

THE BATTLE IS JOINED . . .

# SCHISMS

THE SCRIBE CYCLE

**RB**  
REBEL BASE

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# Chapter 1

When Anna donned the wool shawl of a goat herder, she'd thought nothing of murder. There had been only wind skittering over the lip of the rock overhang, the dry shuffling of boots and cloth wraps, the creaking of trigger mechanisms being locked in place. Four hours of collective meditation had settled her mind and made violence foreign to the core of her being. Of *their* being, she supposed. They'd stared at one another, *through* each other, so inwardly naked and still that anything beyond compassion was unthinkable.

But violence was a language imposed from birth to death.

"Where's the fifth pebble?" Anna asked the Hazani girl as they knelt in shadow.

Ramyi sighed. "Five paces behind me, on the third ledge."

"Second."

\* \* \* \*

By the time the girl had memorized their shelter, the skies were endless mica and tufts of violet. Anna led the herders-who-were-not-herders and their goats down hills threaded by narrow switchbacks. They were a ragged procession of silhouettes and bleats and tin bells, bronze skin and threadbare coverings, a stream mingling with the wagons and traders flooding the valley's night markets. It was jarring to see how many travelers had resorted to using century-old footpaths to reach a city's outlying districts. But with the region's kator networks torn up or taxed to the point of bankruptcy, a return to the old ways was inevitable.

Some of the foundlings jogged after her and called out, rattling handfuls of beads. Years ago the children of Leejadal had been charming, practiced sellers, but eagerness had soured to hurried barks at her back. “*Five stalks, five stalks only. Just for you, morza.*” Old men with milk-white eyes and mouthfuls of khat swiveled their heads as she passed.

They were strangers, outsiders in the most dangerous sense of the word, but not unwelcome: The market’s usual well of flesh peddlers and spicemen had dried up over the past two cycles, and only the foreign caravans—those from Malijad or Qar Annah—brought any hope of profit.

A sea of lanterns lay below her, giving shape to curtains of shifting sand, the hard edges of mud storehouses and ramshackle fencing, brick walls marred with soot stains. A black expanse of stars framed the curvature of the hills and the towers of Leejadal, which now stood high and unlit against the moon.

“Was it always like this?” Ramyi asked in flatspeak, surely knowing the answer already. She was young, but she knew better.

Anna glared at her, but the girl missed it. She missed many things.

Once they’d crossed a dry gully and its tariff checkpoint, Yatrin’s broad silhouette angled back toward Ramyi. His eyes were weary yet alert, sapphire in the light of hanging lanterns. Sapphire in a damning, eastern way. He must’ve felt it too, as he glanced away immediately; that sort of instinct couldn’t always be trained into operatives. “It’s no better.” He clicked at Ramyi through his teeth. “Watch the goats. They like to wander.”

“Yes, of course,” Ramyi said. “The *goats.*” She moved on the outside of their column, using her walking stick to herd the goats back into a tight cluster. The indolence in her walk said it all: She was too blunt to respect a plan’s subtlety. “What will we even do with them?”

“Sell them,” Anna hissed, and that was it.

But Anna had the walk of a goat herder, the strong yet labored gait of those who’d had their legs broken and mended countless times. Woven cotton strips concealed shins laced with pink and white scars. It was systemic, really. Her body throbbed incessantly, protesting against its own existence, crying out for the relief she’d stopped seeking long ago.

She watched Ramyi’s steps, the way they shifted on loose patches of sand and clay and rock. The way they squandered youth and vigor. Granted, Anna wasn’t a foundling, nor had she been born into—and lived through—constant war, but they shared gifts that came with the price of duty. Duty that Ramyi shirked at every turn. During most operations her eyes were skyward rather than sweeping, more invested in memorizing lunar patterns than surveying the essences of passersby.

Anna's blades walked like beaten dogs around Ramyi, but she couldn't cow Anna so easily.

Just shy of the market's entrance, where peddlers' booths and alcoves sat nestled between narrow brick walls, bathing in the light of eerie red lamps, the contact waited. He was shorter than she'd remembered, bundled up in mustard-shaded robes and hunched over a gnarled walking stick. His *fatiyen* trinkets—shriveled red berries, packed into hive-like clumps by dark resin—hung along his belt as usual. And she couldn't forget the essence lurking beneath his skin: a ten-pronged oval, its spindles extending through one another like tree branches. Shadows pooled beneath his hood, concealing deep folds of sun-beaten skin and a patchy white beard. Old Tensic, always milling about. Always, by some miracle, finding lodging for the herders that passed through Nur Ales-Leejadal.

"Low suns," Anna said, joining Tensic as he leaned against a dust-laden setstone well. She waited for Yatrin and the others to guide their herd off the main path, which was growing busier by the moment, then unfurled the fingers of her right hand. Her palm held a bruised flower petal, once rich saffron as it had bloomed in the meadows of the plains.

It caught the old man's eye. "You need bedding," he croaked. "The beasts?"

"Hold them in the pens," Baqir said in perfect flatspeak. "We'll let them feed and sell them tomorrow morning, if we don't take a carving knife to them for our last meal." He grinned, and they did in turn. Especially Ramyi. It was hard to ignore his singsong voice, his slender yet graceful face that reflected little of what he'd done during his seven cycles under Anna's command.

But it crept into everybody eventually, Anna supposed.

Khara moved past them. "I'll take them in." She led the goats with her pack shifted high across her shoulders, weaving between fires in stone-lined pits and lanterns swaying in the breeze. Her frame was broader than it had been just a year before, her waist and legs corded with dense muscle. When she'd been initiated with Baqir, Anna wondered how long her honesty and humility would last. But nothing had shifted in her, warped her like Anna had seen in others. She was good for Baqir, truthfully. Ten years Anna's senior, but carrying the sense of a beloved daughter nonetheless.

They trailed Khara into the dry heat of the settlement, basking in its candles and guttering flames after the chill of windswept darkness. Tensic's lodging wasn't far, but shuffling past crowds of ink-faced workmen and shivering *nerkoya* addicts made the trip harrowing. Even the air warned them, somehow—echoes of snarling hounds, stinging smoke, the shrill cries of whores parading on the settlement's eastern terraces.

It felt wrong to Anna, but then again, everything had since Malijad.

When they reached the lodge, Khara was already working to seal the paddock; her gaze swept up and down the nearby road and its lanes of caravans. The goats were bleating madly, stomping across the hard soil and clacking their horns together, putting a wrinkle of doubt in Tensic's thick brow.

"Come," Tensic said. He gestured to the mud building's low doorway and hanging tapestry. The lodge's five floors tapered inward as they ascended, suggesting a scarcity of engineers. "Apple or ginger tea?"

"We won't need tea," Anna said. "Which room?"

"You've come a long way. You ought to warm your blood, you know. This is our way."

"And this is ours," Yatrin cut in.

Anna stared so intently into the blackness of the old man's pupils that she forgot what she was searching for. "We'd like to rest first."

"Ah." Tensic's attention shifted to Ramyi. "Perhaps the sixth room will suit you."

The lodge's main hall was quiet and hazy with a pall of pipe smoke. Most of those lying on the earthen floor were Hazani, their tunics and wraps hanging from the rafters to dry the day's sweat. A pair of Huuri, gleaming translucently in candlelight, lay huddled together near the door with their packs clutched to their chests. But the stillness was deeper than an absence of guests; the lodge's ornate silk carpets and silver kettle sets were gone, likely converted to a few stalks or iron bars by a crafty peddler.

Déjà vu crept over Anna, thick and threatening.

Yatrin and Baqir headed for the latrine dugout behind a partition, while Khara slumped down beside the door. The woman fished a cylinder of aspen and a blade from her pack, whittling with rhythmic scrapes, eyeing Ramyi as she wandered aimlessly between cushions and hookahs. When Anna was certain of everybody's routines, she jogged up the spiral stairwell in darkness.

The muffled cries of babes leaked through locked doors on the second and third levels, but the fourth was silent. Anna wondered if that was conspicuous, or if it might lure unwanted attention from those who searched for that kind of thing, but she trusted in Tensic's judgment: Many of the veterans in Anna's company, living or dead, had arranged things through him. Sharp minds and tight lips were rare things in the north.

Anna crossed the corridor and its patches of moonlight, halting at the sixth door. She gave a soft tap with her knuckles and waited.

Silence.

She recalled her infiltrator's instructions, the exact exchange of one knock for one cough. If she hadn't been so headstrong, she might've fetched Yatrin. But she was. With heartbeats trickling through her core, Anna reached into the folds of her shawl, unlatched a shortened ruj from the clasp on a ceramic-plated vest, and cradled it against her hip.

It was the length of her forearm, strangely cumbersome despite her having trained with it nearly as long as it had existed as a prototype among Hazani cartels. Two stubby barrels housed in a cedar frame, a fully-wound cog on its side, payload sacs of iron shavings waiting beside spring plungers. Most of her fighters had taken to calling it by northern name: yuzel, thorn. Crude, inaccurate, unpredictable—but that had become the nature of this war.

Anna pressed her back to the wall and took hold of the door handle. Cycles of training coalesced in her stilled lungs, in the hare-twitch muscles of her wrists, inviting peace in the face of unease. Clarity gave form to violence, after all. In a single breath she shoved the door inward, dropped to one knee, swept her yuzel's dual barrels across the room.

The mirrorman's body was sprawled out in a wash of candlelight and ceramic fragments, flesh glimmering with slick red. Stale air and sweat wafted out to meet her.

*"Shes'tir."* Her curse was a whisper, a surge of hot blood.

Anna stood, keeping the yuzel aimed at the shadows around the corpse. Piece by piece, the room revealed the scope of their work, starting with blood-spattered mud-and-straw walls. A dented copper kettle, an overturned table, a tapestry shredded by errant blade slashes. Then she saw it, gleaming like a spiderweb or silk strand: a trip wire was suspended across the doorway, just above ankle-level, set with enough precision to rival some of Malijad's best killers.

But subtlety had never been the way of southerners.

After edging to the left and right, examining the chamber's hidden corners for assailants she suspected were long gone, Anna stepped over the trip wire and approached the body carefully.

His face was distorted, bulging out and cracked inward with oozing welts, both eyes swollen shut. A garrote's deep purple traces ringed his neck. With some difficulty, Anna discerned that he'd also been a southerner, not a local conscript or hired hand from Hazan; he'd had naturally pale skin, now darkened by years beneath a withering sun. A mercenary. But his role—passing information through a mirror's glints—had made him their best chance for information on the tracker's whereabouts.

Their only chance, after three years of frayed leads and compromised operations.

Anna bent down and turned the man's head from side to side, noting its coldness, its turgid and leathery texture as a result of beatings. His lips were dark, and—

*Ink.*

A dark, narrow stripe of ink ended at the crest of his lower lip, originating somewhere far deeper in his mouth. The application had been hasty, forceful even. Using her middle finger, Anna peeled the mirrorman's lip forward. A triangular pattern had been needled into the soft tissue, still inflamed with networks of red capillaries but recognizable all the same: It was an old Nahoran system, more a product of surveyors than soldiers, aiming to meld coordinates with time.

Here, now, her only chance.

Anna reattached her yuzel to its hook, slipped her pack off, fished out a brass scroll tube and charcoal stick. With a moment of silence to listen, to observe the empty doorway and the night market's routine din, she copied the symbol onto the blank scroll. She then furled the parchment and slipped it back into its tube.

Its weight was eerie in her pack, crushing with importance she understood both intensely yet not at all.

She hurried out of the chamber and toward the stairwell, but before she'd cleared the corridor she glanced outside, where she noticed a dark yellow cloth waving atop a post near the paddock. It hadn't been there when they arrived. Her breath seized in the back of her mouth and—

A door squealed on its hinges.

Anna pivoted around, yuzel unclasped and drawn in both hands, eyes focused to the slender ruj barrel emerging from the seventh doorway. A dark hand followed, swathed in leather strips far too thick for northern fighters. She slid to the left and squeezed the trigger.

It was a hollow whisper in the corridor, perhaps a handful of sand pelting mud, a rattle down her wrists. Iron shavings collided as the magnetic coils accelerated them, sparking in brilliant whites and blues and oranges. The wall behind the shooter exploded in a burst of dust and dried grass, sending metal shards ricocheting and skittering across the floor. A scream ceased in a single gust, as bone and cloth and flesh scattered just as quickly. The shooter staggered forward in the haze, howling as he stared at the stump of his wrist.

Anna fired again.

When the dark cloud vanished, the shooter's upper half was strewn down the corridor and dripping from the ceiling.

She spun away, sensing the tremors in her hands and the hard knot in her throat, and started down the stairwell. Three years of violence hadn't made killing any more pleasurable, nor even easier, but decidedly more common. In fact, time had only made her more aware of how warriors were shaped: The nausea and terror remained, but everything was so perfunctory, done as habitually as breathing or chewing. Not that she had the luxury of being revolted by that fact. As she descended she unscrewed the weapon's empty shaving pouches and replaced them with fresh bulbs.

Footsteps echoed up from the staircase's depths. Yatrin appeared a moment later, his face a mass of tension and pockmarks in the light of an alcove's candle. He had a black beard—dense, verging on wild—that nearly hid the tight line of his mouth. It wasn't that Anna forgot his youth at times; to the contrary, she often remembered it. Especially when he was afraid.

"Did I hear it?" he whispered in river-tongue.

Anna nodded. "We'll go in pairs."

"They could've had you, you know."

"But they didn't." Anna stepped past him, lingering in his shadow. "Dragging him out is too much of a risk."

"You didn't even tell me."

"We have our tasks," she hissed. "Listen to what I'm telling you now."

Yatrin seemed to be peering within himself, searching for some mote of calmness in the eye of the storm, as Anna had taught him so long ago. His brow relaxed. "Kill, then?"

She held Tensic's face in her mind, envisioning the creases set by a long and cruel life, the distance in his eyes that was surely born from stillborn babes and dead lovers. "Kill."

Anna picked her way through the hall and its huddled travelers, flashing hard stares at Khara and Baqir as they carved wood by the doorway. She rarely had to say more to them. As the pair stood and slipped out into the darkness, two bulky shawls among many, Anna searched the room: blankets, ceramic cups, pipes, rolled burlap covers, dark and clear bodies—

*Ramyi.*

The girl was a thin, motionless shape in the corner of the room, a purple silk cushion tucked under her head and black hair pooling at her back. Her shawl rose and fell with the rhythm of a dreamer's breaths.

Anna stalked toward her as Yatrin did his work behind the partition—the soft opening of skin, the gurgling of open veins, the muted final words

buried behind a killer's hand. She stood over the girl and prodded her with a mud-spattered boot. "Get up," she hissed in flatspeak.

Ramyi stirred and rolled over with a scowl. "What is it?"

"Come outside." Anna glanced sidelong at Yatrin, who'd emerged from behind the curtain, wiping a short blade with the inner fold of his shawl. "I said, get up."

"I'm not some hound," Ramyi whispered. She lay still, staring up at Anna with clenched hands, but finally shifted to stand.

"You need to listen," Anna said, leading the girl to the door and holding it open as a gust of cool wind rolled down from the hills. She waited till Yatrin and Ramyi had both passed, then closed it gently. Sound carried easily in the valley. "I address you as you behave, you know. Some things have to be earned."

Ramyi's jaw tightened, ready to spill all the bitter words she'd learned in the streets of Nur Kalimed, but the anger drained from her eyes at once. She was staring past Anna, more curious than concerned.

That was a warning in itself.

Anna whirled around, catching a fleeting glimpse of the shadows darting between market lanes. She spotted Khara and Baqir near the road, their shawls lit by firelight and dancing in the breeze, walking with the gait of soldiers who mistook silence for safety.

"Call," Anna said to Ramyi. "Call!"

"What?" Ramyi whispered.

"*Am'dras!*" Yatrin shouted. Heads swiveled toward them from all corners of the artisan flats, drinking up the eastern tongue with a mix of fear and awe, but secrecy was now a wasted effort.

The two soldiers dropped to their stomachs.

The blast was transient, little more than a flash amid fire pits and a blossom of dark smoke. The air itself burst, fanning dust up and out in a tight wave, scattering caravan attendants, sending screams into the night. Shrapnel whistled overhead and smoldered in pockets of sand.

Ramyi stared at the wisps of smoke, huffing, fumbling for words. "So close."

Anna's hearing trickled back as Yatrin rushed past her. She seized Ramyi by the arm, pulled her into a low run toward Khara and Baqir. "That was their first strike."

More *pops* sounded, muffled but prominent, no longer frightening her as they had years before. She watched the bakers and clothiers and spicemen scrambling from the market, awash in dust and soot, and beyond them,

killers flooding out of walled compounds and the cover of awnings. Six, perhaps seven, all bearing ruji and blades.

Anna froze, fixing Ramyi in place at the edge of the haze. She'd expected more.

A moment later, she found it.

Black shapes squirmed on the crest of the surrounding hills. Rusted plates reflected moonlight in jagged stains, gave shape to dozens of churning cogs and cylinders and an enormous firing tube. Even the southern nebulae were soon blotted out, smothered by the fumes bleeding from smokestacks and iron grates. Twitching, awkward legs, strung together with iron cables to resemble a puppeteer's monstrous spider, rose out of nothingness and crashed down on the nearby hillside, drilling through a granite outcropping, fountaining dirt over a terraced opium sprawl.

The machine's cannon wobbled on its suspension cables, coming to rest as a ruji's payload bit into the low wall near Ramyi. More blasts tore through the sand around Khara's head.

Ramyi gazed wide-eyed at the machine. "It's going to fire."

"Keep moving." Anna pulled her along, even as she stared at the cannon herself. "Yatrin, Khara, Baqir. Do you understand?" The order was practical, not personal. "Do you?"

"Yes!"

"Calm down," Anna said. "You need to still your hands."

Yatrin cut to the right, dashing past a dying peddler and into the cover of a tailor's shop. It was a low, sturdy box, their best hope of surviving the machine's volley. He called to Khara and Baqir, but the blasts were constant now, drowning out his words.

Another curtain of smoke and sand brushed past the flats, and when it cleared Anna saw the two fighters kneeling by a ruined brick wall, their ruji assembled and loaded. She pulled Ramyi toward the tailor's shop, whistling as she ran. Before she trained with Nahoran fighters, she hadn't known the force of proper whistling. It was loud enough to pierce utter chaos.

Khara lifted her head to the sound. She slapped Baqir on the arm, pointing.

Anna sprinted into the shop's cover, which was cool and dark and deafening with the sound of boots scraping over packed earth. She spotted Yatrin by the slit of the far window, peering out with his yuzel in hand, calmly selecting his target in that haunting eastern way. Another blast thudded against Yatrin's cover, flooding the room with a flash of white light and sparks.

Ramyi was hunkering down behind a crooked wooden table, digging through her pack for supplies she'd memorized a thousand times in training. She fumbled and spilled a set of vials into the shadows around her knees.

Anna knelt beside Ramyi as the other two fighters dashed through the door, ruji smoking and ripped shawls exposing ceramic panels. "Be still, or we'll die." Glancing at the window slit's firing position, she saw Baqir changing places with Yatrin.

"I can't help it," Ramyi said.

"Focus on me." Anna waited for Yatrin to scramble behind the table before taking the girl's hand. It had gone cold with panic. "Remember the moment before your birth." It was an old Kojadi meditation, a paradoxical challenge to conjure vapidness, but it worked. She watched Ramyi's irises settle back into the notch of her lids.

Yatrin angled toward Ramyi, unwound his neck scarf and lifted his chin, exposing a smooth canvas. It had been marked countless times, but Ramyi's cuts were accurate: She hadn't marred a single fighter's throat, and her runes faded as delicately as tracks in the southern woods.

When she was calm.

"There are too many," Khara called out from the firing position near Baqir's. Her voice was as measured as ever, but the urgency of her shots—rapid, snapping between targets as she leaned in and out of iron-flecked cover—betrayed her concerns.

"Focus on the essence," Anna said. Ramyi's blade lingered over Yatrin's throat with a wavering edge. Two volleys clipped the edge of Baqir's cover, showering them with plumes of pulverized clay and mud, filling the shadows with the odor of scorched dust. "Nothing but the essence, Ramyi. Become it." While counseling the girl, Anna slid her own pack off her shoulders and withdrew the two ruji halves from their webbing. One trigger mechanism, locked in place for sixteen clicks of a cog's teeth, and one barrel, heat-tempered with webweave. "Don't be afraid." She slotted the barrel in its housing, threaded the components together, and slid the sixteen-pouch cartridge into the central chamber. An explosive burst near the door as Anna disengaged the bolt lock and shouldered the weapon, training her eyes on the blast zone and its gray wisps. "We'll make it out of here."

Ramyi's first cut was uncertain, yet manageable. Anna could feel it in the hayat's bleed-off, the way Yatrin's crescent configuration swarmed toward the open wound with hungry curiosity. In her periphery she watched the girl's hands sweep with increasing confidence, arcing over the windpipe and past the major arteries, sweeping up to join the lines at their apex.

Beyond the doorway, shadows flitted past her ruj's barrel and Anna fired once, twice, three times, raking a still-smoldering brick oven and patches of blackened sand with her shots but failing to connect.

Yatrin's neck gleamed with hayat's pale luminescence.

"It's done." Ramyi's smiling lips were an icy blue shimmer in its light.

"You're not finished," Anna said, firing once more as a fighter dashed from wall to wall. "Add the bridge." Every second of pride gritted her teeth further. For all of Anna's meditation and prolific rune revelations, she hadn't been able to mimic—or merely parse—some of the designs Ramyi had gained while simply *toying* with awareness. It was a skillful waste. "Add it now!"

That startled the girl to action. Her blade slid back into the fresh protection rune, channeling hayat down parallel tracks to form a branching addition. As she carved the third line, a pair of fighters burst out of a nearby compound's entryway and unleashed a coordinated volley, their shots chipping away the doorframe and drilling into Yatrin's back. Plates across his ceramic vest exploded in white puffs.

Yatrin's cry was low, buried. His flesh sizzled as it ejected the iron shavings, re-formed, and grew glossy with a sheen of sweat.

Rage flickered through Anna. It was a shadow of her former self, of the days before she'd tamed her mind, but forceful nonetheless. She let off three shots and eviscerated one shooter's knees, forearm, and skull, picking apart his body before putting a fourth payload squarely into his partner's jaw. The dust ceded to a sprawl of stringy limbs and blood. Khara's desperation was resonating in her, fed by the fact that Ramyi's best markings endured for an hour. Terror and haste would only bleed their efficiency.

"There!" Ramyi jerked her blade away, revealing the bridging rune: long, intricate rows, bisecting sweeps, clusters of dotted gouges, and an alien labyrinth encircling the entire design. It was beyond comprehension, stranger than anything Anna had ever glimpsed, and beyond memorization. Every bridge was unique and folded space itself, requiring meditation so thorough that there could be no divide between Ramyi and the tethering site. Not if they wanted to emerge intact.

Anna whistled again, this time competing with a tortured, rumbling scream from the market. *Giants*, she realized, wondering just how far they'd go to destroy her. She heard timber cracking and clay panels shattering and *duzen*-swollen feet stomping closer as Baqir slid behind the table.

Khara joined them when the air grew hot and charged, heralding the first volley from the hilltop's machine. Both of the Nahorans' faces were streaked with blood, dotted with wasp bites of shrapnel and scalding grit.

She and Baqir knelt with their hands on Yatrin's shoulders, shutting their eyes to the shop's smoke-laden dust and shouts in river-tongue.

When Yatrin's runes began to pulse, oscillating between cobalt and ivory, Anna gripped Khara and Ramyi's shoulders. She glared at Ramyi, who then held them to join the circle in tandem with the cannon's tinny howl.

Everything crystallized for an instant. Anna had no body, no singular mind, no presence beyond mere awareness of the shop as it imploded and vaporized in a hail of liquefied iron pellets.

She was there and not there. She was *everywhere*.

An unbroken ring consumed her awareness.

In the darkness of the overhang, which materialized as though she'd been plucked from a nightmare and thrust back into wakefulness, frigid wind kissed her face. Her fingers vibrated as they vented the energy that had, in some sense, killed her.

Baqir was lying on his side and coughing up bile. Khara knelt by his side, gently caressing his back and its chipped ceramic covering. Yatrin's rune had taken most of the load, it seemed, judging by the stillness with which he gazed at Anna, and the delicate folding of his hands across his lap. Ramyi's breaths echoed through the chamber, raspy and broken. Bits of the shop's debris—mostly wool scraps and measuring string—were swept away on the breeze.

Rising from her knee, Anna slid off her pack and retrieved the scroll case. There was no guarantee it was worth anything, much less reliable in her hunt, but it was her only chance for progress amid ruins. A seed of sorts.

"Just breathe." Khara was still touching Baqir, but she'd shifted her attention to the mirage-like flickering of the rear wall's basalt. "Anna, it's open again."

Far in the distance, beyond an expanse of rock and silver dunes, the valley twinkled with blossoms of white light. Distorted aftershocks arrived with groans and playful flurries of sand.

She turned away and stared at the Nest's warped opening. There was no salvation for those trapped in a war they hadn't engineered nor fed—only sacrifice.

Anna gripped the scroll case till her knuckles ached. *You have to sprout, little seed.*