

Chapter One

My mind was calm and peaceful, my breathing slow and easy. I raised my imaginary hands; they looked so much bigger and rougher than my real ones. These were the hands of a hard-working peasant, not a prince. They were good and strong, exactly what I needed. I flexed them a few times, making fists, and then opening them up again until, finally, I felt ready to build my protective mental barrier—my *wall*, as I called it. As usual, I began by conjuring one simple red brick. It slowly started to take form. I could see it growing, and feel its weight increasing between my hands. Then it all went wrong, and I wound up holding a misshapen red lump of muddy clay. I felt my shoulders sagging. Why did I have so much trouble focusing today? I leaned against the tree trunk, hoping maybe more shade would help me concentrate.

All I needed was to conjure up the bricks; then the rest would come easily, and I could relax and watch the wall take shape. *Focus Amir! Think about the wall, the barrier, and nothing else besides the barrier.*

According to Khuan—my friend and teacher in these matters—these barriers were different for everyone. For instance, his was a transparent sheet of glass that only slightly clouded his perception of the spirit world we “shal-galts” could sense surrounding us all, allowing him to rest his senses while remaining aware of his surroundings. My barrier wasn’t nearly as sophisticated. Actually, to be honest, mine was pretty crude—not that it mattered to me; I loved my wall regardless of its rough appearance: my thick, opaque, red brick wall. To learn how to build this barrier was the reason I had decided to accompany Khuan and Lilloh, both emissaries of the eastern emperor, to the famous traveling city. Well, it was not the only reason, but definitely the most important one.

They’d told me I was a shal-galt: a ghost seeker, a demon killer, a sorcerer hunter. I should have been relieved to know that the voices in my head were really echoes of ghosts’ whisperings *and not* the product of a deranged mind, as I’d previously feared. The strange, disturbing sensations my body often experienced, like tingling, stomach pain, nausea and sudden cold, were caused by either the proximity of a demonic creature or the effect of some residual magic lingering in the air, and not by shattered nerves.

So, I wasn’t crazy after all. Although it was a relief, oddly enough, I gathered very little joy from this knowledge. I despised magic...loathed it, really. As for demons and ghosts, needless to say I’d rather do without them, hence the wall, the thicker the better. I didn’t want anything to seep through—anything at all. I found ghostly voices, demonic presences and magical auras highly upsetting. I didn’t want to be a seeker, shal-galt, or anything associated with the supernatural world. I wanted to be normal, ordinary even. I wanted peace of mind.

I concentrated again. Once I had successfully eliminated all thoughts from my head, I focused on erasing the outside interferences. The gurgling of the river lazily running beside me was the first to vanish. (I was seated close enough to its pebbly shore that if I stretched my hand I could touch its icy water.) Next to go was the feel of the breeze on my skin, and then the rustling of leaves from the tree under which I sat. When

my mind reached a relaxed state of blissful numbness, I began building my wall, starting with the foundation, just as Khuan had taught me. First, I conjured the image of my hands, then bricks and, finally, a bucket of mortar.

My imaginary hands grasped a brick and laid it on the ground rather clumsily, a second brick was set beside the first...then another...and another, until I had made a long row. A copious layer of mortar was then applied. Slow at first, this process soon sped up. My movements became easier. I could see my hands placing each square lump of clay, one atop the other, each one making my wall stronger, taller, and thicker—slowly enclosing my special shal-galt senses within its protective circle and sheltering me from the assaults of the supernatural world.

Amir, no! Please don't lock me out, Jafer begged in my head. As usual, the ghost of my dearly departed brother was trying to stop me from building the wall; however, his attempts were now less frequent and much weaker than previously. Like me, Jafer had been a shal-galt—a ghost seeker able to sense either magic or spirits and demons or, in our case, both. And after his death, Jafer had kept appearing to me...to counsel me, I suppose. Although my brother meant well, I found his constant whispering in my mind and impromptu apparitions in my dreams quite disturbing. But, thanks to this mental barrier-building technique, things were now bearable.

“He’s a strong spirit,” my friend Khuan had said of Jafer. “But with time, your brother will eventually cease coming to you. His going to rest will be best for both of you. What he’s doing is dangerous. It puts you and him, his immortal soul in particular, at risk.”

I hoped Khuan was right in saying Jafer would at some point go to rest and leave me alone. I wanted to be at peace. I wanted to forget the past, to forget Jafer’s death, and, most of all, I wanted to forget Eva’s rejection. A couple of months had passed since I’d left Sorvinka and joined Khuan, Lilloh and the old alchemist, Auguste Ramblais, on this journey toward the Anchin traveling city. Hard to believe, but it was almost summer now. Time might have passed since the day I left Sorvinka—the same cursed day Eva had rejected my marriage proposal and announced that she would instead marry Lars, King Erik’s heir to the throne—but little else. I still felt my gut wrench every time I thought about it. I still hurt just as much as if it had happened yesterday; the wound remained just as deep. One thing had changed though. My anger toward Eva had subsided. Now I just wanted the pain to go away.

The sound of voices reached my ears. I looked over my shoulder and spotted my trusty eunuch guard and servant, Milo, and Khuan chatting together beside the campfire. The two made a very peculiar pair. Milo was tall, blond and slender to the point of gauntness, and, more or less, the total opposite of Khuan, who was short—well, shorter-appearing in comparison to the tall, lanky youth, but solidly built with long, silky black hair tied into a braid. His facial features were small and delicate, with well-defined high cheekbones, a rather small nose, and inquisitive, dark, slanted eyes. Milo’s eyes, on the other hand, were wide, round, and a soft mossy-green; his features, aquiline nose and square jaw, were pronounced and highly masculine.

My focus gravitated to Milo’s smooth, beardless cheeks. I rubbed the coarse hairs of my own chin. It felt wrong. I leaned over the river’s edge, contemplating my reflection, and sighed. My beard was a little crooked, shorter on the left than on the right side. Besides the poor grooming job, something else in my appearance struck me. The tan

young man staring back at me in the water, with his angular cheekbones, his square chin and jaw, looked nothing like a prince. Yes, I still possessed the straight nose and flawless profile of my family, the warm brown eyes and thick dark hair of my kind. But nobody could ever tell that I was Prince Amir Ban, second in line to the throne of Telfar, land of sun and sand, after my beloved brother Erik, the ruling Sultan.

No. Right now I looked like an ordinary man, a simple traveler, and nothing more.

An outbreak of boisterous laughter disrupted my reverie; I turned my gaze to my friends again. The sight of Milo and Khuan laughing joyously together brought a smile to my face. I liked them both. And more importantly, I trusted them. Trust was new to me. *Better hurry up and finish this wall*, I decided, anxious to join them.

I sat straight and fixed my eyes on the vast, empty plain stretching to the horizon. Taking a deep breath, I tried to forget my surroundings, the sound of the wind rushing through the leaves of the tree's canopy stretching above me, Milo's laughter as he helped Khuan and Auguste clean up our camp after breakfast, and Lilloh's constant criticizing in the background. I frowned, gritting my teeth. Her voice grated on me—not because its timber was unpleasant, but because her supercilious tone certainly was. Worse still, she had the attitude to match. Women should never be so...so bold. And this particular one certainly didn't know her place.

Forget her, I ordered myself, *forget everything*. It worked. My concentration recaptured, I started the barrier-building exercise all over again. Slowly, brick by brick, row by row, the wall rose. And as it did, Jafer's voice, my doubts, my insecurity, my fears and my pain were locked behind it. I felt lighter. I felt at peace.

"You shouldn't do that," Lilloh said behind me.

I winced, and at once my wall crumbled. I tore up a handful of grass and threw it at her in frustration. "*Arghh*, Lilloh! Now I have to start all over again."

"No you don't," she argued, which didn't surprise me one bit because arguing with me seemed to be Lilloh's favorite pastime. And our arguments had steadily gotten worse. As a result, I regretted having let Milo give her all those Sorvinkian lessons. (Lilloh was now perfectly fluent in this language, while my Anchin left a lot to be desired—and she took much pleasure in reminding me of this.) Teaching Lilloh Sorvinkian had been a mistake, I thought. She was more sufferable when she had less vocabulary.

"Accept what you are, Amir, and learn to live with it; don't hide behind a mental wall like a coward."

"Watch your tongue, Lilloh!" I warned, glaring at her.

She held my stare, her dark, piercing eyes riveted to mine. "I have a habit of speaking my mind, which I'm not going to change on your account!" One of Lilloh's eyebrows rose as she paused. When she spoke again it was in a different language. "And from now on I will speak to you only in Anchin. You would do well to answer in the same language. You need to practice, Amir. Your accent is too thick. If you want to be understood by our people, your Anchin needs to improve!"

I shook my head. Lilloh might have been more articulate in her own language, but, sadly, she remained just as rude.

She joined me under the tree and rested her back against its trunk. I noted that she wasn't wearing her usual rough leather garments and chain mail. Instead, she was clad in a pale brown, loose-fitting, linen shirt over matching pants. A wide yellow belt tightly encircled her waist, accentuating its narrowness. Her jet-black hair, as lush and shiny as

mink fur, which normally flowed freely around her heart-shaped face, was tied into one long braid that fell to the middle of her back. This new hairstyle exposed every detail of her face as never before, making her high cheekbones, dark almond eyes and full lips particularly striking. In the soft morning light, her skin appeared more golden and supple than a freshly baked bread roll. The new clothes and hairdo suited her well, in my opinion. This was an improvement. Lilloh looked more polished, more civilized, very unlike the savage creature I had met in Sorvinka, the one who always seemed on the verge of gouging my eyes out.

Lilloh wrinkled her small, low-bridged nose. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you looking at me as if you’ve never seen my face before?”

“Don’t be silly! I’ve seen your face far too often if you ask me. It’s the clothes I’m curious about. What’s with the new outfit?”

Adjusting her belt, Lilloh said, “Summer clothes. Soon it will be very warm, too warm to wear leather.”

I nodded. I too had abandoned my thick kaftans in favor of light cotton tunics and comfortable linen pantaloons. I looked at Lilloh again and saw that she had grasped the tip of her braid. A leather hair tie with two jade beads dangling at its ends held her braid together. I watched her roll the beads between her fingers as an uncomfortable silence settled between us.

Lilloh broke it first. “You’re still going to build your mental barrier regardless of what I say, aren’t you?”

“Yes!”

“Then I won’t subject you to the sight of my face any longer.”

“Good!” I said, staring directly ahead. Moments later, I heard her leave. By the brisk stomping her feet made, I knew she was angry—yet again. I sighed. For some reason, Lilloh and I couldn’t have a discussion without it turning into a heated argument of some sort. I guess some people were just not meant to get along no matter what. Shaking my head, I tried to banish Lilloh and her unpleasant, arrogant attitude from my mind and started rebuilding my barrier once more.

I was just beginning to make progress when the sound of galloping horses broke my concentration. I saw two riders racing toward our camp. Khuan and Lilloh had already mounted their shaggy brown ponies and were trotting out to meet them. I gathered the small rug on which I’d been kneeling and hurried toward the camp. By the time I had rejoined Milo and Auguste at the campsite, Khuan and Lilloh had met up with the riders. All four now stood some distance away from us and appeared to be talking.

“Who are those newcomers?” I asked Milo.

“Messengers from the Anchin emperor.”

“Here? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Auguste. The old alchemist limped over beside me. Stroking his long gray beard, he aimed his good eye at the group; crossed by an ugly scar, his other eye was white and dead, the disastrous result of a failed experiment. Auguste pointed a knobby finger at the riders, or more precisely at the red and gold banner the man on the right was carrying, and explained, “See the gold lion at the center of the banner? That’s the emperor’s emblem. Khuan told us so before riding to meet them.” Auguste rubbed his red bulbous nose; then his fingers traveled to his scar, where they lingered. “What do you think their sudden presence here means?” he asked.

I surveyed the group. Khuan's and Lilloh's stiff, formal posture didn't bode well. "Nothing good, my friend. Nothing good."

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The messengers didn't stay long. Shortly after my exchange with Auguste, they turned their horses around and rode off in the same direction they had come, and Khuan and Lilloh rejoined us.

"What's going on?" I asked as they reached the camp.

"The emperor summons us to the palace," answered Khuan.

"Why?"

His brow furrowed for a brief instant. "I can't say." He paused and shot a hesitant sidelong glance to a very pale and distraught Lilloh before adding, "It wasn't fully explained to us."

How bizarre, I thought. If I didn't know Khuan as well as I did, I might have been tempted to believe that he was lying to me right now.

"Let's hurry and break camp," Khuan said in an upbeat tone. "We must be there before sundown."

"Before sundown—impossible!" I exclaimed. "You said the city was two weeks of travel away."

"Not anymore," said Lilloh. "The city has moved to the Sanksiki province. If we make haste, we can be there this afternoon."

"Oh yes! Yes! Wonderful!" cheered an enthusiastic Auguste. "Let's hurry to the traveling city! I can't wait to see this marvel. What about you, Prince Amir?"

I smiled. "Oh yes! I am looking forward to seeing this city, too. I'm sure Lilloh and Khuan are also impatient to return home."

Khuan replied with a series of nods and a broad grin.

Lilloh, however, looked so glum that it took me aback a little. The expression on her face was a blend of shock and sadness; I thought she looked as if she'd unexpectedly lost something very precious to her and was still in shock.

I felt my stomach knotting itself. *Lord! Something's up, because this woman doesn't upset easily*. Clearly the news they'd received from the emperor's messengers was troubling her. It filled me with apprehension.

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We'd been riding hard for most of the morning, when the first sign of the city appeared on the horizon: smoke, huge plumes of it.

Rising on my stirrups, I peered ahead. The city had to be farther away because all I saw was the flat grassy steppe stretching to infinity, like a wind-swept undulating green ocean. Just as I was slowing my gray mare, Khuan pulled beside me on his shaggy brown pony.

"We're almost there, Amir. It's just ahead."

"Where? I don't see anything."

"You can't see it now, but there's a ridge in front of us. It leads down to a valley. That's why you can't see the city. It's in the valley."

As we progressed, the edge of the ridge became visible. I could now distinguish a second ridge rising in the distance and the upper part of the depression running between them.

“This way!” shouted Khuan, turning left along the ridge.

Before chasing after Khuan, I looked over my shoulder to make sure that Milo and Auguste, who were both driving wagons, were still following us. They were moving along without too much difficulty. Reassured, I swiftly caught up with Khuan, who had stopped at the edge of the ridge. Khuan pointed down to the valley. “There, Amir! Look!”

Stretching in my saddle, I gazed down at the city with amazement. A flow of red buildings ran along the bottom of the valley as far as the eye could see. At first glance, it looked like a river of blood. Every house, every tent, every construction in this city was of one shade of red or another: it went from the palest, nearly pink hue, to vibrant carmine and the darkest maroon. If the color was the first detail to strike me, the sheer size of the city was a close second. It was enormous—so much so, I couldn’t see where it ended. By the look of it, this city numbered at least a couple hundred thousand inhabitants.

“It’s so big,” I whispered.

“A home to so many people has to be huge,” replied Khuan. “People belonging to dozens of different races call Ulahn Gazar home. But three races form its core: the Anchin, the Chechow, and the Taiko, which is, as you know, the race I belong to.”

I nodded absentmindedly. Frankly, I wasn’t paying much attention to what he was saying. I already knew about my friend’s true background. During this journey, Khuan had told me all about it, and also explained the functioning of the Anchin Empire. The people of its many territories and provinces—either annexed through conquest or, for a very few, voluntarily—although considered Anchin citizens, were nonetheless allowed to retain their culture, traditions, and ethnic identities. Such leniency toward people of conquered countries was unknown to me. My father, the late sultan of Telfar, would certainly never have permitted it. An unaccommodating man, he would have opted for a fast assimilation and the total obliteration of all non-Telfarian customs. As far as I was aware, so would have most rulers I knew, thus making this emperor’s approach unusual and highly intriguing. But right now I couldn’t think about the far-reaching implications of Anchin politics. I was too absorbed by my examination of Ulahn Gazar.

“How can such an immense city be moved? And why?” I whispered to myself. It was beyond my comprehension. I directed my attention to the heart of the city where the largest buildings were nestled. This particular cluster of imposing constructions appeared to be surrounded by some sort of wall, and at its center was a huge house with a glossy green roof. “What’s the building with the different colored roof?”

“That’s the emperor’s palace,” said Khuan.

I scanned the portion of the city neighboring the palace complex. It was the most densely constructed area of all. The houses, tents, and all sorts of buildings in that sector seemed almost piled atop one another. Away from the city center, the space between the houses widened. In spite of this, I was left with the suffocating impression that this city was too crowded.

A sudden tightness gripped my chest. *Could the thought of entering such an impressive city be the cause of the oppressive feeling growing inside me?* I wondered. I felt uneasy, nervous and jittery. I looked around, seeking the source of my discomfort,

but found nothing tangible. As I spurred my horse to the very edge of the ridge, I sensed an unusual energy floating in the air, like a heat wave on a hot day...but not quite. This energy was like nothing I had experienced before, and it was radiating upward. To my dismay, I realized it emanated from the city, as if this place were alive, with a spirit of its own. What at first had begun inside me as a vague uneasiness hadn't ceased intensifying, but seemed to be mirroring the flow of energy rising up to us in strong bursts like waves hitting the shore at high tide. It climbed and climbed, up and up, until in one final leap it touched the tip of my feet. My entire body tensed as tingling sensations danced along my limbs, making me shudder, raising goose bumps all over my skin.

Magic! So much magic! The city seemed to be constructed entirely of magic, as if conjured out of nothingness. This was so shocking to me that it, literally, took my breath away. After a brief struggle, I managed to catch my breath again and was able to hiss through clenched teeth, "Why didn't you tell me about the magic, Khuan?"

Looking sheepish, he said in a small voice, "Knowing how much you dislike magic, you wouldn't have come if I had."