

City of the PLAGUE GOD

SARWAT CHADDA



RICK RIORDAN PRESENTS

Disney • HYPERION

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ONE



“GIVE ME A HAND WITH THIS SHUTTER, DAOUD?” I asked, and not for the first time that night.

Daoud raised his finger as he continued his phone conversation. “You’re kidding. From Hollywood? What time?” He checked his watch. “Cool. I’ll be there.”

“At last.” I sighed as he put the phone away. It was creeping toward midnight, and we should have locked up the deli an hour ago. I tugged at the unyielding roll-down security shutter.

Daoud flexed his biceps. “You need some real muscle behind this.” He grabbed the other handle.

“On three . . .” I tightened my grip. “One . . .”

“Three!”

The slatted steel grille rattled down thunderously and slammed on the sidewalk. Daoud snapped on the padlock. “Yallah, cuz. I’ve got places to be.”



Cuz? Daoud acted like he was one of the family, but he was just a guy my brother had brought home when they'd met in fifth grade, a decade ago. I'd never understood why Mo had liked him so much. Maybe it was because there weren't many other Iraqi kids at school. Since then, Daoud had hardly been out of my life, but he was still no "cuz."

"Another party?" I asked.

"Not all of us want to spend our lives grilling kebabs."

"Nothing haram about it. People gotta eat," I replied. "So, who's in town? Spielberg? The head honcho from Disney?"

He grinned. "A big-shot casting agent out of LA. She'll be attending the *Hamilton* after-party. That's where I've got to be in exactly one hour."

We set to pulling the second shutter down. "Wouldn't it be easier if you actually learned acting?" I asked. "And, I don't know, appeared in something?"

Daoud scowled. "In case you've forgotten, I was in *Homeland*. Twice."

"Yeah, and spent it with your face covered by a keffiyeh. What was the part again? Terrorist Henchman?"

"Head Terrorist Henchman." One big pull and the grille rattled down into place.

I put on the padlock. "So when are you gonna play a hero?"

Daoud laughed. "Guys like us don't get to be heroes. You know that."

"Why? 'Cause you're an Arab, or 'cause you're a Muslim?"



“Take your pick, cuz. Take your pick.”

Why did Daoud still bother? I couldn’t understand it. How could he be happy with always being the bad guy?

It made more sense to keep both of your feet on the hard concrete. In the real world.

We reentered the deli from the rear, through the cramped kitchen and into the dining area. Mo’s didn’t look like much. The tables didn’t match and some of the chairs wobbled, but the place had *sizzle*. And I’m not just talking about the onions in the pan or the shawarma turning on the skewer, but the crowd. We were on the corner of Fifteenth and Siegel, so we got constant foot traffic. We specialized in Arab and Mediterranean, basically the best food in the world.

We opened at six a.m. to fuel the office workers with fresh pita and Turkish coffee thick enough to stand a spoon in. Mid-morning brought the locals, who came for a chat and to break out the backgammon, or to just sit by the windows with a pot of mint tea and watch the rest of the world rush by.

I took the late shift. Yeah, I know thirteen-year-olds aren’t supposed to work, but Mama and Baba needed the extra hands. Our block had plenty of pop-up music clubs and art galleries, and there was no better way to kick-start an evening than with a falafel sandwich topped with a spoonful of our famous Baghdad chili sauce. On good nights, our deli’s sizzle would become a *blaze*, and it felt like the whole city was in there with us.



The trouble with sharing your home with a thousand people was it needed a serious wipe-down at the end of every day, and that was left to me and Daoud. But mostly me.

I triple-locked the front door from the inside and left the keys on the countertop while Daoud continued to explain his career plan, for the thousandth time.

“It’s not about talent—just look at the people who get all the parts—it’s about getting spotted. And you get spotted at parties. The right parties.”

“If you say so.”

“Look at this face, Sik. Just look at it.”

I dipped the mop into the bucket for a soak. “I know what you look like, Daoud.”

“Look. Really look.”

Okay, I need to fess up. Daoud was stupidly handsome, the emphasis on both words. Chiseled jaw, high cheekbones, a mop of wavy black hair, and a deep brow that only magnified his light brown eyes. His physique was gym-sculpted, his skin as flawless as only a three-hour daily cleansing routine could manage. He was more vain than a *Real Housewife* of Beverly Hills and blew most of his salary on top-of-the-line bodywash and Versace aftershave. Me? I *liked* smelling of sautéed onions.

Daoud pointed to his chin. “I’ve only got another five years and then it’s over, Sik. I’ll be too old.”



“Too old at twenty-five?”

He sighed. “Twenty-one if you’re a girl.”

“Is that why you wanted Botox gift certificates for Eid?”

He double-checked himself in the window reflection.

“Beauty’s got to be preserved.”

I peered at him. “Is that a zit?”

“What?” he exclaimed, horrified. “Where?”

“Middle of your forehead. You can’t miss it.”

He wailed and dashed off to the bathroom to inspect every single one of his pores.

Finally, some peace. I dragged the bucket to the center of the room and got to work, sliding the mop over the floor in long, easy strokes.

Mopping used to be Mo’s job. I’d be in bed, and the cleaning fluid’s citrus smell would rise through the apartment and I’d fall asleep to the bittersweet scent of lemons.

We’d changed the brand once, but customers had complained that Mo’s no longer smelled as friendly, so we’d gone back to the lemon stuff. You couldn’t escape Mo—this was his deli.

Photos of him plastered the wall, the biggest being of his high school graduation, right under the framed takbir, and alongside the Iraqi flag. He’d been born there, and though my parents had immigrated to the US when he was little, Iraq had always remained home for him. Which is why he



went straight back there during his first college break. And the next and the next.

I paused to look at the collage he'd made of his trips to places that were already ancient when Rome was just a village. There he was, grinning in front of the Ziggurat of Ur, sitting on a camel at the ruins of Nineveh, and dusty from his motorcycle trip to the brick mounds at Lagash, remnants of when the country had been known by its ancient name: Mesopotamia.

The cradle of civilization. Yet as I looked at the photos of Mo helping out at the refugee camps, rebuilding bombed-out villages, and replanting farms, I couldn't help but think of how that birthplace had suffered over the centuries. Why couldn't it have been left in peace?

I was in some of the pictures on the wall. Birthday shots, us dressed up for Halloween. Typical sibling stuff.

The space wasn't big—twenty-four feet by ten—but it displayed Mo's life, from beginning to its end.

But it was the flowers that really made it Mo's. Being born near barren desert had made him appreciate plants all the more, which was why he'd chosen to major in botany. He'd started the local community garden down the block and preserved his favorites in frames, decorating the deli's white-washed walls with the brightest colors nature could provide. Roses ranging from the deepest crimson to the snowiest



white ran above the windows. Lush purple orchids hung beside the explosive pink, gold, and orange petals of countless wildflowers.

A car swept by, and its headlights stroked the far wall, stretching out the shadows, bringing them to life.

The lemon scent, the photos, the flowers, the quietness of the night, and the swaying shadows combined to bring him back. It was like my brother was sitting at that table.

“Hey, Mo,” I said.

Asalaamu alaikum, Yakhi. You should be in bed. School tomorrow.

“And leave lock-up to Daoud? No way.” I sank the mop back into the bucket and gave it a twist before starting under the windows.

Actually, shouldn't you be crashing at Aaron's? Wasn't Thursday always game night with him and the other guys?

“You know I don't have time for that anymore, Mo. The deli needs—”

There's life outside the deli, Sik.

“The deli suits me fine,” I snapped. I shoved the mop back into the bucket for a soak. “I wouldn't have to do this if you were around to help out. When was the last time you mopped?”

You tell me.

“Two years, three months, and fourteen days.” As if I



didn't know. "So when are you coming back?"

Come on, Sik. . . .

"This place you're staying, it must be some sort of paradise. Better than home?"

You've got Daoud.

"He was always your friend, not mine," I said. "He's moved into your room. Can you believe that?"

That's better than leaving it empty.

"He takes your clothes. Remember that leather jacket? He wears it everywhere."

Why are you doing this, Sik?

The memory flashed across my mind. The worst day of my life. Sitting near the landline with my parents as they learned what had happened. I knew it had to be bad news. Three a.m. phone calls are always bad news. Mo had been riding his motorcycle in the dark, a truck had swerved into his lane and . . . That night I had watched Mama and Baba grow old in an instant as their futures crumbled to dust.

"Someone's got to look after our folks," I replied.

And the garden? You looking after that?

I scowled. "I'll get around to it, inshallah. Maybe this weekend."

You haven't weeded it in months.

"Figures you would know *that*."

You know everything I know.



“That’s not true. I don’t know why you went and never came back.”

I had to. It was the right thing to do.

“No, it wasn’t. It was wrong.”

Iraq was my home. Saving your home is never wrong.

I didn’t want to argue with him—that wouldn’t get me anywhere. “They miss you so much, Mo. I see it in Mama’s eyes. Baba’s, too, but he’s better at hiding it.”

Don’t forget me, Yakhi.

“Never.” I looked up suddenly, hoping to catch a glimpse of him at our table, even just for a slice of a second, but of course he wasn’t there.

Why did I do it? Try to bring him back, night after night? Why couldn’t I just forget about my brother and get on with my life?

The school counselor had called it a “coping mechanism,” my way of dealing with the tragedy. She’d assured me I’d adjust to him being gone, but two years later Mo still felt as real as ever. And even though he was just a mismatched collection of memories, he still disagreed with me—over everything. Strange, huh? I guess you just can’t control some people, even when they’re only figments of your imagination.

I entered the kitchen to rinse out the pots, starting with the leftover Lebanon and Cairo sauces. I sniffed the pot of Baghdad sauce from a wary distance, and despite it being



almost empty, that alone was enough to make my eyes water. The deadly chilies my dad put in it were part of the reason our deli was so popular. Everyone, at some point, tried the Baghdad—"pure shock and awe to your taste buds," Baba always said. Only the hardiest came back for more.

"For you, Yakhi," I said as I emptied the thick red sauce into the sink. Mo had loved the Baghdad. He used to pour it over his cornflakes.

I heard a cat shriek in the back alley, followed by the crash and rattle of a trash can falling over.

The dumpster lid banged. What was going on? I opened the rear door a crack, but I couldn't see anything in the dark.

Then I heard voices.

Someone grunted with satisfaction. "Look at that, Sidana, me old mate. Fancy a bite?"

There was a fear-filled squeak.

Another someone smacked their lips. "What a sweet, delicious rat! All juicy and oh so fat!"

Were they hunting a *rat*?

There were two people, at least. I couldn't make them out. So I listened.

The squeaking got more desperate.

"Manhattan vermin—ain't nothing tastier."

The rat gave one final squeal and then there was a snap, followed by a sickening crunch. And a loud, satisfied burp.



Okaaay, things were getting weird.

The reply was a snicker. "Allow your mem'ry to linger,
dwell on the taste of a finger. To suck on marrow, crunch on
bone . . . what food delights we both have known!"

Really weird. And in rhyming couplets no less.

I put down my mop and, after a second's hesitation,
unhooked our big cast-iron wok from the wall. Then I slipped
outside to take a look.

That, as it happens, turned out to be a *huuuuge* mistake.



TWO



THE ALLEY BEHIND OUR DELI STANK. WORSE THAN usual, I mean. A putrid, hot stench lay as thick as syrup. Funny that I hadn't noticed it a few minutes ago, when I'd entered through the back door. Had a sewer pipe burst or something?

Flies swarmed over the food that had spilled out of two torn-open garbage bags. Rotten vegetables carpeted the bare concrete and maggot-infested meat smeared the brick walls. I heard movement from within the dumpster.

I crept closer and almost slipped on a half-eaten rat. Yeah, that was exactly as disgusting as it sounds.

A feral-looking tabby cat watched me from the fire escape. It had scars across its body and one completely white eye, which, I swear, winked at me. Then it sprang up and hissed as a guy stuck his head up from inside the dumpster, waving



a wedge of old pizza. “Maggot topping, all slimy and nice! I shall devour it in a trice!”

I ducked behind a trash can as the tabby leaped away into the darkness.

I say *guy*, but I mean it in the loosest sense of the word. He had a head and two arms, but aside from that . . .

His dented top hat did nothing to hide the deformed length of his skull, or his long, hairy ears. A pair of cracked pince-nez balanced on the end of his twitching nose. Wiry black whiskers sprouted from either side of a mouth crowded with yellow teeth that jutted out at all angles. He heaved the slice into his mouth and chewed loudly, his beady red eyes rolling in delight.

His companion rose beside him. He wore a battered bowler hat, pulled down low over his huge toadlike eyes, and he licked his wide lips with a tongue as thick as my arm. His belly rumbled loudly as he chewed on a length of rotten sausage. “Leave room, chum. There are plenty of tasty morsels to be had.”

More flies gathered. Ugly, shiny bluebottles darted by me, as if trying to determine whether I was a tasty morsel, too.

These dudes were seriously into their roles. Were they cosplayers gone bad? Or burglars in seriously weird disguises? I should have gotten Daoud or woken Baba before coming out here. I couldn’t run for help now. Messrs. Strange



and Unusual would see me the moment I raised my head from behind the trash can. So I crouched lower and tightened my fingers around the wok handle. It wasn't exactly Thor's hammer, but it was big and heavy and would leave a big dent in their faces if need be.

The rat-faced rhymer picked at his teeth with a dirty claw as he turned his attention to the darkened windows of our upstairs apartment. "The family sleeps up there. Shall we two give them a scare?"

That didn't sound friendly.

Toady licked his lips with a disgustingly long and slimy tongue. "We only need the boy."

"Oh, him we shall take with ease. The rest, handle as we please." Ratty straightened his top hat and reached for the lip of the dumpster.

Not friendly at all.

Did *the boy* mean me?

I was afraid, verging on terrified. I wanted to run and hide. I wanted to be anywhere but here, but they were threatening Mo's and I wasn't going to let that happen, not now, not ever. So even though the wok trembled in my sweaty grip, even though I could hardly breathe for the fear gripping my chest, I charged.

I swung the wok—missing them both—but they ducked, and that was good enough. I grabbed the lid of the dumpster and slammed it down onto their hatted heads. I flipped the



latch just as one of them tried to shoulder the lid back open.

I smacked the wok on the side of the metal container. “You freaks stay right in there!”

The dumpster rocked as the pair crashed against it. I could hear their muffled, furious shouts from inside.

“Daoud!” I yelled. “Call the cops!”

Where was he?

“Daoud!”

The dumpster hopped, and bumps appeared in its steel lid. But that didn’t matter—as long as the latch was secured, the lid was going to stay exactly where it was.

Then there was a flapping, and a wet whistling. A stomach-churning stench hissed through the narrow gap between the dumpster’s lid and rim. I held my breath to avoid inhaling it.

A pair of beady crimson eyes peered out through the gap. “Sikander Aziz? Well, well. For this I’ll see you in hell,” he said with a snarl.

I stepped back. “You know who I am?”

Ratty snickered. “Know you? That would be a yes. You’re famous, we must confess.”

A fist slammed against the inside of the dumpster wall. “You, mate, are gonna suffer when Sidana and me get outta here,” said Toady. “I promise you that.”

“Sidana?” I asked Ratty. “What sort of name is that?”

“It’s not a name—it’s a curse,” said Toady. “As is mine: Idiptyu. Remember them well.”



“Sidana and Idipty, eh?” I asked. “Think I’ll just stick with Ratty and Toady.”

Ratty—sorry, Sidana—hissed angrily. Clearly they were not fond of nicknames. “This will not bode well for you. We shall wreak revenge, we two.”

“Yeah? It’s boding okay so far.” Where was Daoud? Was he still checking his pores?

“You have courage,” admitted Idipty.

“I have a wok.” I banged it hard on the lid, and it rang loud and proud.

“Who does this boy think he is, Gilgamesh reborn?” Sidana taunted. “We shall correct that, and leave him tattered and torn!”

Nice. It’s not every day you get compared to the world’s first and, IMHO, greatest hero. Just think King Arthur meets Heracles with a dash of Thor and multiply that by fifty thousand.

Toady pressed his face right up to the crack. “Do you know who we are, mate? *What* we are?”

“I find myself not caring a whole lot.” I glanced at the trash can. Could I use it to weigh down the lid of the dumpster so I could get inside to call 911?

“We are the Great Misfortunes of Mankind, the Asakku,” said Idipty. “Or, in common parlance—”

“Demons,” I replied. I was up on my mythology. “Uh-huh,



yeah. More like trick-or-treaters with no sense of time.”

Idiptu’s eyes glowed a sickly yellow. “We’ve come from Kurnugi.”

“Kurnugi?” I rolled the trash can toward them. “Is that near Michigan?” I knew he meant the netherworld, but I was enjoying having the upper hand.

Speaking of hands, mine were busying swatting the flies that swarmed all over. And not only flies—I slapped a mosquito on my neck. My palm came away smeared with blood.

“Bugs are quite nasty, my dear.” Sidana tutted. “They carry disease, I fear.”

“Is bad rhyme a thing in Kurnugi? Listen to this.” I started tapping a rap rhythm on the dumpster. “Sik’s my name, and I play a mean game/What makes you think you can bring your stink/To threaten my fam and our fine deli meat?/Get out now before I call the heat.”

Idiptu grunted. “Not bad.”

Why wasn’t Daoud out here already? Hadn’t he heard my banging?

No choice but to keep on vamping. “So, demons, eh? Nice angle. But I don’t think the cops are going to go for it. This is the real world, and here demons don’t exist. Neither does the Tooth Fairy. I’ve got a bad feeling about Santa, too.”

Sidana snarled as if I’d insulted his parentage. “No demons exist, you cry? Then pray tell me, what am I?”



“In need of some serious dental work?”

Despite the sass coming out of my mouth, my legs were shaking. Whatever these guys were, they were not the type you wanted to meet in a dark alley.

The swarm of flies around me grew thicker, buzzing in my ears, biting my skin. I swung the wok, splatting a few, but more and more gathered. “Bug off!”

“All yours, Idiptu, my love,” said Sidana. “Can’t you give the latch a shove?”

Idiptu unrolled his slimy tongue through the narrow gap. Three feet long, it slid down the side of the dumpster and began darting from side to side. It found the latch and flicked it open.

And then the falafel really hit the fan.

The lid crashed open. Idiptu sprang out and landed on the ground in front of me with a heavy thump. He was squat and barrel-chested, with thick bowed legs that strained the seams of his checked pants. Sidana, wearing a tattered old tuxedo jacket, scrambled out and limped over to Idiptu. He polished his pince-nez and fixed them to the end of his hairy snout. “Master Sikander, how do you do?” He grinned, giving me a good view of his crooked yellow fangs. “We have some cruelties prepared for you.”

This was bad, really bad. And I don’t just mean the verse. I backed away, waving the wok in front of me. “Don’t come any closer.”



“Or what? You’ll stir-fry us?” Idipty gestured at a shifting black cloud at the far end of the alley. “It’s not us you need to worry about, mate. . . .”

An immense figure stood within the whining swarm. Over ten feet tall, even hunched over, he shuffled through the mass of insects. Instead of dispersing, they coalesced *into* him, clustering in the folds of his ragged cloak, disappearing into his mouth, and flying around his head like a screaming halo.

Idipty doffed his bowler hat. “It’s the boss.”

