

Sneak Peek
Of
Under the Cover
of Darkness

Book One

By

A.K. Barr

Under the Cover of Darkness

It was late—the sun had set hours ago. The rare red moon illuminated Zabashi's night sky. Inside a concealed chamber, gathered around a fire pit, stood the Ba'kar brothers—Lords Yaqin, Makai, Naeem, and Jabril—alongside *Sarel* Zuko. All five were draped in dark, long-hooded robes embroidered down the front with Zabashi's symbol: a red sun with a golden star and crescent at its center.

“Are we sure?” Makai asked, his eyes flashing in the flickering flames.

“Yes.” Zuko met his heated glare. “Either we find your daughters with the help of knights—”

“We've used knights and *Sareltines* for years!” Jabril cut in, his fist clenched. “Why didn't we see this coming? Between the two of you—” he gestured to a quiet Naeem and Yaqin, “—you should've known!”

Naeem paced the edge of the pit, ignoring his brother.

Yaqin's eyes narrowed. “You know how our powers work.” He frowned, stepping forward. “You understand the decree.”

Makai shook his head. "The rules no longer apply in the current world we're living in, and Virticus definitely isn't following the laws."

Zuko held up a hand. "You four need to choose. We only have enough *bashikuto* for one, and time is running out. The red moon will be gone soon. Do we find your daughters or hear the full prophecy?"

The brothers stared at one another.

Yaqin broke the silence. "Zabashi must come first."

"How?" Makai's voice cracked with passion. "How do I tell my wife? I promised Anaya I would find our daughter."

"We cannot tell our wives," Naeem said in a somber voice. "It will break them."

Jabril sighed, running his hand down his face. "We must block ourselves." He hesitated. "From Jalila."

Their eyes snapped to him.

"We vowed to our wives that we'd never do that," Yaqin chided. "Our word is our bond, Jabril. What is going on with you tonight?"

Zuko raised his hand. "In three minutes, we will lose the chance to do either. If we're to do this, I need an answer. Your daughters or—"

"Zabashi," the Ba'kar brothers said in unison.

Zuko gave a sad nod. "Zabashi."



The brothers watched as Zuko reached inside his robe, pulling out a small vial of *bashikuto* powder

and a golden, double-edged dagger. Its red hilt was engraved with Zabashi's symbol and the Elemental Guardians' emblem—a wave crest, vine, flame, and tornado intertwined.

Zuko extended his hand. “Yaqin, if you will.”

Taking the ceremonial blade, Yaqin pricked his finger. Blood dripped into the flames as he passed the dagger to Jabril, who quickly nicked his own forefinger. Once Makai and Naeem pierced theirs, the energy in the room shifted. The wind howled, and rain thrashed against the stone walls.

Yaqin waved his right hand over the pit, a white light beaming from his palm. Zuko began chanting, sprinkling in the red powder. The flames flared higher, and the ground cracked beneath their feet.

Makai twirled his finger, sending the fire swirling into a tight circle. Naeem thrust his hand forward to help control the inferno.

“Now!” Zuko shouted between chants.

Yaqin uncorked a vial of water and flung it into the pit as Jabril tossed in a handful of earth. Swirling currents of energy swept through the chamber, forcing the men to shield their eyes. Bright flashing lights, whispers from unknown voices, and an overwhelming presence filled the room.

A stunning figure appeared in the flames. “Who are you?” she asked in a soft, puzzled voice. “What’s happening? Where am I?”

“My name is Yaqin Ba’kar, and the future of Zabashi is in peril.” He stepped closer to the pit. “Please, we need your help.”

“I should not be here. I must go.” She turned her body amidst the flaring flames.

“No, wait!” Jabril reached the edge of the pit. “We sacrificed finding our daughters, the guardians from the *GruDir* prophecy, to contact you.” His voice broke. “Please help us.”

“The Guardians from the *GruDir* prophecy are your children?” She narrowed her eyes, uncertain. “How do you know this if you seek the words of the scripture?”

“Our ancestors passed down fragments of the prophecy. Our parents believed the timeline added up—that my brothers and I would father the chosen ones who would defeat the demons. But now...” Jabril looked at his brothers. “We’re not so sure.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why?”

“Shortly after our daughters were born, Virticus found us, and our girls vanished into another world. It’s been twenty years, and we’re no closer to finding them. If they truly are the chosen ones, they must receive their full powers before their next birthday, or—”

“They lose their gifts of the elements,” she finished.

“Yes, and their birthright as goddesses,” Naeem added solemnly.

She nodded. "My name is Qayya. I may be able to help, but I haven't much time."

Makai stepped forward. "Then let's begin."

"I must warn you." Her face turned grave amid the flickering flames. "There is a traitor among you... And you will need his help."

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