held his hand in a iron grip and turned it behind Abudir’s back. Sudden pain shot through Abudir’s arm, splitting the mental miasma of disbelief that had clouded it.

Raheem pointed to his wife. The two men held her down while a third held a cruel looking armament at her. Abudir went to free himself, but Raheem simply twisted his arm further, inducing crippling pain, and causing him to slump to his knees.

He looked vainly at Jaro’s men, but they fared no better. All of them lay on the floor, either dead or unconscious. Raheem’s men stood over some, attaching what looked like restraints to their arms.

“Do you see?” Raheem spoke cleanly, still holding Abudir’s arm at a sickening angle. “There is no fight anymore. You will come with me.”

Raheem attached restraints to Abudir’s arms and legs and he was soon being dragged out of the room. “What about Shera? Don’t you dare touch her!” He screamed as dust ran all over the clothes she had cleaned for him just earlier today. In a moment of clarity he said nothing about his children, hoping they had heard the commotion and had time to flee.

They were outside. Abudir could see the rest of the town now, all around him, no one of his friends were doing any better. Bodies were starting to accumulate in the square, all in a row, tied but squirming on the ground. All men. “What are you doing!” He screamed again at Raheem as the man affixed his restraints to a massive metal chain, along which several members of the town were attached.

After Raheem was done. He turned at looked clearly into Abudir’s eyes before yelling “kill the rest!”

Metal bit into his arms like teeth as he lunged forward, forgetting that he was now attached to several other people. The chain pulled taught and he crashed against the hard road. Undeterred he tried to scramble to his feet but the restraints hindered his movement and he fell to the ground again.

Raheem looked at him curiously before delivering a rib splitting kick to Abudir’s side. Abudir yelled in agony as Raheem repeated the attack, finally delivering one to Abudir’s face. Abudir collapsed.

Raheem made sure Jaro and the man’s friend were securely chained before turning back to Abudir’s building. He gave a sign of affirmation as his men started lighting fire to it.

The town burned. People burned. And those that didn’t soon perhaps wished they had.

Abudir awoke to realize he was being dragged along the ground. Sand filled his mouth and clothes, and the early morning sun shone overhead. He tried to stand but the chain line would not slow for his attempts and he fell again. Jaro was ahead of him though and after the second time, realized what was happening. He was pulled to his feet and met a grim face.

The memory of the previous night flooded Abudir’s head and he gripped Jaro’s shoulder sharply. As he did so, he was surprised to wince at wounds on his shoulders and upper chest, no doubt from being dragged.

“Where are we? Is everyone from the town here?” He said, walking sorely but quickly to keep up with the constantly moving line. “Have you seen Shera? Have you seen my children?”

Jaro shook his head. “They only seem to have taken the men.” He said grimly. “I…I’m so sorry Abudir. I should never have come. He said with a weak voice.”

Tear now streamed down Abudir’s face. A guard, a thug he recognized from last night caught his attention. “Where are the others? He yelled. “What did you do with… them” He yelled again, this time his voice deserting him at the end.

“No talking.” The guard responded and smashed Abudir over the head with something.

Abudir realized he was being dragged again. Jaro was trying to wake him.

“Dear god, man, your head is bleeding!” he said, falling back to try to help Abudir. The chain in front of him pulled taught though and he was yanked forward against his own volition.

He reached up to touch his scalp and his hands came away red. A splitting headache attacked him. He was still in disbelief. He could not understand. He kept on walking.

The sun was just beginning to rise. Abudir could feel the heat. He knew it wasn’t the true desert heat yet but the world swam in front of his eyes. Foot followed foot. The ground gave way from packed ground to sand. He could feel it shift under his feet as he walked. His eyes kept down. He was suddenly aware he only had one shoe. Nothing to do about it. Keep walking.

The horizon was an endless line around him. There no major landmarks in the desert. His eyes passed a submerged red post. It had significance. Sometimes either of the nations dragged way points. They left. Everything sank.

The desert was a living thing. Nothing lived in it but it itself lived. Abudir could hear its breath now. It spoke to him in soft gusts. Swirling sand was its footsteps and also its mouth. The sand was a maw and he was being fed to it. He was a sacrifice. His blood would quench that eternal thirst.

He looked down and saw that indeed his chest was bleeding. The desert’s teeth were imbedded in his flesh. How strange. He had always lived on the edge of this beast. He had never heard its call before. It was both strange and terrifying. He hoped whoever was leading them knew where they were going. A yell came from one of the guards. He had slowed. He could not slow. Otherwise the beast would tear into him and there would be nothing left.

He realized that the man in front of him was trying to talk to him. Abudir looked quizzically at the man’s mouth. It was moving in fascinating ways. His ears heard sounds. The other man was now trying to shake him.

And the wind rushed by him in frightful gusts. “….Abudir!” Jaro was yelling.

Abudir’s eyes finally focused on the other man but he said nothing yet. “Abudir, my friend are you ok? The guards say we are stopping soon. You should get someone to look at your head.”

Abudir’s hand went up to the wound but came away dry.

“How long have we been walking?” Abudir asked.

“More than three hours by the sun. But more than three days in total. I had to carry you for bits of it!” Jaro replied.

Abudir's mouth opened but his clumsy lips brought no breath to words. He merely frowned.

“Halt!” one of the thugs said from up front. The line trudged to a stop and people knelt over panting; the sun was showing itself.

“Everyone stop!” He repeated. The line needed no second urging. Everyone fell to their knees, and some fell completely. Or had already fallen. Perhaps everything had fallen. Nations, men and sanity. Before them gaped the desert.

“Oh gods. They're taking us to the mine!” A man said off to Jaro's side.

Abudir's head turned somehow slower than he would have liked to address the man. The world swam.

“What… mine?” He managed.

The man approached him and lifted him to his feet. He was old and gaunt, but still had some strength in him.

“Are you feeling well, Abudir? Its me, Habilish.”

“Is there water?” Jaro interjected. The guards passed out meager amounts.

“Give me that. Abudir looks hurt.” Habilish said, grabbing the jug from Jaro; who let it go, with perhaps a twinge of reluctance.

A beast cannot cross water. It has to be bidden. The desert cannot give life. It can only take it.

“God, his eyes aren't focusing. I think he had a concussion.” Habilish said.

Things became somewhat clearer. A rainstorm after a drought. Flowers in spring on the spine plants. The mighty wadi. The water rushed down his parched throat.

“Sorry. I… I must have taken quite a blow to the head.” Abudir managed to say. Almost emptying the jug. A sudden impact hit him as he realized that the water was meant for all of them.

“I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking straight...” Abudir said, handing it off to Habilish.

Jaro peered at him.

“What is your wife's name?” Jaro asked him.

The fire. The yelling.

“God. Why would you ask him something like that? We don't even know...”

Jaro glared Habilish quiet and turned to Abudir for a response.

“Shera.” He replied. “...the most beautiful woman in the world.” He said, his voice operating from a distance. His eyes staring into the nothingness, into the desert.

“Now listen.” Jaro said, grasping him by the shoulders. “Remember her. She is alive. And you are going to get back to her. Do you hear me? While I am still breathing I swear that to you.” The tall man looked at Abudir, staring straight into his eyes.

Abudir nodded, suddenly ashamed at his actions. “Of course. Of course. She will be worried. And the children...”

“Right.” Jaro said, grasping his again and pointing him to Habilish.

“Tell him what you know, old man.” Jaro commanded.

The man looked down for a moment, for some reason ashamed.

“They're taking us to the mine. Like I said.” He looked away.

“The whole thing you fool!” Jaro commanded, leaning forwards threateningly.

“Fine, fine! Look, Abudir. The Whites have taken the mine...or…No, I'll be honest. I sold it to them. Things weren't looking so well. We hadn't been able to make a profit in months. I had gone into debt over in the city. When I couldn't pay… well… It was all that I had left.”

“I'm sorry to hear that Habilish. I remember as a child when you and your father employed scores of men. A business deal is a business deal Jaro. Whats your point?”

“Because it wasn't a business deal. Tell it all damn it!” Jaro said.

“Information!” Habilish squeaked. “The whole thing. About the town. When I saw Jaro and his men. I told them everything. They even promised to help me get the mine back up and running.”

“You did what?” Abudir said, not comprehending.

“They did fix the mine back up. Expanded it too. But I wasn't really running it anymore. They started bringing in Brown Cloaks. But wasted ones. Making them work. They're turned the thing into a camp Abudir. They're going to work us to death in my own damn mine! ” The old man yelled, eyes widening.

“Shut it you!” One of the guards said. A whip cracked and Habilish was on his stomach panting, a red welt slicing through his back.

“Looks like you're ready enough as it is!” He said, addressing the line. “Get a move on it!” Whips snapped in unison.