



SARA EL-ARIFI

A Novel

THE
FINAL
STRIFE



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A NOVEL

SAARA EL-ARIFI



NEW YORK

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A Duster is built for labor. Their submissive nature, which I believe to be an element of their blue blood, means they are best suited for the plantation fields. Ghostings, stripped as they are of communication, make the best servants, their translucent blood a clear indicator of adaptability, although a Duster may be substituted if needs must, given the rarity of Ghostings. Embers continue to be the superior race, proving without a doubt that those with red blood are born to lead.

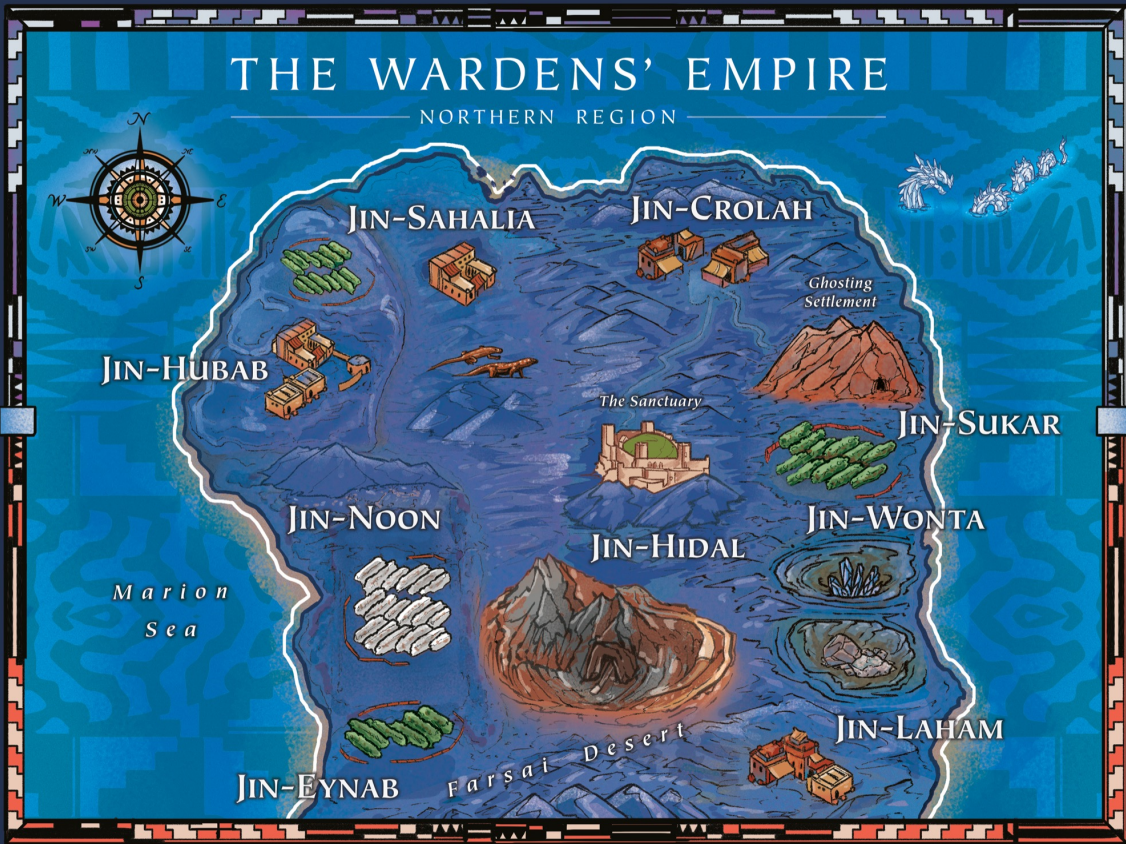
—Extract from *On Race and Color* by Hamad Al-Olar, Warden of Knowledge, year 378 of the Wardens' Empire

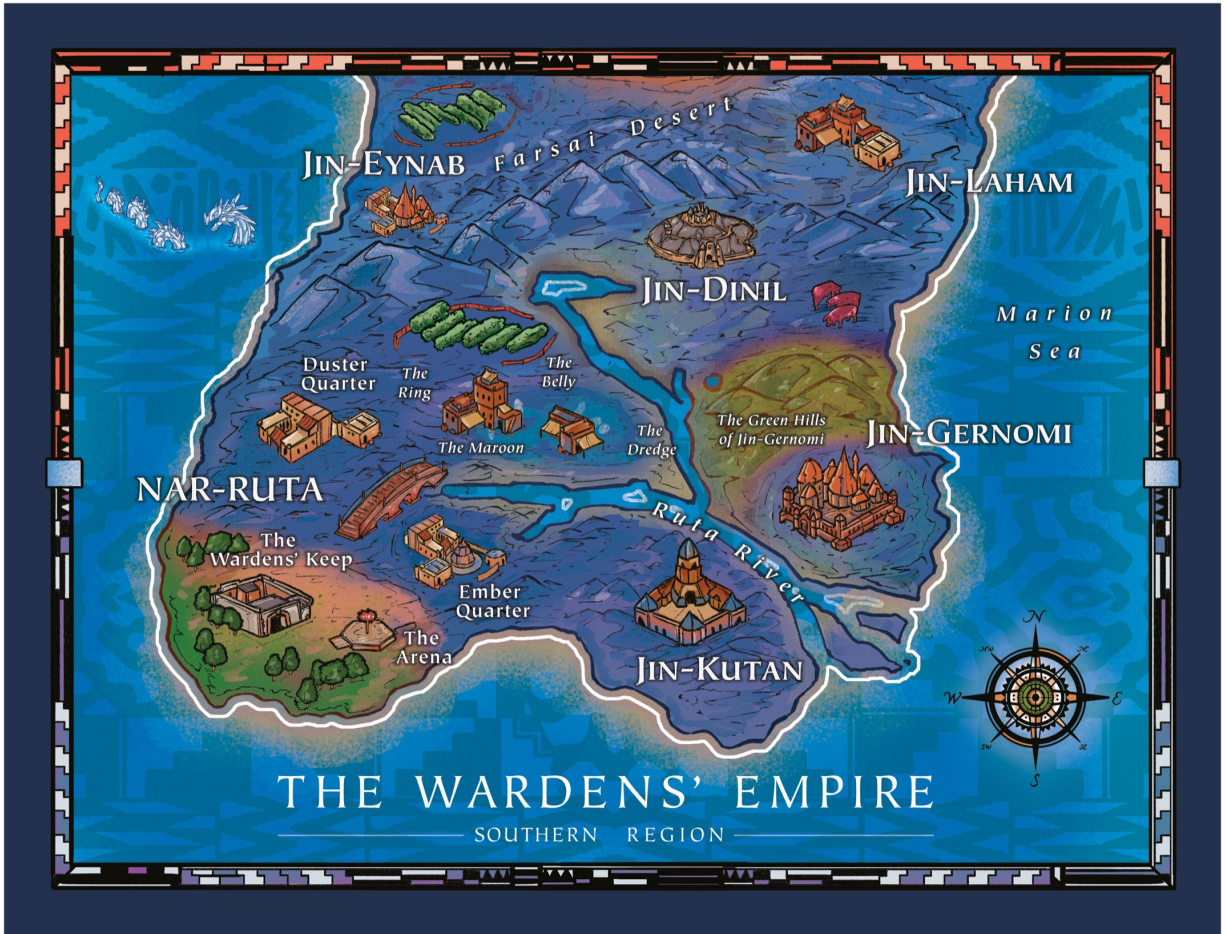
Stolen, sharpened, the hidden key,
We'll destroy the empire and set you free,
Churned up from the shadows to tear it apart,
A dancer's grace, a killer's instinct, an Ember's blood, a
Duster's heart.

—The plantation chant of the Stolen

THE WARDENS' EMPIRE

NORTHERN REGION







PROLOGUE

The tidewind came every night.

It billowed in from the Marion Sea between the clock strikes of twelve and two, moving from one wave to another, from the sea to the sand dunes of the Farsai Desert. Salt air and blue sand collided within its swirling midst, weaponizing each grain into something deadly.

It blew through the Wardens' Empire and the thirteen cities within, destroying everything in its path not strong enough to withstand it.

To the south, it swirled through the capital city, Nar-Ruta, running along the invisible seams that separated the citadel into four quarters. It weaved up toward the Keep, the smallest and most affluent quarter, where the four wardens, the leaders of the empire, slept soundly behind the iron walls of their fortress. Nothing entered the Keep without the wardens' knowledge.

In the Ember Quarter wreckage rolled through the cobbled streets, soiling the pristine courtyards of the nobility. The tidewind pounded on their lavish doors, but the metal shutters were steadfast.

The tidewind moved on to more fruitful ground, across the Ruta River, which separated rich from poor, red blood from blue and clear. It battered the wooden doors of the Duster Quarter and thrust its tendrils through poorly repaired windows. Brooms stood ready for the morning's cleaning. The residents, worn down from the plantation fields, were used to backbreaking work.

The wind moved east toward the final district of Nar-Ruta, the Dredge: the impoverished ruins and rubble home to Ghostings and Dusters. It moved toward the maiden houses where the fake cries of the nightworkers' pleasure drowned out the tidewind's wails. It swept through the shadows of the joba seed drug dens where the small red seed was consumed under the cover of the Dredge's crumbling structures. There it lingered, ready to shred the skin of any who had the misfortune of finding themselves outside as the tidewind blew. Then gone would be their dark skin and blood. The tidewind took it all, leaving nothing but bones and the tattered remains of who they once were.

And the wind had been getting stronger in recent weeks. Hungrier.

The residents of the Dredge not to be found in the maiden houses or joba seed dens could be found in the Maroon, the largest tavern north of the Ember Quarter. Set into the tunnels beneath the city, the tavern was protected from the tidewind's havoc.

Inside the Maroon, a drumbeat shook the blue particles of sand that had slipped through cracks and under shutters, until the sand danced like the plantation workers within.

They were all Dusters. The workers swayed, their brown faces smoothed by the fleeting freedom of the dance. Heels pounded the floor, turning outward left and right with a flick of their wrists. Backs arched, not in pain now but in defiance, their faces snapping to the rafters of the tavern. They stamped their scythes on the ground, adding to the cacophony of the drums. The blades were sharp enough to cut bark but blunt enough to make their Ember overseers

feel safe. And if their limbs were covered with welts from the whip and their backs stooped from carrying heavy loads, the Maroon's shadows hid all that.

And if it didn't, the firerum would.

Griot Zibenwe took to the small wooden stage and signaled for the band to stop. He held a small djambe drum and wore a shawl patterned in bright reds and greens, well made if a little threadbare. His graying locs, which fell down to his waist, shimmied back and forth as he beat a new rhythm on his drum.

Griots were storytellers, Dusters who had taken it upon themselves to preserve their heritage in poetry, prose, and rhythm. Many of them worked in the plantations during the day, but at night they came alive with their stories.

There was a collective inhale as the energy from the dance shifted into anticipation of a new tale.

The drumbeat reached a crescendo and then abruptly stopped.

The audience stood on their heels, waiting with readiness for the griot's words. The silence pulled taut, the tension building, and just when the crowd thought they couldn't take it anymore the griot pounded the djambe three times.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Then he spoke:

"Listen well. Sit close. This story will be told once, and only once. So listen well. Sit close."

Thump.

"Too close!"

Those sitting closest flinched, then laughed as a wicked grin spread across the griot's face.

He continued, "Let me take you to a time not too long ago, but not yesterday. A moment when the space between the peoples of the empire fractured a little more. Eighteen years ago. Not long ago at all."

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“There is one thing in life that weaves us all together. No matter your blood color, no matter your quarter—we are all birthed into this world as babes, naked under Anyme’s sky.”

“Absolve me of my sins, Anyme.” The prayer was an instinctual reflex from the crowd.

“But when the babe cries the weave holding us together unravels. The colored threads of the empire pull apart, pull away. But there are those who resist the patterns laid down for them. And so, to the story I promised you today.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“You may have heard of the Night of the Stolen, though the wardens tried to strangle the whispers on the wind. But for one night I will pry the wardens’ grip from our necks and let the story free. It is a story about thieves in the night; about a rebellion brewing; about our wardens’ home breached.”

Thump.

“Duty.”

The audience grumbled.

Thump.

“Truth.”

The audience booed.

Thump.

“Strength.”

Fists were raised in the air.

Thump.

“Knowledge.”

The audience screamed their dissent to the beat of the drum.

Thump-ba-da-thump.

The griot stopped and leveled his gaze at a newcomer. “My stories may fill your mind, but they don’t fill my coffer. Latecomers, pay up, stories aren’t free. One slab apiece.”

The griot paused until he heard the sound of a coin hitting his trinket box.

“Now, back we go. To the Wardens’ Keep, where the court resides and the patrons sleep. Here we find three unwelcome shadows: a mother with her child, and the leader of their crimes, sneaking through the gates.”

The griot’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Do you know who they were? The couple who crept in? Fleet of foot and quieter than a breath?”

“The Sandstorm!” a young Duster cried. Instead of a toy, she clutched her scythe.

“Eyoh! You have it right. Indeed, you have it right. The *Sandstorm*,” Griot Zibenwe whispered the word and winked. “Just in case the officers hear your cheers.

“The Sandstorm had a plan that night. They crept into Ember houses and the Keep and cut down anyone in their path. And so, the three shadows moved through the Keep, death in their wake. Blue was their blood, but that night the Keep ran red.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

“Up and up the stairs they went. Toward the chambers where the nobility slept. Toward the chambers, where the babies were kept.”

The griot lifted his hands from the drum and sliced them through the air. “The leader slashed his scythe through the nursemaid’s neck. Blue blood stained the wall.”

“He killed a Duster?” the young girl in the front cried.

The griot nodded sadly. “Yes, my friends, he killed one of his own. But I tell you this: love may give you strength, but retribution gives you purpose.”

Thump.

“There in the center of the bedchamber, another baby lay. A babe whose blood ran red, unlike the blue-blooded child the mother held. Two years the Sandstorm had planned for this moment. The mother placed her Duster babe next to the other. Red and blue threads in the Sandstorm’s plan. The Duster a decoy for the other, a life sacrificed to allow them to escape.

“The leader lifted the other baby. The child whose blood ran red. This new child, swapped, was the key to bringing down the empire. Neither looked back at the Duster child they left behind as they ran from the warden’s home.”

Thump.

“If you looked outside that night you might have seen other couples in flight. For the Sandstorm knew their craft. The craft of people wronged. Twelve children they stole and disappeared into the beyond.”

The griot’s voice softened, grew weaker, like he spoke his musings to himself.

“And that is where their story is silenced. A tale with no ending. What happened to the children they stole? Their doom impending.”

He raised his head, his eyes shimmering.

“Dead is what the wardens say, destroyed like every rebellion. But sometimes I wonder, what was the Sandstorm’s plan? And that of the stolen?”

The griot stood, the moroseness that had burdened him vanquished with a mischievous grin. “Remember, my friends: love gives you strength, but retribution gives you purpose.”

Thump-ba-da-thump.

The audience cheered and stamped their scythes as the tale came to an end. The griot stood and reached for his trinket box, now brimming with slabs. He looped the strap of the djambe over his other hand and made his way through the crowd who congratulated him on his tale.

As he ascended the steps to the street above he listened for two things. First, to check whether the tidewind’s wrath had quietened for the night, and secondly to hear the distinctive thud of an officer’s boots. It was easy to know if an officer was nearby, as few people in the Dredge owned shoes.

When he heard neither, the griot pushed open the door to the Maroon and slipped out into the blackness of the night.



PART ONE

TRADE

Each of the thirteen cities of the Wardens' Empire specializes in different exports, creating a sustainable cycle of resources within a single market. Every city must meet its trade quota each mooncycle, often resulting in a higher death toll among those who labor in the fields. Sacrifices must be made in order to ensure economic stability within the empire; blood will always flow when an empire thrives.

—Extract from *Economic Independence* by Sibul Abundo



CHAPTER ONE

THE DAY OF DESCENT

I have been searching for any trace of the Sandstorm to complete my tale. Though the wardens claim to have killed them some years ago, I have no confirmation of where or when. It may be my aging eyesight, but I can't see the end of the story. The rumors are thin, wisps of smoke that I can't grasp. I will continue to search. I will continue to hope.

—Note found in Griot Zibenwe's villa

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

The drumbeat still thrummed through Sylah's veins as she weaved her way back home.

The raw pink of dawn promised a blistering heat, and Sylah tilted her head and basked in the sun's rays. The tinkets in her braids chimed.

She ran her tongue over the joba seed tucked in the gap between her front teeth. The warmth induced by the seed was dissipating, leaving her cold. Hugging her arms to her chest, she noticed for the first time she held an empty bottle of firerum. She threw it at the wall

of a derelict villa, which was filmed with blue sand. It had been a strong wind last night. At times its pounding had even eclipsed the drums.

But not the drumbeat in her memory.

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

The sound came again and with it an unmistakable tremor of fear that woke people from their beds. Now Sylah listened and realized she knew the cadence of the rhythm, and it wasn't from the song in her mind. It was the pounding of the Starting Drum, indicating the beginning of a trial.

It was the sound of death.

Bang-dera-bang-dera-bang.

Dredge-dwellers began to seep out of their decrepit homes and stream toward Dredge Square. Sylah found herself being carried along in the current.

The square was full of Dusters and Ghostings, blurry-eyed from a night of drugs, sex, or alcohol. Or in Sylah's case, all three. A dozen officers of the warden army stood to attention in front of the rack, the wooden device used for executions. Like ripe bruises, the army's purple uniform was enough to instill fear in anyone north of the Ruta River—anyone without red blood.

Sylah spotted Hassa in the crowd and pushed her way toward her.

"How's it hurting?" Sylah greeted the Ghosting girl.

Like the beetle she had been named after, Hassa was small with dark eyes. The color was unusual for a Ghosting, as light-colored eyes were often a feature of their translucent blood. But it didn't matter if you were a Ghosting or a Duster, everyone who lived in the Dredge had the same hollowed-out look. It was a mandatory uniform, an expression of squalor and poverty enforced by malnutrition and childhood labor.

You look like shit. Have you even slept? Hassa signed.

Sylah ignored Hassa's observation and pointed toward the officers. "Have you seen this guy's talent?"

Hassa followed Sylah's gaze to the officer with the Starting Drum strapped to his chest. He was beating the rhythm with absolute dedication, his muscles clenching and releasing with military precision.

He was born to play the drums, Hassa agreed.

Sylah snorted. "Bet he wanted to join the playhouse, but his mother made him enlist in the army. Poor little Ember."

Hassa smiled, revealing the spongy flesh of her severed tongue. Her tongue, like her severed hands, had been taken from her at two mooncycles, like they were for every Ghosting in the empire. Their limbs and tongues were cut off and sent to the wardens to tally against the number of Ghosting births as a penance for a rebellion four hundred years old. As a result, Ghostings had developed a complex language that used all elements of their body. It was a subtle language, one invented in defiance of the rulers that still condemned them.

The drum stopped, though the vibrations of dread rippled out for moments afterward. The captain, identified by his striped green kente epaulettes, stepped forward.

"In the name of the four wardens, blessed by Anyme, our God in the Sky, we bring forth the accused."

A prisoner in shackles was brought forward between the officers' ranks. Sylah inhaled sharply between her teeth. "A griot."

They raided his villa a few strikes ago, no warning, Hassa signed. *He told his final story last night.*

Sylah vaguely remembered a griot entering the Maroon, but she had been preoccupied with chewing a record number of joba seeds.

"What did they get him for?"

Writing letters.

"Bastards."

Bastards, Hassa agreed, using her left wrist against her shoulder in a slashing motion.

Sylah scowled up at the podium where the officers stood. How she hated them and everything they represented: fear, oppression, pain. She rubbed her neck as the captain continued.

“The accused deliberately and maliciously plotted and engineered acts of rebellion against the Wardens’ Empire through the written word. A crime punishable by death. May Anyme be our guide. May Anyme absolve you of your sins.”

The griot’s head hung low, his gray locs trailing the dirt in front of him.

“We pronounce you guilty of treason.”

Sylah muttered, “They’re *always* guilty.”

Hassa nodded sadly. The trials always ended the same way.

A hush fell over the crowd as a ripper was spotted.

Rippers were Dusters, forced to turn on their own kind. It was their job to turn the lever that separated the two jaws of the rack. Their uniform was deep blue. Less washing that way.

Sylah shivered and ran her tongue over her teeth, probing for any residual joba seed juice, but the husk was dry. She spat the remains onto the ground.

“Ach.” Hassa bared her teeth at the globule on the ground.

It’s turning your teeth Ember.

“Ember?”

Hassa signed the word again. Sylah had been learning to understand the Ghosting language since she’d met Hassa six years ago, but she still stumbled now and then. “Ah, red.” The two words were differentiated by an additional turn of the elbow. “Well, I don’t care.”

You should. The drug is very bad for you, it could kill you. The sign for “kill” was a wrist across the throat. For some reason the gesture made Sylah smile.

It’s not funny.