



BOOK II OF THE BOAHIM TRILOGY

AMASKAN'S WAR

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The rumors crept their way across Sadai's border the way a water droplet rolls across a stone — it finds a crevice, a weakness if one will, then trickles inside without warning, forever changing more than the stone's surface.

Chatter had reached the Order of Amaska, but Bredych had paid it no mind. What did he care of King Leon's struggles? But the whispers had created chasms that echoed and bounced inside his old mind. He had tried lying to himself, but news traveled fast these day.

When a trader had mentioned travelers fleeing the Kingdom of Alexander, fear had forced his fingers into fists. The next caravan to pass the Order had painted a grimmer picture—some poor soul had been hung in the square at high noon for assassinating a prince. The word *assassin* had leapt from their tongues like cinders, and his fists turned into knives. When a single Amaskan approached the Alexandrian border on Bredych's orders, the rumors painted the council room black, and Bredych seethed.

An Amaskan had seduced the Prince. No, she had seduced the King. Never mind that, she had tried to kill the King! No matter, the King had strung her up for treason and eaten her entrails in celebration.

A dozen different tales, each one darker than the one before.

Yet Bredych had refused to believe.

He had sent a dozen Amaskans to the border for answers, and as their horses disappeared from sight, his knees had trembled like a first year trainee rather than the Amaskan Grand-Master.

Walls painted blue and green left him somber as the sun set on another day *she* would not see. The powdered gold mixed into the paint glittered, mocking him as the Thirteen stared with knowing looks from their frozen frames.

Alone in the council room, Bredych traced the carved figures of the Thirteen with his fingers before depressing the eye of Anur, God of Justice. At first, the wall merely trembled in response. After three breathes, a click sounded in the wall to his right.

He pushed against the wall, which slid open to expose a room with several lifetimes of dust. At its center, a single orb glowed. Bredych pulled his hood closer about his face. Could the Boahim Senate see him through the sleeping orb?

No other Amaskans knew of the room's existence. The orb was an artifact survived from a different time—something his dear *sister* had discovered shortly after he'd been named Grand Master. But the words needed to bring it to life had been *his* discovery.

"*Ta'asor Ley*," he whispered, and the orb's glow dimmed.

While many seasons had played across his body, the woman in the orb appeared unchanged from the last time he'd seen her. "You dare call upon us, assassin! I should curse you where you stand," she said as she glared.

"You could, but then we would be forced to build boats."

"What do you want, assassin?"

"Knowledge."

"About?"

He paused for a moment, then answered. "Alexander."

The sudden paleness of her face washed out any beauty she'd held. "War trembles at their border. Beyond that, I won't disclose."

"War with whom?"

"An old enemy with poison in its veins."

She spoke in nothingness as well as Bredych, but the twitch of her eye muscles gave her away.

"There is more to this warning of war, Senator. We've heard rumors of death—"

The woman in the orb nodded. "Indeed. But then, you already knew this." The foggy shroud cleared as she leaned forward and whispered, "*Itovestah*." The crystalline pendant around her neck twinkled once, then the image faded until only darkness remained.

Bredych touched the orb, but it was as cold as her stare had been. He repeated, "*Ta'asor Ley*."

Nothing. The orb was dead.

Loud footfalls warned of someone's quick approach. He left the orb room and rolled the wall back into place. Someone knocked upon the council room door, and when he opened it, a trainee stood outside, face down and waiting.

Like *she* had once been.

Bredych blinked back the moisture that threatened to ruin his composure. "You have a message for me?"

The blonde haired boy nodded. "Delmon's returned—with news—should I summon the council?" The words tumbled out of his mouth and at Bredych's nod, he was off down the corridor again.

Instead of the bed his exhausted body craved, Bredych remained in the room and claimed a seat the end of the long table. Fifteen minutes of silence until the Amaskan council members shuffled into the room, followed by Delmon himself.

Dark circles made a raccoon of Delmon, and a jagged wound stretched across his forehead—a twin to match the one across his left cheek. The Amaskan fell into the offered chair, and after a moment's rest, he bowed his head before the council members. One poured a glass of water, which Delmon accepted with a grateful nod. When offered a glass, Bredych shook his head. His stomach churned enough on its own.

“Master Bredych—” Delmon swallowed a large gulp of water before continuing. “There are troops moving within Alexander, and word has it that to the South, the Shadian army approaches.”

“War between Shad and Alexander? Would they dare with the Senate watching?” Bredych asked, but Delmon ignored the question.

“I wish that was the worst of the news, Grand Master. No matter where I traveled, people spoke of Amaskans. None of it was new information. That is, until I gained passage into Alexander.”

No wonder he bore a scar. He had been lucky that was the worst of it. Bredych said, “You were ordered not to cross the border.”

“I—I had no choice, Grand-Master.”

“Explain.”

The man ran a trembling hand over his bald head. “When I reached the border, word came that...that one of our own had been killed. I sent messages to the others, and we met in a barn. It was a trap, Grand-Master. The man who'd given me this information reported us to the border guards. We were hooded, tied up, and tossed into the back of a wagon. We crossed the border unwillingly where a man interrogated us. He thought we came to kill Queen Margaret.”

One of the council members asked, “Queen? So the rumors of Leon's death are true?”

Bredych dismissed her question with a hand wave. “How did you escape?”

Like water over stone, the cold wrapped itself around his shoulders as Delmon spoke.

“I didn't escape. They released me, Grand-Master, so that I could pass along a message from the Queen herself.” Delmon took another sip of his water. “Any Amaskan caught inside the borders will be killed without question.”

“What about...?”

Delmon stared at his glass. “When the wagon reached the capital city, the others were killed. Queen Margaret herself witnessed it from her balcony. They took me to where they would dispose of the bodies, and...and that's when I saw her.”

The man's hands trembled, and water sloshed over the side of his glass. Bredych's muscles quivered with inaction.

“Master Bredych, I’m sorry. Her—her body still hung for all to see. Queen Margaret said nothing of it, but the rumors are that she was hung for treason. The Prince of Shad is dead—”

Ah. So that was why Shad’s troops moved to the Alexander border.

“—And the Senate had encased her body with some spell or another. They meant to use her as an example, Grand-Master.”

The old woman in the orb had known all along. She had frozen someone in place. What magics did one require to stop time?

Bredych’s jaw ached from clenching his teeth too long, and he stood. “Thank you, Delmon. You may leave.” To the others, he said, “Arrange a memorial for our missing brothers and sisters. And someone fetch a mystic to treat Delmon’s wounds.”

His feet carried him out of the building and down to the paths. Like a well-trained pup, Bredych fled to the coast where he’d walked *her*.

She had cursed him for sending her away. She had thrown questions at him, and he had answered by removing her identity, the mark that made her Amaskan.

Bredych’s fingers buried themselves in the rocky soil as the waves crashed in the distance like footfalls too loud in his ears. Something about the scenario didn’t make sense. If Leon loved her even half as much as Bredych did, Leon wouldn’t...he couldn’t have allowed this to happen.

But then, Margaret stood as queen. King Leon was dead, but how?

Tears mixed in the dirt below, which he allowed in the moment before rage bubbled up and burst from his mouth with a shriek.

Whether it was Leon, Margaret, or the Senate that had hung the noose around *her* neck mattered little. Bredych wiped the remnants of tears on his sleeve and straightened his shoulders.

The blade slid easily from its hiding place at his waist. Practiced hands swept it across his chin before the brain could register the sting. When it arrived, it was both less and worse than the ache in his heart.

The tattoo he had worn for fifty-four years landed in a bloody heap of skin in the soil below.

In the morning, he would ride for Alexander.

He would ride for answers...and for vengeance.