

The Problem with Sand

The desert is a liar.

Oh, sure, from a distance that endless expanse of golden sand *looks* inviting. Standing at the top of a sand dune, warm breezes soothe the scorching sun above, beckoning you to the wonders awaiting below. Whatever you desire – treasure beyond imagining, escape from your enemies, or maybe even a cure for the twisting black lines that won't stop growing around your left eye – some fool will swear it's waiting for you across the desert. *A dangerous journey? Perhaps, but the rewards, boy! Think of the rewards . . .*

Look closer, though – I mean, really close – say, an inch or so from the sand itself. This is easy to do when you're face down in it waiting to die of thirst. See how each and every grain of sand is unique? Different shapes, sizes, colours . . . That seamless perfection you saw before was just an illusion. Up close the desert is dirty, ugly and mean.

Like I said: it's a stinking liar.

'You're a stinking liar,' Reichis grumbled.

My head jerked up with a start. I hadn't even realised I'd spoken out loud. With considerable effort I turned my head to see how my so-called business partner was faring. I didn't

get very far. Lack of food and water had taken their toll on me. The bloody bruises inflicted by the spells of a recently deceased mage whose foul-smelling corpse was rotting in the heat a few feet away didn't help either. So was I going to waste what life I had left to me just to glare at the ill-tempered, two-foot-tall squirrel cat dying by my side?

'You stink,' I replied.

'Heh,' he chuckled. Squirrel cats don't have a very good sense of their own mortality. They do, however, have an acute penchant for assigning blame. 'This is all your fault,' he chittered.

I rolled over, hoping to ease the stiffness in my spine, only for the wounds on my back to scream in protest. The pain drew a rasping moan from my parched throat.

'Don't try to deny it,' Reichis said.

'I didn't say anything.'

'Yes, you did. You whimpered and I heard, "But, Reichis, how could I possibly have known that I was leading us into a death trap set by my own people? I mean, sure, you warned me that this talk of a secret monastery in the desert where monks could cure me of the shadowblack was a scam, but you know me: I'm an idiot. An idiot who never listens to his smarter and much better-looking business partner."'

In case you've never seen a squirrel cat, picture an angry feline face, slightly tubby body, unruly bushy tail and strange furry flaps connecting their front and back limbs that enable them to glide down from treetops to massacre their prey. 'Good-looking' isn't exactly the phrase that comes to mind.

'You got all that from a whimper?' I asked.

A pause. 'Squirrel cats are very intuitive.'

I drew a ragged breath, the heat off the sand burning the

air in my lungs. How long had the two of us been lying here? A day? Two days? My hand reached for the last of our water skins, dragging it closer. I steelled myself for the fact that I'd have to share what was left with Reichis. People say you can live three days without water, but that's not factoring in the way the desert robs the moisture from you like a . . . *like a damned squirrel cat!* The water skin was bone-dry. 'You drank the last of our water?'

Reichis replied testily, 'I asked first.'

'When?'

Another pause. 'While you were asleep.'

Apparently the desert wasn't the only liar I had to contend with.

Seventeen years old, exiled by my people, hunted by every hextracker and bounty mage with two spells and a bad attitude, and the last of my water had just been stolen by the closest thing I had to a friend out here.

My name is Kellen Argos. Once I was a promising student of magic and the son of one of the most powerful families in the Jan'Tep territories. Then the twisting black markings of a mystical curse known as the shadowblack appeared around my left eye. Now people call me outlaw, traitor, exile – and that's when they're being polite.

The one thing they never call me is lucky.

'Sure, I know the place,' the old scout had said, her mismatched hazel and green eyes glued to the dusty leather bag of copper and silver trinkets on the table between us. We had the ground floor of the travellers' saloon to ourselves, with the exception of a couple of passed-out drunks in the far corner and one sad fellow who sat on the floor by himself, rolling a pair of

dice over and over as he sobbed into his ale about having the worst luck in the whole world.

Shows what you know, buddy.

'Can you take me to it? This monastery,' I asked, placing a card face up on the table.

The scout picked up the card and squinted at the shadowy towers depicted on its surface. 'Nice work,' she observed. 'You paint this yourself?'

I nodded. For the past six months, Reichis and I had crossed half a continent in search of a cure for the shadowblack. We'd pick up clues here and there, brief scrawls in the margins of obscure texts referring to a secret sanctuary, rumours repeated endlessly by drunks in taverns like this one. The Argosi paint cards of important people and places, imbuing them with whatever scraps of information they collect in hopes that the resulting images will reveal otherwise hidden meanings. I'd taken to painting my own. If I died in my search for a cure, there was always a chance the cards would find their way into Argosi hands, and then to Ferius Parfax, so she'd know not to bother looking for me.

The old scout tossed the card back down on the table as if she were placing a bet. 'The place you're looking for is called the Ebony Abbey, and yeah, I *could* take you there . . . if I were so inclined.' Her smile pinched the crags of sun-browned skin on her forehead and around her eyes, her face like a map of some long-forgotten country. She had to be well into her sixties, but her sleeveless leather jerkin revealed rope-like muscles on her shoulders and arms. Those, along with the assortment of knives sheathed to a bandolier across her chest and the crossbow strapped to her back, told me she could probably handle herself just fine in a fight. The way she kept

staring at the bag of trinkets on the table without paying much attention to me made it plain that I hadn't made a similar impression on her.

Searching for a miracle cure hadn't been a particularly profitable enterprise so far. Every coin I earned as a spellslinger during my travels had been wasted on snake-oil salesmen peddling putrid concoctions that left me sick and vomiting for days at a time. Now my travel-worn linen shirt hung loose on my skinny frame. My face and chest still showed the bruises and scars from my last encounter with a pair of Jan'Tep bounty mages. So I could understand why the sight of me didn't exactly fill the scout with trepidation.

'She's thinking of beating you up and taking our money,' Reichis said, sniffing the air from his perch on my shoulder.

'That thing ain't rabid, is it?' the scout asked, sparing him a wary glance.

Other people don't understand the chitters, snarls and occasional farts Reichis uses to communicate. 'I'm still trying to figure that out,' I replied.

The squirrel cat gave a low growl. 'You know I can just rip your eyeballs right out of their sockets and eat them while you sleep, right?' He hopped off my shoulder and headed towards the two drunks passed out in the corner, no doubt to see if he could pick their pockets.

'Ask them that know the tales,' the old scout began in a sing-song voice. 'They'll tell you naught but seven outsiders have ever been inside the Ebony Abbey's walls. Five of them are dead. One's a dream-weed addict who couldn't find his own nose with both hands, never mind a secret monastery hidden in the desert.' She reached for the little bag that contained everything I still had of any value. 'Then there's me.'

I got to the bag first. I may not look like much, but I've got fast hands. 'We haven't agreed terms yet.'

For the first time the old scout's mismatched eyes locked on mine. I tried to match her glare, but it's unnerving to have two different-coloured eyes staring back at you. 'Why you want to mess with them Black Binders anyway?' she asked. Her gaze went to my left eye, and I could tell she'd picked up on the slight discolouration where the edges of the skin-coloured mesdet paste met the top of my cheekbone. 'You ain't got the shadowblack, do ya?'

'Shadow-what?' I asked. 'Never heard of it.'

'Well, I hear there's a posse of Jan'Tep spellcasters who'll pay plenty for one o' them demon-cursed. There's a particular fellow they've been hunting a while now, or so I hear.'

'I wouldn't know about that,' I said, trying to lend my words a hint of a threat. 'Like I told you before, I'm just writing a book about obscure desert monks.'

'Lot of money for that bounty. Maybe more than what's in that bag of yours.'

I removed my hands from the bag and let my fingers drift down to open the tops of the pouches attached to either side of my belt. Inside were the red and black powders I used for the one spell I knew that always left an impression. 'You know what?' I asked casually. 'Now that you mention it, I think maybe I *have* heard about this shadowblack bounty you mention. Word is, a lot of dangerous folk have tried to collect on it. Have to wonder what happened to all of them.'

One corner of the scout's mouth rose to a smirk. Her own hands, I saw now, had managed to make a pair of hooked knives appear. 'Met plenty of dangerous men in my time.'

None of them impressed me much. What makes you any different?’

I returned her smile. ‘Look behind you.’

She didn’t, instead angling one of her knives just a touch until the blade caught the reflection of a certain squirrel cat who’d surreptitiously made his way up to the top of the coat rack behind her and was now waiting for the cue to pounce.

Yeah, the little bugger makes himself useful sometimes.

I counted three full breaths before the old scout slowly set her knives down on the table. ‘Sounds like a mighty fine book you’re writing, my young friend.’ She snatched up my bag of trinkets and rose from the table. ‘Best we load up on supplies in town before we make the trip.’

I waited a while longer, doing my best to make it appear as if I hadn’t decided whether to hire her as my guide or blast her into ashes. Truthfully though, I was waiting for my heart to stop racing. ‘How far away is this abbey?’ I asked.

She adjusted the strap of her crossbow and slid her knives into their sheathes. ‘A long ways, as these things go, but don’t worry; you’ll enjoy the journey.’

‘Really?’

She grinned. ‘Folks say the Golden Passage is the gentlest, most beautiful place you’ll ever see.’

The Virtue of Corpses

Faint scratching sounds returned me to my current predicament. I opened one eye a fraction, groggily expecting to be blinded by the reflection of sunlight against the shimmering golden sand. Instead I was greeted by twilight and a bitter chill. You'd think a place as blisteringly hot during the day as the Golden Passage would be temperate at night. But no, the temperature goes from scorching to freezing with barely an hour of warmth in between. I shivered and tried to go back to sleep.

The scratching continued though – so close that for a second I batted at my ear, fearful that some insect was burrowing inside. When that failed to solve the problem, I forced my head up enough to turn towards the source of the incessant noise. Reichis was wearily dragging himself along the sand.

He's trying to get to me, I thought.

Fondness broke through the cold and despair. For all our quarrelling, the squirrel cat and I had saved each other's lives more times than either of us could count; now he wanted to die beside me.

I reached out a hand, only to discover he wasn't getting any closer. He was actually crawling *away* from me.

Have I mentioned that squirrel cats are ungrateful little wretches? My so-called business partner hadn't been expending his last ounce of strength so that we could meet our end together; this wasn't some final moment of friendship between us. No, instead the furry monster was slowly working his way to the war mage's corpse.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

No reply. Reichis just kept crawling inch by inch to his destination. When he finally lay next to the corpse's head, panting and exhausted, I worried that perhaps the squirrel cat's mind was so far gone from thirst that he'd mistaken the dead man for me. With a trembling paw, he reached for the mage's unblinking eyes that stared blindly up at the darkening sky. That's when I finally understood what Reichis was up to.

'Oh, for the sake of all my dead ancestors,' I swore, 'tell me you're not planning to—'

With the deftness that comes from practice – a *lot* of practice – Reichis used one of his claws to dig out the man's eyeball. He then opened his jaws wide, dropped the disgusting, squishy sphere into his maw, and bit down. 'Oh . . .' he said, moaning rapturously, 'that's tasty.'

'You're repugnant, you know that?' I'm not sure the words actually came out of my mouth. At that precise moment I was using what little strength of will I had left to keep myself from vomiting.

'Yummy,' he mumbled between chews, then swallowed noisily.

What few people know about squirrel cats is that the only thing more revolting than the way they devour their food is their insistence on rhapsodising about it afterwards. 'You know,' he began with a contented sigh, 'you worry that it'll

be overcooked, on account of this guy's face having caught fire and all, but it turned out perfect. A little crispy on the outside; soft and warm on the inside.' He reached a paw over to the other side of the dead mage's face. 'You want the left one?' he asked, adding a slight snarl to convey that the offer wasn't entirely sincere.

'I'll pass. Doesn't it just make you more thirsty? We're likely to die from lack of water a lot sooner than we'll expire from hunger.'

'Good point.' Reichis hauled himself closer to the mage's chest, where a massive wound from our duel had left a pool of blood. The squirrel cat began lapping it up. He paused when he caught me staring at him in horror. 'You should probably drink some too, Kellen. Must have *some* water in it, right?'

'I am *not* drinking blood. I am *not* eating eyeballs.'

The squirrel cat served up a sarcastic growl. 'Oh, right, because your culinary hang-ups are so much more important than our survival.'

I couldn't think of a suitable retort. He might've been right, for all I knew, though I had no idea if human beings could actually get enough moisture from blood to make a difference, or if it would just make me sick. Either way, I couldn't bring myself to find out, so I just lay there for a few minutes with nothing to do but listen to the sound of Reichis's enthusiastic slurping. When he was finally done, he lay back down on his side and called to me. 'Kellen?'

'Yeah?'

'I know this is kind of a sensitive topic, but . . .'

'What?'

'Well, when you're dead, is it okay if I eat your corpse?' Hastily he added, 'I mean, it's better if one of us lives, right?'

With what little strength I had left, I rolled away from him onto my back, ignoring the pain that exploded from my injuries. I didn't want the last thing I saw in this world to be the blood-soaked face of a squirrel cat as he pondered which to eat first, my eyeballs or my ears.

High above, beyond the petty concerns of mortals, the stars began to appear, thousands of tiny sparks coming to life. Though the Golden Passage was an arid, unlivable hellhole, the night sky out here could really put on a show. I took in a breath, only to have my throat spasm painfully – a reflex that I guess must be the result of going too long without water.

I'm going to die here. The words invaded my thoughts as suddenly and as forcefully as an iron binding spell. *I'm really going to die tonight, killed by some asshole Jan'Tep bounty hunter and my own stupidity.* I felt myself starting to cry, and with trembling fingers reached up to wipe at tears that weren't there.

I must've let out a sob, because Reichis groaned. 'Oh, great, cos bawling your eyes out is really going to help conserve water.' Squirrel cats aren't exactly known for their compassion.

Usually when I get myself into trouble, my survival depends on the timely arrival of a certain curly red-haired gambler by the name of Ferius Parfax. There I'll be, on my knees, begging some lunatic who happens to have a thing against shadow-blacks, waiting for the blade (or mace, or crossbow, ember spell, or . . . you get the idea) to come crashing down on me, when all of a sudden *she'll* turn up.

'Well now, don't you two look as fussy as two feisty ferrets fightin' over a fern,' she'll say. Actually, she's never used those exact words, but it's usually something equally nonsensical.

'Do not dare interfere, Argosi,' the mage (or soldier, assassin or random irritated person) will shout back.

Ferius will push that frontier hat of hers a half-inch higher on her brow, reach into her waistcoat to pull out a smoking reed, and say, 'Far be it from me to interfere, friend, but I've grown somewhat accustomed to that skinny fella you seem intent on carvin' up. Gonna have to ask you to kindly back off.'

After that? Well, fight-fight-fight, clever remark, certain death, near-impossible daring feat, enemy goes down, one last clever remark – usually at my expense – and then I'm saved. That's how it's been ever since I left my homeland on my sixteenth birthday.

Only now everything's different. Six months ago I'd abandoned Ferius, my mentor in the ways of the Argosi, and Nephemia, the charmcaster I once loved, on account of I'd learned that my people were never going to stop hunting me and anyone with me, so long as I had the shadowblack. Since the swirling black marks around my left eye showed no sign of fading away, that meant leaving the two people I was closest to behind or risk them being killed by enemies intent on getting to me. As painful as my departure had been, at least it had felt kind of noble.

For about six minutes.

The problem with being noble and self-sacrificing is that when you get into a jam – say, like, when the tattooed metallic bands on a Jan'Tep hextracker's arms are glowing from all the magic he's summoned to kill you – there's nobody to get you out of it.

'Hey, Kellen . . . ?' Reichis asked with an uncharacteristic hesitation in his voice.

'Yes, you can eat me when I'm dead. Happy now?'

Silence for a moment, then, 'No, I was just wondering if you think that mage was telling the truth.'

'About what?'

'When he said he killed Ferius.'

The Trouble with Spells

I'd suspected the old scout would betray us the minute she had us in the desert and away from any prying eyes. Reichis and I took turns watching her, day and night, as we trudged up and down one sand dune after another. Our vigilance proved to be misplaced, however, because although she really was leading us into a trap, it wasn't one she'd set herself.

Among the many ways the desert messes with you is the way light reflecting off the sand plays tricks with your eyes. Sometimes you'll see a shimmer in the distance that looks just like a Jan'Tep shield spell. You'll get ready for the fight of your life, only to have your mean-spirited guide mock you for being 'as jumpy as a tadpuddler'.

I have no idea what 'tadpuddlers' are. Apparently they're quite jumpy.

Every time I freaked out over a mirage, the old scout would ride up to the glistening haze, holding her hooked knives aloft and shouting, 'Have at thee, foul patch of empty air!' She found it all terribly funny, right up until one of those blurry shimmers fired a bolt of ember magic that blasted her into ashes.

Reichis and I were so exhausted by then that we barely

had time to drop to the ground before another bolt came after us. Turned out we weren't even the target: the ember spell was aimed at our horses. They died a mercifully quick death. Unfortunately, with them went the supplies we needed to survive another week in the desert.

'How many?' the broad-shouldered mage asked as he stepped out from his obscurement spell. As cloaking conjurations go, it wasn't particularly impressive, which gave me hope this guy might be relying on a charm and wasn't particularly powerful himself. Maybe he was just a one-bander like me.

'How many what?' I asked, rising to my feet and casually reaching for my powders.

'How many of my fellow mages have you killed, shadow-black? How many of our people have died trying to bring you to justice?'

I considered the question. 'Nine,' I lied, then corrected myself. 'Actually, ten now.' I tossed the red and black powders into the air in front of me. Just before they collided, I formed the somatic shape with my hands: index and middle fingers pointed towards my target, in the sign of guidance; ring and little fingers pressed into my palm, the gesture of restraint, and thumbs to the sky, the closest I ever get to a prayer to my ancestors for help. 'Carath,' I intoned.

The explosion shattered the air between us. Twin red and black flames intertwined around each other like snakes as they roared out after my enemy. An instant later, the flames were gone, broken against his shield spell.

Guess this guy's sparked more than one band.

'Did you really expect that to work?' he asked.

'No, but I'm ready for you now, and you can't cast another ember blast without dropping your shield.' I let my hands

drift back down the pouches at my sides. 'Care to see who draws faster?'

'Heh,' Reichis chuckled.

'What?' I asked.

'Nothing. It's just funny when you try to sound tough.'

'Not helpful.'

My opponent watched me closely, taking my measure as I took his. He was young, as mages go, not much older than twenty. Usually that means I can count on them to take up my challenge, but he didn't bother with another ember spell. Instead he flicked copper-coloured hair out of his eyes and kept up the somatic gesture for his shield with one hand while raising the other so I could see that one of his fingers had an unnaturally elongated nail. With a slow, deliberate motion, he pushed the nail into the skin of his wrist and drew a sinewy line about six inches long, leaving behind a trail of crimson.

Reichis sat up on his haunches, licking his lips. 'Isn't making him bleed supposed to be our job?'

'Blood magic,' I whispered, cursing my lousy luck. 'Why did it have to be blood magic?'

If the guy had been Berabesq, I might've confused him with one of their crazy faith warriors who use their own blood to conjure shields, but he was Jan'Tep, like me, which meant this was something much worse.

'Would you like to know how I found you, shadowblack?' he asked.

Definitely Jan'Tep. My people always feel a burning compulsion to talk you to death before they actually kill you. 'I must be sparking the sigils for sand magic,' I replied, 'because I'm having this premonition that you're about to tell me.'

'We heard rumours of an outlaw spellslinger travelling the

length and breadth of the continent in search of a cure, which is ridiculous, of course, since everyone knows there's no cure for the shadowblack. But I was positive the fool in question was none other than Kellen of the House of Ke, the most notorious traitor in our people's history.'

That hardly seemed fair. I couldn't have been more than the second or third most notorious. 'So you figured you'd get your own name in the history books?'

'It wasn't easy.' He gestured towards the silver glyphs around the brim of my black frontier hat. 'Those veiling charms are remarkably effective.'

Well, that was good to know. I'd stolen the hat from a fellow spellslinger named Dexan Videris as partial compensation for his having tried to kill me. I was never sure how reliably it warded off tracking spells.

The mage tapped a finger on his temple. 'Then it occurred to me: an exiled shadowblack fleeing Jan'Tep justice, knowing his luck had to run out sooner or later – could desperation lead such a one in search of that preposterous old legend about an "Ebony Abbey"? He laughed at the name. 'Didn't it ever occur to you that if such a place had ever existed our people would have long ago destroyed it?' He glanced at the dusty yellow desert all around us. 'Well, you've found your mythical sanctuary. This is where so-called "scouts" bring the afflicted. They slit their throats and leave them here to die so that their flesh will be consumed by scavengers, their bones scoured clean by the wind, sinking into the sand to make room for the next poor fool.'

'What did I tell you?' Reichis growled at me, then muttered, 'Gullible moron.'

Still maintaining the somatic form for his shield with one

arm, the mage turned over the other and squeezed his fist until drops of blood fell to the ground, turning the golden sand at his feet a deep crimson.

'What's he doing?' Reichis asked.

'I think he's summoning a blood-shaping,' I replied.

'That sounds bad. How do we fight it?'

'I'm working on a plan.'

The squirrel cat's fur changed to match the red of the sand spreading towards us, making him blend in with our surroundings. The muscles on his hindquarters bunched. 'So I should probably run away?'

'Yeah.'

Reichis took off as fast as his legs would take him. I didn't resent him for it. As he frequently reminds me, it's inevitable that one day our luck will run out. No point in both of us getting killed. I would've run too, but by then the mage's blood had gone deep into the sand. With a few esoteric syllables, he completed his invocation. The spell came to life and so did the desert all around me.

The bloodshaper – because that's definitely what he was – raised his bleeding arm and reached out for me. Thousands of pounds of sand rose up from the ground, taking the exact same shape as his arm only about a hundred times larger. As his fingers grasped the air in front of him, his sand form mirrored the gesture, grabbing me and lifting me ten feet above the ground.

The mage sauntered towards me with the sort of casual selfassurance of one whose carefully planned ambush has now reached its conclusion. 'That's odd,' he said, glancing around theatrically. 'Shouldn't a certain Argosi meddler be coming to your rescue right about now?'

'Give her a minute,' I said. A bluff couldn't hurt at this point. 'When we saw your pathetically obvious obscurement spell, Ferius went to get the rest of her Argosi friends. Apparently they're playing a hand of poker to decide who gets to kick your arse first.'

The mage reached into the folds of his robes with his free hand and pulled out a playing card. Dark red lines flowed elegantly along the painted surface: a hand with seven thorns in its palm. I recognised this instantly as one of Ferius's debt cards – the ones she keeps as reminders of each of the obligations she's accrued over the years. Only this one was marred by splotches of something darker. 'The Argosi's blood made my little souvenir terribly sticky. I'm afraid the rest of the deck was ruined entirely.'

'You're bluffing,' I said, struggling in vain to free myself from the giant sand fist holding me prisoner. 'Ferius Parfax is way too smart to get caught by a stupid—'

The mage cut me off with a tut-tut sound. 'Don't be so hard on your dead friend's memory. Not even she could be expected to outwit all seventy-seven of us.'

'*Seventy-seven . . .*' That number stole the breath from me. Or maybe it was just the sand fist crushing my lungs.

The mage gazed up at me triumphantly. 'Tribulators. Chaincasters. Lightshapers. War mages. Sightblindners. Seventy-seven of us, Kellen. A true war coven.' He smirked. 'Though I think the Argosi called it . . . What was that funny little name she gave us? A "posse"?''

Posse was exactly the kind of word Ferius would've used. 'Now I know you're lying,' I said. 'There hasn't been a war coven in three hundred years. No clan prince has the influence to . . .' Even as I began to say it, I knew I was wrong.

While getting Jan'Tep mages to agree on anything is like herding a bunch of angry, spell-wielding cats, there was one person who could probably pull it off: the newly ascended prince of my own clan; the one man whose scheming and manipulations might just be enough to unite seventy-seven lords magi to his cause.

The bloodshaper must've caught the awakening despair in my expression. 'Ke'heops,' he confirmed, 'Lord of the House of Ke. Your father.' A thin-lipped chuckle. 'You really have been a terribly disobedient son, haven't you?'

'He wouldn't do this! Not just to kill me!'

'What's the old saying? "A father's love is only ever exceeded by his wrath."'

I'd never heard the quote, but it described Ke'heops perfectly.

'If it makes you feel better,' the bloodshaper went on, 'this isn't just about you. Lord Ke'heops petitioned the clans to name him mage sovereign of our entire people, but they are, as yet, unresolved on the matter. So he asked for seventy-seven mages to join him on a great quest. He seeks to prove his worth by hunting down every remaining shadowblack on the continent.' The bloodshaper raised a finger, and part of the massive hand construct reached up to gently touch the black markings around my left eye. 'Starting with his own son.'

He kept looking at me, as if waiting for some reply, but when I tried to speak he closed his fist a fraction tighter and the breath fled me. 'You should be proud of him, Kellen! Not since we rid the world of the infestation of the Mahdek tribes have our people been so united.' The mage paused before adding, 'Well, I suppose we missed one or two stragglers here and there.'

Ferius, I thought. *He knows Ferius is Mahdek!*

'She died for you,' the bloodshaper said softly, almost soothingly. 'A dozen of us spread word that you'd been captured not far from here and that members of your clan were gathering to hold a trial for your execution. The Argosi reasoned that she had to free you before the others arrived. She walked right into our trap. That's how we captured her, Kellen. That's why her corpse lies rotting even now. Unburied. Awaiting the carrion eaters to rid the world of her stench.' He came close and flicked the card at me. It struck my cheek before falling to the ground. 'A clever trick, wouldn't you agree, shadowblack?'

Futile rage rose up inside me, and like a fool I struggled even harder against the unbreakable grip of his sand shape. *Stop*, I told myself. *Anger won't do any good now. Think, damn it! Think!*

Unfortunately I'm not the only one with anger issues. Reichis's outraged howl split the air. 'Lousy Jan'Tep skinbag!'

In the periphery of my vision I saw him leap out at the mage, fangs and claws poised to tear into our enemy. But the bloodshaper was smart – and prepared. He must've known about Reichis, just as he'd known about Ferius, so he'd been waiting for the squirrel cat's attack. His hand opened wide, causing his sand shape to do likewise and sending me tumbling to the ground. With a casual slap of the air, the shape struck Reichis hard, hurling him some twenty feet before the squirrel cat landed in an unconscious heap. Before I could get to my powders, the mage reached out to me and closed his hand again. Once more I was immobilised.

'Nine mages,' he said, venom thick in his voice as he squeezed my ribcage to what felt like breaking point. 'Nine good men and women brought low, all because you didn't have the courage to meet your destiny.'

'In my defence,' I groaned, struggling for breath, 'it wasn't an especially appealing fate.'

He laughed, coming closer, his sandy grip easing just a fraction. 'I have to admire an opponent who makes jokes right up until the moment of his death. Ferius Parfax did that too.'

'Yeah?' I asked, struggling to shift my hands just enough to flip open the tops of the pouches at my sides. I had no hope of tossing the powders into the air – never mind forming the somatic shape to guide them – but a new plan was coming to me now. It was dirty and underhanded and even cruel. That only made it more appealing. 'You should've been there when I blasted those nine mages, because that was *really* funny.'

His mouth twisted into an ugly grimace. He lifted the hand up high for an instant and then brought it back down, throwing me to the ground and knocking the wind out of me. 'You would mock the deaths of your own countrymen?' he demanded. 'Cannot even an exile like yourself understand how few true mages exist among us? How numerous our enemies?' Shaking in righteous fury, he willed the sand into a massive fist and brought it down on me like a hammer.

I should've died then, but the form wasn't as durable as before. The sand shape broke against my shoulders, falling apart and half burying me. The blow hurt like hell, but it revealed that my opponent's concentration was fallible.

I spat out sand. 'They aren't *my* countrymen. They're a bunch of thugs who hide behind spells because they're too cowardly to get their hands dirty.'

'Filthy shadowblack!' he shouted, and back-fisted me with about two tons of sand. Once again, though, the shape fell

apart before it could do any serious damage. In the meantime, most of the powder in my pouches had fallen into the remains of his shaping.

I staggered unsteadily back to my feet and gave the mage my biggest, most slap-worthy smile. 'Don't look now, friend, but it looks like your precious spell is falling to pieces.'

He smirked right back at me. 'Is that what you believe? That you can goad me into losing control of my own magic? Allow me to show you the difference between an amateur spellslinger and a true mage.' He held out his hand, palm up, and the sand rose up in the air to take the shape he willed. Slowly he began to close his fingers, watching me as I waited for death. But waiting for death has never been my style. In fact I was waiting for something else entirely.

Come on, I begged silently. Show me how tough you are. Make a nice big fist to smite me with.

The metallic red and grey tattooed bands on his forearm, signifying blood and iron, shone brightly as he focused his will, closing his fist ever tighter, the sand shape become more and more densely packed as he prepared to bring it down on my head. 'Any last words?' he asked.

I would've liked to have replied, 'Just one, asshole,' but that would have risked mistiming my spell. I kept my mouth shut and watched for the sign. When it didn't immediately come, I was afraid that the powders had become too diluted in the sand to ignite. But then I saw it: the first beautiful sparks rising up out of the sand as the powders trapped inside came into contact. 'Carath,' I said.

The mage's eyes went wide as he too noticed the flash of light and saw the somatic gestures my hands were making. Twin fires, red and black and carrying all the fury of a hundred

hells, bore down on him, swirling all around him. Reflex made him abandon his blood spell as he tried desperately to form the somatic shapes for a shield. Too late though, because by then the sand was exploding all around us. I felt the heat as the blast of air sent me flying.

I'm pretty sure I lost consciousness for a second or two, because when I opened my eyes I was face down on the ground. Unable to get to my feet, I crawled on all fours towards my enemy, following the stench as much as my blurred vision.

When I finally reached him I was surprised to see that he actually *had* managed to cast a shield. Unfortunately for him, the spell had only partially manifested when the flames hit. Instead of being fried to a crisp, his body was now a patchwork of untouched skin next to tracts of burnt flesh the colour of ash. A wound on his chest bled profusely, too fast for me or anyone else to have stopped it. 'Ten,' he said, spitting blood with the word. 'Ten of your own people. Does it make you proud?'

'Almost never,' I replied.

He chuckled, even as tears came to his eyes, belying the curse he uttered next. 'My death wins you nothing but more suffering. Another will take my place, and another should he fall. Seventy-seven mages will hunt for you until the desert turns red with your blood. Do you hear them coming, Spellslinger?'

Beneath his bravado and contempt was a terrible sadness, as though he were watching all his dreams of being a great mage – dreams I had once shared – collapse like castles made of sand. His sorrow filled me with shame for what I was about to do next, but I did it anyway. I grabbed his shoulders and squeezed until he winced in pain. 'Tell me what happened to Ferius Parfax. You said you killed her. Was it a lie?'

His lips twitched and I wasn't even sure if he'd heard me. Then he spat out a ragged laugh that brought more blood with it. 'Did I say I killed her? Perhaps she escaped. Perhaps I never found her at all. Beg me for the truth and I might remember.'

I shook him again. 'Please! Just tell me if she's—'

My enemy met death with a soft exhalation of breath that carried with it his last words: 'Suffer, shadowblack.'

The Dilemma of Dying

A day and a night went by before either Reichis or I could manage to crawl a few more feet without passing out from the pain. The pair of us were exhausted and half dead. Being stuck out in the desert with no guide and no supplies would soon take care of the other half.

'You know what I was thinking?' Reichis asked, rousing me from my steady drift into a sleep from which I was unlikely to awake.

I forced my eyes open. The first blush of orange dawn was pushing back against the darkness. It would start getting hot again soon. 'What's that?'

'When that mage asked if you had any last words? You should've said, "Just one," and *then* blasted him.'

I lay until I could get enough breath in my lungs to waste it on a reply. 'Good note. I'll remember that for next time.'

As the first rays of morning light brushed my cheek, numbness began to seep through the rest of me. This was it. This was *really* it. In another hour, maybe two, I was going to die.

With the last dregs of strength of will left to me, I slowly inched towards Reichis.

'What are you doing?' he asked suspiciously.

I collapsed a couple of feet away from him and reached out a hand to lay it against his fur.

'Kellen?' He figured out what I was doing. 'Get that stinkin' paw of yours off o' me!'

'No,' I said, watching as his coat slowly changed colour. He was trying to make it go black with dark red stripes the way he does when he wants to look threatening, but he was too weak now. Instead it turned a pale grey. I stroked it gently. 'If we're going to die out here, then I'm going to say what I have to say. And you're going to listen.'

The squirrel cat tried to squirm away, but he didn't have the strength for it. 'Get off me, skinbag! I'm not your kin. I'm not even your friend! This was strictly a business arrangement!'

'Reichis,' I said, ignoring his protests, 'you were mean and irritable. A thief, a liar, a . . .'

'A murderer,' he added.

'Right. That too. But despite all that, you were . . . Reichis, I want you to know that I lo—'

He cut me off with a snarl, scrambling to try and get his legs under him. 'Idiot skinbag! All your moanin' and talkin' kept us from hearin' them!'

'Hearing who?' But then I heard it too: the quiet plod of footsteps on sand. I managed to roll onto my back, not that it would do me any good. My fingers were so numb that if I tried to cast the carath spell all I'd do was blow my own hands off.

Two hooded figures stood over us, the rising sun at their backs hiding them in shadow. Gradually I made out the long black leather coats they wore, nothing like the brightly coloured silks of a Jan'Tep mage, but far more functional.

They knelt down and began to drag me onto a litter made of woven reeds.

'Well, what do you know?' I said to Reichis. 'That scout wasn't lying about taking us to the Ebony Abbey.'

'Yeah,' he growled softly, 'only she left something out.'

Squirrel cats have better eyesight than humans, which is why he noticed what was wrong before I did: underneath his hood, the face of the monk nearest me was covered in twisting black lines that moved as though alive when I stared at them.

'Well, crap,' I muttered as consciousness slipped away from me.

Despite all the trials and tribulations in our way, we'd found our mythical monastery in the desert, or rather, it had found us. Problem was, it hadn't gotten its name because they had a cure for the shadowblack.

They called it the Ebony Abbey because the monks who lived there embraced it.