

City of Ashes

By Grace Dvorachek

“The voice of the Lord divideth the flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shaketh the wilderness...”

—Psalm 29:7-8a

“Zaccai.”

The young boy leaped to his feet at the sound of his name. “Kalen, where’ve you been?”

“The sewers... where else?” The man’s voice was as deep as the shadows that hid him from view.

Zaccai folded his arms with a frown. “You know what I mean. Why didn’t you show up last week? I was worried that... well, I thought...” His voice gave a slight quiver that he was unable to steady.

“It’s alright,” Kalen replied, his tone begrudgingly becoming more gentle. “I had work to do.”

“They were talking at the market about another robbery.”

Kalen chuckled dryly. “They are always talking.”

“My sister said the thief was a Scarlet,” Zaccai replied pointedly. “A Scarlet in a cloak.”

There was a moment of silence, then Kalen gave a sigh. “Alright, it was me. Now I suppose you’ll give me another lecture.”

“Don’t you see that this is wrong?” The boy asked in earnest. “Your stealing and vandalism are hurting people. And even worse, it’s going against God Himself.”

“God.” Kalen bitterly spat out the name. “God never did anything for me.”

“You *know* that’s not true! He came to earth to die for your sins.”

“What you call sin, I consider justice,” Kalen replied grimly. “And I will not worship a God who punishes it.”

“I just—” Zaccai bit his lip, his voice coming out barely above a whisper. “I don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“Zaccai...”

“They beat you so horribly, that first time I found you.” Tears sprang to the boy’s hazel eyes as he recalled the sight. “Then they left you lying in a ditch for dead.”

“I remember.” Fondness crept reluctantly into Kalen’s voice. “I could never forget opening my eyes and seeing your face for the first time. If it weren’t for your care, I wouldn’t have recovered.”

“Yes, but— but I don’t want to have to do that again, Kalen. You *must* stop all of this.” Zaccai shook his head, his light brown curls bobbing in the moonlight. “The Scarlets will never prove these superstitions wrong if they resort to breaking the law.”

“Our *existence* breaks the law!” All traces of gentleness had disappeared from Kalen’s voice. “And, quite frankly, I don’t care that stealing is wrong! I’d break more laws if it would help the Scarlets!”

Zaccai was silent for a long moment. “They— they caught a Scarlet down by the cornfields today. I heard they burned the man.” He sighed. “That makes three in two weeks.”

“I know,” Kalen replied. Through the shadows, Zaccai thought he could almost see his square jaw clench in suppressed anger from within the dark folds of his cloak. “Most likely, he ventured from the cave to find food.” He paused, then his voice became soft once more. “His name was Matthias.”

“Kalen, I understand your anger, but you cannot keep responding with more violence and hate,” Zaccai began in a firm tone. “Your actions have only worsened the rumors.”

“I will not stand by while innocent people are burned to death!” Kalen snapped. “It’s not enough that we’ve been driven into hiding—it’s not enough that we barely have enough food to survive in this barren wasteland—but they refuse to rest until we’ve all been put through the flames!” His voice hardened. “Well, *I* won’t rest until the Scarlets can live in peace.”

The tone of Kalen’s voice—the harsh words that he spoke—sent a chill of fear down Zaccai’s spine. “There’s something wrong, isn’t there?”

There was no reply for so long that Zaccai thought one would never come. But, at last, Kalen took a deep breath and spoke heavily. “Zaccai, I... I think it’s time we parted ways.”

“What?” Zaccai straightened, unbidden tears springing to his eyes. “Kalen, no!”

“I must do what needs to be done.”

“This is about the work you’ve been doing, isn’t it? You’re going to put a stop to the burnings!” The man didn’t answer, and Zaccai’s cheeks flushed red in anger. “Kalen!”

Just then, shouts of excitement sounded in the distance, carrying closer with each one. Cautiously, Zaccai peered around the corner of the alleyway to see small spots of light bobbing up and down just a few blocks away.

Zaccai turned back to Kalen, unable to hide the concern on his face. “They’re coming for you again.”

“I thought they might.” A shaft of moonlight rested on Kalen’s face for a moment, and something vicious glinted in his stone-gray eyes. “But this will be their last hunt for a Scarlet. By daybreak, the burnings will be a thing of the past.”

“What are you planning?” Zaccai asked, a sense of dread in the pit of his stomach.

Kalen stepped back, deeper into the shadows. “I can’t tell you much. But I need you to do something for me.”

Zaccai folded his arms warily. “And what’s that?”

“Get out of the city tonight.” He paused. “I’m burning it to the ground.”

“Kalen!” Zaccai called, his voice echoing down the long, underground tunnel. He hesitated, tightening his grip on the handle of a rusty lantern, then hurried forward.

He knew that this tunnel branched out into a network of sewers that crisscrossed the entire city. Finding Kalen—especially in pitch blackness—would be like finding a needle in a haystack.

Unless I catch up to him, Zaccai thought as he navigated his way over and around the waste and debris. He can't be too far ahead.

He cupped his free hand around his mouth, leaning into the darkness before him. “Kalen!”

“Shh!” A rough hand grabbed Zaccai’s shoulder, causing him to nearly drop the lantern.

“What are you doing down here?”

Zaccai turned to find Kalen glaring down at him and suddenly felt very small and foolish.

“I– I came to find you.”

The man shook his head impatiently. “You need to get out of here. I’m sure your sister is worried about you.”

“Elise is always worried about me.” Zaccai folded his arms, planting himself in the middle of the tunnel. “Now, I’m not leaving until you explain yourself.”

“You know my reasoning. I am putting an end to this injustice”

“Yes, but– but burning the city down? Are you out of your mind?”

“The only way to fight fire is with fire,” Kalen replied matter-of-factly. “Once my work is done, the townspeople will have no choice but to evacuate. At least, those that survive,” he added in a strange, cruel voice.

“Kalen, you’ve gone mad!” Zaccai cried, disbelief stamping his face. “You’re going to destroy an entire city?”

Kalen’s fist slammed into the sewer wall, rage written all over his features. “I’ll destroy a thousand cities before I watch another Scarlet burn at the stake!”

Silence fell between them, and, to Zaccai, the constant dripping of water from the ceiling seemed loud enough to be a waterfall.

At last, Kalen sighed, turning to go down the dark tunnel. “Come with me.”

Zaccai hesitated. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” Kalen replied over his shoulder. “I have something to show you.”

Stepping from a small tunnel into the doorway of an even smaller room, Zaccai paused, glancing around curiously. He’d never seen this place before, though it wasn’t much to look at. Just a pile of blankets in a corner, and a strange, faded tapestry that hung on the slimy sewer wall.

Kalen brushed past the boy, the hood of his cloak falling back onto his broad shoulders. Though Zaccai had seen it many times before, he nearly gasped aloud at the sight of Kalen’s flaming red hair that almost seemed to glow in the lantern light.

Pausing next to the tapestry, Kalen turned. “When I was a lad,” he began. “I watched as my parents were put to death in the town square by burning. I refused to return to the cave, and instead fled into the sewers that would become my home.” His eyes took on a sorrowful, faraway look. “That night, I scratched two marks into the wall, one for each of my parents.”

Kalen lifted a corner of the tapestry. “Ever since then, I’ve been keeping a count of every single Scarlet burning.” He paused, then tugged swiftly on the woven cloth. With a soft swishing sound, the tapestry fell to the ground in a heap.

Zaccai sucked in a sharp breath as he took in the dozens of tally marks scratched on the wall. “All of these... are— are burnings?”

The man nodded soberly. “You see now why I must do this.”

“No.” The word came out much louder than Zaccai had intended. “No, Kalen, I don’t see. The townspeople are wrong to believe the legends about the Scarlets, but that doesn’t give you the right to seek revenge.”

“You don’t understand!” Kalen burst out, anger darkening his face once more. “Every day that we are silent, another Scarlet is put to death! Every day we sit in immobility is another day in which the Scarlets must suffer!”

“Of course you should not be silent! But this”—Zaccai raised his lantern, waving a hand at the flickering flame inside—“This is not the answer!”

All became eerily silent, and Kalen stood motionless, staring hard at Zaccai. “Ever since I met you,” he said slowly. “I knew you were special.” His voice trembled, but he quickly steadied it. “I— I’ve never known anyone who cares about the Scarlets—about me—like you do.”

Zaccai felt his tears returning. “Kalen, I—”

“I thought you were *different* from the other townspeople.” His face hardened into stone.
“But I suppose I was wrong.”

Then he shoved past Zaccai and disappeared down the tunnel.

Everything was quiet as Zaccai approached the wooden door of a small townhouse—the only house on the block with light still flickering in the windows. He reached for the knob, his muscles tensing.

All at once, the door flung open to reveal a young woman, her face smudged with grease and lined with worry as she confronted the boy. “Zaccai! Where’ve you been?”

Zaccai avoided her questioning gaze, moving past her into the house

The woman shut the door and turned, her hazel eyes stern. “You’ve been wi’ the Scarlets again, ‘aven’t you?”

Zaccai set the lantern onto the hard-packed floor and hesitated. “It was only one this time, and he—”

“I do na’ care if it just be one! You know ‘ow I feel about that!”

“He’s my friend, Elise.”

“But I be your *sister*!” Elise snapped, the words echoing harshly in the small room. After a moment, she withdrew with a sigh, wearily brushing her blonde hair back into her bun. “Oh, Zaccai... I’ve got enough to deal wi’, tryin’ to keep me job at the factory. Why d’you ‘ave to make it worse by bringin’ the Scarlets’ misfortune upon us?”

“They *don’t* bring misfortune,” Zaccai began in protest. “They—”

“No.” Elise shook her head, her voice emphatic, her eyes full of fear. “You ‘aven’t heard the stories.”

Zaccai shrugged. “I’ve heard enough to know they’re not true.”

“People ‘ave *disappeared*, Zaccai!”

He flinched at her sharp tone, then lowered his head to hide a face full of remembrance and grief. “I– I know.”

Elise’s expression softened, and she stepped forward, bending to cup his chin in her hand. Her gaze firmly met his eyes. “Listen, I just be tryin’ to protect you. With Mum and Da gone, you’re all I’ve got left.” Her voice caught. “I canna let you disappear, too.”

“But I *won’t* disappear,” Zaccai said insistently. “You know about the quicksand beyond the city. Anyone who ventures past the fields is bound to get lost or stuck.”

She stood back, her eyes flashing defensively. “Tisn’t the quicksand, ‘tis–” She stopped short, lowering her voice. “Tis the Scarlets.”

“Elise, you know what God thinks about this. You can’t hate someone just because–”

“I do na’ hate them.” Her voice took on a strange tone. “I fear them.”

“But–”

“I be a Christian, Zaccai—you know that. An’ you also know that the Lord commands us to be protectin’ our own. I do na’ trust the Scarlets, and I canna allow you to trust them, either.

Zaccai sighed. “Do you remember when we read the book of 1 John?”

“Of course.”

“There’s a verse that says, ‘There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.’” He paused, earnestness filling his voice. “You can’t let these rumors blind you, Elise. God hasn’t called us to fear the Scarlets but to love them. Can’t you see that?”

“No, I do na’ see.” She pressed her lips together and turned away, brushing at her grease-stained work dress. “An’ we are na’ discussin’ this anymore tonight.”

At that moment, the town bell began to clang in the distance, its deep, hollow sound carrying down the quiet streets.

Zaccai froze. “Elise.”

“Shh!” She held up a hand, cocking her head to listen.

Shouts came from the same direction as the bell, more and more people taking up the cry until the boy and his sister could finally make out the words. “Fire! Fire!”

A loud pounding came on their own door, and a man burst through, his face covered in perspiration and fear. “There’s a fire breakin’ out in the town square! We need all the help we can get with the bucket brigades!”

Before either brother or sister could respond, the man was off down the street to carry on his message.

Zaccai spun around, snatching up his lantern from the floor. “I have to go.”

“No!” Elise grabbed his arm, terror springing to her face. “’Tis the Scarlets that did this—I’m certain of it!”

“Let go of me!” Zaccai pulled away and flung open the door.

“Zaccai!” Her voice carried after him as he dashed down the front walk. “Zaccai, where are you goin’?”

“To the mountain! I must try to stop this!”

Zaccai gave one last pull, heaving himself up onto the side of the mountain. Breathing heavily, he paused to survey the land below him. The city lay in a huddled group of houses and buildings, the center of it now a mass of hungry, orange flames. Beyond the city walls lay the fields where the townspeople grew their food. And beyond that, Zaccai knew, stretched a vast wasteland full of swamps and pits of quicksand.

Rising to his feet, Zaccai glanced around in the darkness. He'd extinguished his lantern past the city gates, not wishing to lead anyone towards the Scarlets. But he'd taken this route enough times to know it well—even at night.

He headed for the mountain wall at a cautious but hurried pace, his feet crunching rhythmically on the stony ground.

“Who’s there?” A harsh voice sprang out of the shadows.

“It’s me.” He took a step closer so that the moonlight shone directly onto his face.

“Oh, Zaccai.” A cloaked man moved out of the darkness, pulling aside a covering of brush to reveal the opening of a tunnel. Light flowed gently from the hole, coming from someplace unseen. “You can go on through.”

The boy moved towards the entrance but paused just inside. “Have you been near the edge tonight?”

“Can’t say that I have. I’m supposed to watch the cave, not the city.”

Zaccai nodded in thanks, then began to hurry down the passageway.

The glow of light gradually became brighter, until the tunnel broadened into a large room. Zaccai blinked as his eyes adjusted to the warm lighting of the torches on the wall and the brighter glare from the fire in the center.

It was almost like a small village inside the cave. Groups of children ducked in and out of the tents along the walls, their laughter echoing off the stone. The men and women bustled about, cooking at the fire, talking among themselves, washing clothes, repairing tools, tidying their tents, and carrying wood to the pile next to the fire. Together, the sounds of work and play blended to make a cheerful humming that soothed the boy's ears.

Though Zaccai looked upon the scene with familiarity, someone unacquainted with the Scarlets would have been shocked by one noticeable detail. Every single person, from the youngest infant to the oldest sage, sported a head of bright red hair.

"Zaccai!" A young man waved at the boy from the other end of the cave and began to stride toward him. His authoritative air—as well as the respectful glances he drew from those he passed—gave full proof that he was the leader of the Scarlets.

Reaching Zaccai, the man greeted him with a friendly smile. "We haven't seen you here in a while. Have you brought food?"

"Not this time." Zaccai beckoned the man closer and lowered his voice, speaking hurriedly. "Listen, Elric, there's something I must tell you. About Kalen."

"Kalen?" Elric repeated, though with exasperation rather than surprise. "What's he done this time?"

"Not here." Zaccai glanced around the crowded cave. "I must speak to you alone."

Zaccai waited impatiently for Elric to pull the tent door shut, unable to keep the sight of the burning city out of his mind.

At last, the man sank onto a mat on the floor, motioning for Zaccai to do the same. “Now, what’s this about Kalen?”

The boy declined the seat and remained standing. “He’s gone mad, Elric. You know he’s always talked about revenge, but– but now he’s actually doing something.”

Elric’s face tightened. “What do you mean?”

“He’s burning down the city. Tonight.”

“What?” The man leaped to his feet, shock and disbelief stamped on his features. “Are you certain?”

Zaccai nodded. “The town square was already ablaze when I left the city.”

Elric began to pace back and forth, his strong hands clenched into fists. “We have to do something!”

“That’s why I came to tell you. I don’t think we can stop Kalen, but I believe we can stop the fires.”

“What do you propose?” Elric paused, turning back to Zaccai.

“They’ve begun to form bucket brigades, but there won’t be enough people.” Zaccai took a deep breath. “I’m asking you—the Scarlets—to risk your lives to save the city.”

The town square was in a state of perfect chaos by the time Zaccai had descended the mountain. Some citizens were lined up at the city pumps, passing buckets of sloshing water down the line towards the rows of fire-engulfed buildings. Most people were running away

from the flames, casting terrified glances over their shoulders as they fled. The streets were lit up with an eerie, orange glow that flickered and danced, ever growing brighter.

Zaccai halted and glanced back at the group of hooded people behind him. Elric and the rest of the Scarlets had donned cloaks to keep from standing out. However, Zaccai knew it was only a matter of time before they were recognized.

And once the Scarlets are discovered... Zaccai shuddered as he thought of the possibilities.

Stepping forward, Elric placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Well, it's in God's hands now."

Zaccai took a deep breath. "I- I know."

After a moment, Elric spoke a few words to the other Scarlets, and they began to disperse into the crowd. Amid the confusion, no one seemed to notice the cloaked newcomers who stealthily joined the bucket brigades.

Left alone, Zaccai remained where he was for a while longer, scanning the scene before him. Worse than the destruction and pandemonium—worse even than the fire itself—were the faces of the townspeople. So often lit up with strange, almost gleeful relief at the Scarlet burnings, their expressions were now imprinted with grim determination and sheer terror.

In the middle of the turmoil, Zaccai spotted Elise standing in one of the bucket brigades, her arms swinging in frantic rhythm as she passed pail after brimming pail down the line. The grease-stained dress she wore was now faded into a smoky gray from the ash that coated the air.

Starting towards his sister, Zaccai suddenly stopped short as he caught sight of a shadowy figure on the roof of a nearby building.

The man stood with folded arms, his dark cloak flapping gently in the wind, his cold eyes watching the city below. Sparks and pieces of ash flew past his face, but he barely noticed or

moved. His hair—a startling, bright red—blended in with the vicious flames that licked at the buildings on either side of him.

Kalen.

Zaccai opened his mouth to call the man's name, but Kalen turned just then, his gaze landing directly on the boy's face.

Never would Zaccai forget the look that glittered in those gray eyes. Fierce and wild, it seemed to come from deep within Kalen, as though the fire that rose around him had become a part of his very soul.

“Out o’ the way, boy!” A man rushed past, carrying a pail of water.

Zaccai leaped back to avoid the man, a splash of water landing on the cobblestones where he'd been standing. He lifted his eyes to the rooftop again, but Kalen had vanished into the clouds of gray smoke.

He may win yet, the boy thought grimly. But I must focus on what I can do, and leave the rest to God.

With this thought in mind, the boy headed again towards the bucket brigades, dodging the hurrying townspeople as he went. When he got closer, he cupped his hands around his mouth. “Elise!”

His sister looked up, and her smoke-streaked face stretched into a relieved smile. “Zaccai!” She set her bucket on the ground, running to meet him with open arms.

Zaccai relaxed as he fell into her comforting embrace, and, for a moment, he felt as though he could almost forget about the fires.

Elise pulled away, her stern eyes searching his face. “You ‘ad me worried, you did. Why on earth did you go runnin’ off like that?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just... I knew we needed their help.”

“They?” She repeated skeptically. All at once, her expression molded into understanding and alarm. “Oh, Zaccai, you didn’t!”

“I had to, Elise. We need every able body to stop these fires.”

“We do na’ need *them*! The Scarlets did this, an’ there’s no tellin’ what else they’ll do.”

“It was one Scarlet who did it—the rest are innocent!”

“I just—” She sighed, her forehead wrinkling in earnestness. “I do na’ know that they can be trusted.”

“You can trust *me*.” Zaccai’s eyes were pleading. “Please, Elise. They can help us save the city.”

Just then, a cry of horror came from a woman near the edge of the wall of fire. “My baby!” She screamed, pointing a trembling finger to the second-story window of a house.

From behind the smoke-stained glass, a small, terrified face appeared, the toddler’s little hands flailing in fright as she sobbed.

“Millicent!” A man cried, breaking away from the throng to dash towards the flames. “That’s my daughter!”

Several other men grabbed at his arms. “You can’t save her, Charlie!” One of the men said. “The fire’s too big!”

“Cowards!” The man struggled fiercely against their grasps. “Cowards, all of you! Let me go!”

In the confusion, no one but Zaccai saw Elric slip from the crowd and pull himself into a side window of the house. The boy’s entire body tensed in apprehension, and he breathed a silent prayer on his friend’s behalf.

Zaccai waited for what seemed like an eternity before the face in the upstairs window disappeared, and a chair came smashing through the glass. The townspeople audibly gasped, then everyone moved and spoke at once, rushing to crowd underneath the window.

“Throw ‘er down!”

“We’ll catch her!”

Elric appeared in the window, the little girl clinging to him tightly. A flaming beam above him gave a creak, and he cast an uneasy glance backward before lowering the girl into the waiting arms below. There was a shout of exultation when the girl landed, accompanied by the joyous cries of her parents as they ran to embrace her.

A short moment had passed before everyone seemed to remember Elric. Several townspeople moved to rejoin beneath the window again, but then a loud cracking sound was heard, and the fiery timber began to fall from the ceiling. Elric desperately surveyed the ground below, then leaped through the window just as the beam landed where he’d been standing.

He landed among the crowd in a tangled heap, taking a few of the people to the ground with him. There was a slight, anxious pause as everyone waited, their eyes fixed on Elric’s motionless form. Zaccai’s heart had come to a standstill.

Finally, the man gave a stir, then slowly raised his head. A roar of acclamation went up from the crowd, Zaccai being the first and loudest to cheer. Everyone rushed forward, lifting Elric to his feet and flocking around him until Zaccai could no longer distinguish his muscular form from the others.

All at once, someone gave a shriek of terror, and they all scrambled backward, stumbling over each other until they were a safe distance away. Facing the townspeople without fear, Elric stood erect and alone, his red hair standing out above the fallen hood of his dark cloak.

From beside Zaccai, Elise gasped sharply. “’Tis a Scarlet!”

Before anyone could do anything, another cloaked figure stepped from the crowd, pulling back his hood to show his crimson hair. Another Scarlet followed, then another, until they were all standing behind Elric.

Zaccai couldn't move, his heart pounding wildly. This was it. The Scarlets were in the open, now, and their fate would be determined in this moment.

The townspeople were all yelling at once, fear and anger mixing indistinguishably in their voices.

"You'll kill us all, you will!"

"What do ye want wit' us?"

"You've already done us enough harm!"

Elric raised his hands in an effort to calm the growing shouts. "We haven't done anything against you! We only want to help!"

"Help?" Someone retorted. "You're the ones who started the fires!"

"We did not, I swear!" Elric replied earnestly. "The superstitions are false—we are no less human than you are. Will you repay us with flames after we have proven ourselves to you?" His eyes rested meaningfully on the little girl, who was now folded safely in her mother's arms.

But the townspeople didn't seem to even hear Elric—or, at least, they didn't care—and their cries only increased in volume.

"Quiet!" A voice rose above the others. "Quiet, I say!" Charlie, the girl's father, pushed his way to the front of the crowd and headed towards the Scarlets.

The angry shouts dying on their lips, the townspeople stared at Charlie in dumbfounded amazement as he stopped directly in front of Elric.

“I don’t care what any o’ those rumors say,” he began gruffly, turning to glare over his shoulder at the other townspeople. “You Scarlets ain’t no threat to this city. An’ there ain’t nobody who can tell me otherwise.”

Elric’s lips drew upwards into a smile, and he grasped Charlie’s hand in a firm shake. “Thank you, my friend.” He turned to the crowd, scanning each face hopefully. “Is there no one else who will join us?”

These words awoke Zaccai from his dazed state, and he glanced up at his sister. “Elise?”

She looked down at him, her expression reflecting the struggle that was raging inside of her. At last, she sighed. “Alright, then. Lead the way.”

He turned towards Elric, then paused to give his sister a firm but encouraging look. “Elise, we can’t give in to fear.”

She nodded, her voice soft and small. “I know.”

Zaccai pressed his way through the multitude, Elise following behind. He could feel his sister tense beside him, but when he turned to look at her, she lifted her chin bravely, fixing her gaze on the Scarlets.

“We will help you,” Zaccai said, stepping out from the crowd. Even as he said it, he was surprised at the strength of his own voice.

This declaration silenced any shouts of outrage the townspeople had left, bringing them into a full realization of what the past several minutes had displayed. To Zaccai, it seemed as though an eternity passed in that moment. No one moved, no one spoke... there was only a heavy silence.

At last, a voice rang out with decided courage. “I will also help.”

“And I!” Came the echo from someone else.

“I’ll help.”

“I will, as well.”

The voices chimed in one by one, steadily growing louder and more confident as more and more people spoke. The townspeople swept forward to crowd around Elric once more, melding with the Scarlets until they all formed a single throng.

“God bless you.” Elric’s eyes swept over the group with an air of gratitude and satisfaction. “Now, to the pumps! Let us stop this fire!”

“To the pumps!” The cry was passed on through the crowd as they began to reform the bucket brigades.

Zaccai glanced around for Elise and was surprised to see that she had joined a line at the pumps, passing pail after pail towards the flames with the same, tireless rhythm as before. But as Zaccai watched her, he realized that her face was now full of courage and determination.

Every trace of fear had been entirely erased.

The sun’s fiery rays had just begun to peek over the far horizon as the last flames sizzled and died beneath splashes of cool water. Zaccai set down his empty bucket next to a nearby pump, wiping the soot and sweat from his forehead.

“We found him!” A voice called from down the road.

“ere’s the fella who’s done this!” Another voice called.

Zaccai glanced over. Two men were entering the town square, hauling a third man in between them. This man was tall and muscular, and was encompassed with a long, dark

cloak. Struggling in his captors' grasps, his face had turned a crimson color only a few shades lighter than his hair.

The boy gasped. "Kalen!"

By this time, many of the townspeople had heard the commotion and gathered about the men.

"I saw 'im startin' fires last night," one of the men explained. "But we couldn't find 'im 'til this mornin'."

The townspeople began to mutter among themselves, casting angry glances from the city ruins to Kalen and back again. Kalen stood tall and defiant, but Zaccai could see the fear in his eyes as he awaited his fate.

Charlie planted himself in front of Kalen, his arms folded. "So you're the fella who did this, eh?"

A spark of pride came into Kalen's eyes. "I am."

"What should we do wit' 'im?" Charlie turned to the townspeople.

"He *do* be a Scarlet, y'know," a man pointed out. The others nodded in agreement.

Kalen's face tightened at the implying tone of the man's voice, but he said nothing.

Charlie faced Kalen once more, thoughtfully studying him. "I know," he finally began. "But we saw what them fires did to our city. There ain't no one who should 'ave to go through that. Not even the one who did it."

"He's right," someone chimed in. "Let him not be burned."

A woman nodded. "Yes, let him not be burned."

The rest of the townspeople took up the cry. "Let him not be burned!"

Kalen's face was a pool of both relief and confusion as the two men grasped his arms, preparing to escort him to the city dungeon.

"Kalen!" Zaccai called, running towards them.

The men paused and waited for him to catch up.

"Zaccai," Kalen said, his tone full of perplexity. That one word seemed to ask the many questions that showed in his eyes.

"It's a miracle!" Zaccai exclaimed, smiling widely. "The Scarlets are free!"

"Free?" Kalen frowned, his gaze resting on the destroyed city around them. "But... my plan failed."

Zaccai perceived the turmoil on the man's face and placed a gentle hand on his arm. "It wasn't your plan, Kalen. *God* did it."

"God." Kalen repeated the word, but not with bitterness as he'd always done before. His face reflected bewilderment and a strange openness. But behind that—deep in those gray eyes—Zaccai observed a flicker of interest.

"A'right, let's move it along." One of Kalen's captors jerked on his arm, and he was forced to stumble along the cobblestone pavement, away from Zaccai.

The boy opened his mouth to call out a message of encouragement, but the words died in his throat as he recalled the look on Kalen's face. Perhaps he'd already said what needed to be said.

As Kalen and the two men disappeared from sight, Zaccai turned to face the town square. He nearly gasped aloud, the extent of the city's destruction hitting him for the first time. Up until now, he'd been too occupied in putting out the flames that he hadn't stopped to observe the damage they'd done.

Many of the houses had been reduced to nothing but ashes, and those left standing were either half-destroyed or, at the very least, stained black with smoke. It was a grim sight, to behold this city—his home—in such a state of ruin.

He narrowed his eyes, thinking of Kalen and Elise and the townspeople. The city was in ashes now, but... perhaps it always had been. Perhaps the flames of hatred and fear had been raging long before the real fire had begun. And now—only now that they had gone through disaster together—could the city be built up again.

Even as the thought crossed Zaccai's mind, reassurance filled his soul. Yes, they would rebuild the city. And, this time, they'd do it together... Scarlets and townspeople, side by side. Gone was the city built on ashes of bitterness and superstition. They would begin again. They would build a new city—a city built on hope, and love, and forgiveness.

Familiar voices caught Zaccai's attention, and he turned to see his sister approaching Elric, who had seated himself next to one of the pumps. Even at a distance, he could sense the timidity in her stance as she endeavored to give a welcoming smile. "Hello."

Elric stood to his feet, dipping his head in greeting. "Hello, there."

Elise hesitated, then held out a hand to him. "I'm Elise."

"A pleasure to meet you, Elise." Elric grasped her hand in a firm shake, his warm grin shining almost as bright as his red hair. "My name is Elric."

Overwhelming gratitude flooded Zaccai's heart as he turned away from the two, a satisfied smile on his face.

The restoration had already begun.