

# Prelude of Flames

by Katherine Walker

The pilgrim caravan plodded slowly into the small town of Arati, wagons pulled by the lumbering olinphs of the southern plains. Azas looked dispassionately at the low-lying buildings of the Zikia border village, just another stop on the pilgrims' journey toward the Forest of Forests, the very heart of the Zikia world. The forest bordering the town shifted with strange shadows as the evening drew on. The architecture and the people of the village struck that strange note between the traditional tribesmen and the Zikia of the modern day, who had learned to build cities and farm the land from their Durani and Gudanna neighbors and lords. There was a small shrine built beneath a *dvitra* tree by a well in the village commons, adorned with antlers and trinkets ranging from hand-carved wood fetishes to finely wrought jewelry. There was a great hall, like in most Zikia towns, from which a revered elder came to speak to the pilgrims. Ramsu, the pilgrims' unofficial leader, went to speak to her. Everything he did was with a quiet strength and resolve, and so he was well respected by all in the caravan. It was Ramsu who had taken Azas under his wing, and thus with his attention elsewhere, Azas leapt from the wagon to go do something – anything but sit and wait, bored out of his mind.

Suddenly another boy was standing right beside him, and Azas started. The boy smiled. An unruly mop of brown hair nearly covered his bright, playful blue eyes, and his pale Zikian skin was ruddy in places where his clothes failed to protect him from the sun.

"Hallo! What's your name? I'm Bhaj!" Bhaj stuck out a meaty hand, grinning. Azas took it and shook politely.

"Call me Azas."

"Sure. Where are your people from? What way did you take here? Are you the only kid in the whole caravan? See anything neat on the way? Want something to eat?"

It was getting late in the day, and the pilgrims had not stopped to eat, hoping to arrive at the village before dark. Azas nodded, and almost on cue, his stomach growled loudly.

"Alright! We're having taproot curry tonight, my father makes the best there is, so come on!" Bhaj grabbed his hand and hauled Azas away at a run, though it turned out his family's home was not far. It was a round, single-story hut, sort of a dome of knit saplings twisted together, trunk and branch grown into a weathertight wall and roof. The smoke of a house fire drifted up between the leaves covering its open apex. Its surprisingly large interior seemed filled with a multitude of people, children and adults alike. Lively conversation and play rotated around a central stove atop which simmered a large pan, tended by a great bearded man stirring and tasting a curry that smelled positively delicious. As Azas stepped forward, he caught a glimpse of himself in a bronze mirror mounted opposite the door. His golden skin, jet-black hair, and the testy look in his emerald eyes looked very out of place among this enormous happy family. He suddenly felt terribly alone.

At that moment a hand descended upon his shoulder, and he looked up to see a red-headed woman smiling down at him as she knelt, bringing her eyes to his. "Hallo child! You must be with the pilgrims. Did Bhaj neglect to invite your parents to eat with us?"

The question caught Azas off guard, and he looked at his feet, not sure what to tell her. A moment passed and she began speaking with a soft and penitent tone. "Oh, forgive me, dear child. Come, sit, I'll bring you something to drink." She ushered him to a spot at a large table, a massive single plank of wood flanked by woven root benches on either side. Almost as soon as she left, Bhaj materialized across from him, pouring a leather pouch of wooden dice on the table.

"That's my sister Jui! She just married last week, but she and Darad just got back. Do you play root stones?"

"What now?"

"Ancient Ones, pilgrims can be so boring! Here, I'll teach you..."

They spent the next half hour playing a variety of dice games, sometimes shooting them at each other like marbles, or tossing them in the air and trying to catch them on the backs of their hands. Bhaj's siblings joined them, and soon the whole family was at the table, laughing, eating curry, and lobbing wooden dice everywhere. Azas still felt a little out of place, but it was only when Bhaj got distracted trying to keep his younger sister from swallowing a root stone that he looked out the window and realized how long he had been in their home.

"Oh, you should get back to the caravan! I'm sure they're worried sick about you." Jui almost intuitively saw the thought in Azas' look, and she lobbed a glare at Bhaj. "Bhaj, would you bring Azas back to the common? It's dark and I don't want him to get lost and end up in the Wildwood."

"Fiiiiine" Bhaj sighed exasperatedly. *Lost? In a village the size of a courtyard?* Azas almost protested, but he bit his tongue and stood to bow, the way he was taught. "Thank you very much for hosting me."

Bhaj's sister smiled, waving a hand, not even bothering to get up. "You're very welcome, sweet one. Get back safe now!"

Bhaj's head appeared in Azas' view from out of a blind spot, grinning. "I was hoping she'd let you stay, but I suppose everyone's back right now and you'd have to sleep on a rug and father gets so picky about where everyone sleeps! But, but but but, tomorrow you're not leaving until later, right? So I'll come get you in the morning and we'll go greet Vitri!"

"Wait, who?" The boys were already halfway out the door and on their way back to the common at the village's center. Ramsu would probably be angry.

"She's a traveling merchant. She always has the greatest stuff. Last time, she had this Urugal amulet and it glowed and could start fires!"

"Woah! That does sound great."

"I bet she'll have even better stuff this time! She's sent word that she'll be by tomorrow. I just got to see. You'll come look, right?"

Azas agreed to go with Bhaj, happy to have made a friend his own age after traveling with the pilgrims so long. When Bhaj woke him the next morning before the sun was even up, however, Azas was a little annoyed.

They ended up watching the sunrise from in the crook of a tree by the peddler's road, more of a wide cobbled path than a road. More than once they fell asleep, only to wake one another at any small sound, in case it was Vitri. Azas curled and uncurled his toes to keep the blood flowing, listening to the patter of rain falling between the leaves and the slight *tunk-tunk* of the droplets on thick bark.

"When you grow up, what kind of tree would you like to be?" Bhaj's voice shook Azas out of his rainy reverie, but he stayed silent for a minute.

"Azas? Are you in there?" Bhaj's voice cracked a little, anxious to make a good impression on his first friend who was not from Arati.

"Yes, I'm here." Azas groaned. "Why did you think she'd come this early?" He brushed a drop of water off his nose. The rain drowned every small sound, muffling particular noises underneath its quiet symphony. Azas kept listening for the footsteps of the traveling peddler, and kept starting at sounds that all turned out to be anything else. From the undergrowth issued deep, dull thuds – beasts scavenging for food in the rain, ancient trees shifting under the weight of all the water.

"Well, she normally does, but we gotta be the first ones to see her and her goods you know? So, you don't want to be a tree then?" Bhaj seemed anxious to change the subject from the wait, to keep Azas from getting irritated and leaving before Vitri came.

"Wait, what?"

"Oh. Didn't your mother ever tell you? You know, how all Zikia grow up to be trees, instead of dying? I think it'd be nice to be a ... fruity tree. Or maybe a *vadama* tree, with all those nuts. That would make people happy, don't you think?" Azas had learned last night that Bhaj's mother had only died a few months ago in a landslide, in the hills to the east of Arati. It hadn't been long enough for her to sprout leaves, but the family had remembered her fondly.

"All the girls would want to sniff you, Bhaj." Azas grinned, looking out at the road.

"Azas! That sounds gross."

He went on. "They'd put your flowers in their hair, and rub them everywhere for perfume... on their necks, on their chests ..." Azas could practically hear Bhaj blush, sputtering as he did.

"Well, you'd probably like that Azas, why don't you be a *vadama*?"

"No way! Girls like me way too much as it is. It'll be annoying if they're still climbing on me when I'm a tree." Azas' trick had turned back on him, and now he blushed in the early morning light.

“Well, what would you be then?”

Some of the muffled rain sounds coalesced into heavy, squelching steps on the road ahead, immediately cutting their conversation short as they turned to look. In a moment they saw the source of the thuds: not any sort of draft beast, driving a wagon full of trade goods, but a sizeable troop of golems, metal and stone gleaming in the rain.

“Forests aflame! Have you ever seen anything like that, Azas?” Bhaj went wide-eyed with wonder. Azas only stared, crouching low on the limb they sat on, eyes narrowing. “I mean, the only golems I’ve ever seen before – did you see them? The Nagarika Bramblehorns. The Nagarikas were blessed with them in the time of the Ancient Ones to defend Arati, but mostly they help us carry and build stuff. Darad—you met him at dinner, just married Jui—he rides the flowering one.”

Azas remained silent, staring at the Durani golems as they advanced toward the town. *What could they be doing here? Where would they be going?*

“You know, there was a third one years before I was born, and I hear it was taller than three trees! Stacked atop each other of course. It was destroyed in a great fire that ate up the other great family, the Khamza, for the sins of their eldest son. I’ll tell you that story when we get home,” he chirped as Azas rapidly lost interest and began to clamber quietly down the tree.

“Hey, wait, are you going to go meet them?”

Azas whirled on him and hissed through clenched teeth. “No! I just want to go back. It’s cold and wet and I’m bored.”

“Oh come on,” Bhaj wheedled. “I bet it’ll be exciting if we met the stone golems before anyone else does.”

“No!”

“Maybe they’ll let us ride one!”

“Not a chance.” Azas stepped for the least mucky spot he could see, a root that broke up through the earth, scarred by years of boars’ teeth sharpened upon it.

“Ohhhh. You’re scared, aren’t you? Fine then, we’ll just go home.” Bhaj started climbing down after him, but Azas froze, his foot not quite touching the root, his hackles raised. He glared up at Bhaj.

“Am not scared!”

“Oh, you’re not?”

“That’s right I’m not!”

“Well then come on!” Bhaj jumped from several feet up and landed nimbly on another root cluster. “Last one there’s a big, fat, scared olinph pup!”

Azas looked, cursed, and ran after Bhaj. Bhaj was fast, and caught up to the golems quickly, now some distance ahead on the road to Arati. The troop numbered no more than eight, but their great size made it seem as though there were many more. Among them walked a pair of Urugal golems, crafted from the bones of creatures that lived and died long ago. Bhaj ran up alongside a Plague Bringer, whose doglike claws scraped uneasily over the broken road that hadn't seen a maintenance crew in living memory. Its rider, an Urugal woman with wine-dark tattoos and wearing the extravagant pauldrons of the Durani, didn't even notice Bhaj until he began yelling at her.

"Hey! What's this kind of golem called? Where are you all going? Are you headed to Arati?" The warrior gave a start and looked down to see Bhaj, chipper as ever, running alongside her mount. Azas was catching up fast, but not at his top speed. He could see these were not golems on parade: the woman wore studded leather armor lined with fur for bad weather, and only her pauldrons were at all shiny.

"Bhaj, stop it, let's go!" He yelled, running up and panting to keep alongside the massive Plague Bringer. The rider narrowed her eyes and leaned down to speak to them. Her accent, thick and mellifluous, identified her immediately to Azas as hailing from the Upper Empire.

"Child, this is none of your concern. Listen to your friend and begone from here!" Her whisper came harsh and urgent. Bhaj didn't seem to understand, and spoke up even louder.

"Woah! Are you guys Imperials? That must mean these are Durani golems then, huh?!"

Azas almost wished the ground would swallow him. The other knights had begun to take notice, and a pair of Fire Rams began outpacing their masters as the knights slowed down to see the commotion. At the head of the group, a great horn was blown and the whole procession stopped. A massive Winged Preserver leading the group turned to walk back toward them. Its enormous feet could've crushed Azas without a thought, but it knelt down carefully beside the Plague Bringer, leaning on its great scythe arm for support as it lowered its face towards the ground. A steel-helmed figure could then be seen atop the huge golem. The knight's voice boomed from beneath the visor with the same heavy accent, but much harsher.

"Lady Garza! What is the meaning of this?"

The noblewoman straightened up in her golem's saddle, meeting her captain's glare with as much rectitude as she could muster.

"Knight Captain! They are merely children. I was sending them on their way."

"That one looks Zikian. They could jeopardize our mission by warning the townsfolk of our approach. Deal with them appropriately – and be reminded that you're already on thin ice. Any error here and I'll see you executed for the Emperor's pleasure!"

The man riding the Winged Preserver leaned back, and the giant golem arose once more to return to the front. The other golems also began to move, and Bhaj and Azas stood stock still with fear as the Plague Bringer wheeled about to face them, bone teeth glistening in the rain. The noblewoman looked furtively about her and leaned down to speak to them.

“My golem has trouble getting over hills and rocky terrain. Find a way!” The great bone golem planted its feet widely and roared at them, a sound like rocks rolling angrily down a mountain.

Bhaj grabbed Azas by the hand and ran for the craggy hills bordering their village, while the Plague Bringer followed close behind.

Azas felt a stitch knotting his gut with pain, but he dared not stop. He feared running ahead of Bhaj, because he didn’t know the way, but he glanced at Bhaj and saw abject terror in his eyes. Neither of them knew where they were going, and the golem was closing in—though slowly—as they began to scramble up through the rocks.

Azas took the lead, grabbing Bhaj’s arm and pulling him along. It was all scree and shale, slow and slippery climbing, but they made faster progress than the Plague Bringer, which slid several meters every few steps. Azas had to let go of Bhaj’s hand as the hill got steeper, but he kept looking backward to make sure he made it. They had to make it.

Ahead, a large promontory parted the scree, beneath it only darkness. *It can’t follow us in there*, Azas thought. He launched himself upward and ran as best he could for the hole in the hill. As soon as he reached the stone mouth, he yelled to Bhaj, who hastily scrambled into the shade of the promontory. The Plague Bringer scabbled not far behind, but when the rider saw where they’d gone, she instantly stopped, wheeled about, and bounded back down the incline.

Bhaj sat, stunned and shivering, eyes wide and staring. Azas waited till it was out of sight, partly to wait till they could leave safely, and partly to stop trembling. Only then did he turn to speak to Bhaj.

“We have to tell the village.”

“Mother...” Bhaj was staring at the rocks, indubitably thinking of how close he was to the place she had died. Azas looked at the scree, still gently shifting from their mad climb.

“What about your father? And Jui?”

Bhaj began to breathe more normally, though still quite heavily. A light of clarity came into his eyes. “Oh. Oh! We got to go. Azas, this way!” Nimble as ever, he leapt up and began hurtling back down the hill, jumping like a goat more than running. Azas followed as close behind as he could. Once they reached the bottom of the hill, Bhaj slowed enough that Azas could catch up.

“Azas, all the roads lead to the center of Arati. Go tell the pilgrims!” Bhaj seemed to be getting his wind back, remembering the prize of his knowledge. Azas nodded his assent, too out of breath to speak. They ran with a fervor born of terror, and Azas felt the air burning in his lungs, too used to the slow plodding of wagons after nearly six months.

They were too late. Large fires burned across the village, vomiting thick smoke into the sky. The smell of iron and earth was almost sickeningly strong, made worse by the summer humidity. Arati was no longer a town, but a crematorium. Bhaj bolted without a word, and Azas slowed down a little to pick his way over the village roads, now covered with shattered bricks and shards of bone and wood. He had only taken a few steps when

an alley beside him suddenly belched flame, a hot gust following along the eddies of heat, then disappearing in the other direction as quickly as it came. The smoke was heavy and acrid, laced with large ashes floating on the waves of heat. Azas pulled his scarf over his mouth and nose and moved forward slowly, watching his surroundings with care.

He realized he'd come to the town center when he saw the road open up ahead of him, a scene of horror unfolding before his eyes. Many of the pilgrims' bodies lay strewn about their crushed and burning wagons. One woman remained, her veil thrown back from her face, entreating the Blazing Dervish before her with upraised palms. At its knight's command, the fierce golem raised his great sword high in the air, and Azas put his hands over his eyes.

When he took his hands away, the Dervish was walking off toward the woods to the west, and only a crumpled heap on the ground remained of the woman. He stood a minute staring blankly at the carnage before a feeble, hacking cough caught his attention. Instinctively, he ran toward it. It was Ramsu, wounded, dying. He had somehow crawled from where he fell to hide behind one of the wagons, leaving a trail of blood, slick and nearly black on the ruddy bricks of the plaza. He coughed again, and beckoned to Azas. As he came close, Ramsu collapsed, and Azas leapt to catch him, cradling his head in his arms. It weighed heavily, like the warm stones put under blankets against the cold. Ramsu tried to speak, but only blood came burbling from his lips.

*What can I do? Ramsu? Are you dying?*

Ramsu strained to lift a hand to Azas' face, a smile barely bending his bloodied lips. His hand fell and his jaw went slack at once, and his gaze slowly became glassy, staring up at Azas. Azas stared back, just holding this man's head in his arms, one of the pilgrims who took him in, fed and clothed him, who prayed for him. He didn't know Ramsu, and he didn't know this Ramsu at all, clotted blood spattered over his calm face.

Yet he knew one thing. Ramsu had tried to be kind. Bhaj, too, had tried to be kind. Wherever he could be now, Bhaj had done his best to be Azas' host and friend. If there was one thing his parents had taught him, it was to honor and repay kindness.

But how?

Azas stood, dropping the lifeless body on the ground unceremoniously. It was not Ramsu, not anymore. The clamor of stone and flame was starting to fade to the west, with only the quiet roar of fire in the distance. He began to move through the smoke, looking for anything to give him an idea of what to do. Under the steps of the village hall, a group of children huddled together, all still, eyes closed, choked to death under all the smoke. Azas was glad for his scarf.

He remembered a *dvitra* tree near the edge of town, near a public well. He was drawn to its promise of relief from the shimmering heat: of climbing among the wide leaves, resting in its cool shade, letting the juice of its tangy fruit drip down his face and hands. He walked for a long time – hours, maybe – before the bits of buildings left standing began to echo his memories of arriving only the night before.

The smoke was lifting, but when he arrived at the well, it took him a moment to recognize it for what it was. A whole side of its brick wall had fallen in, as though it had been struck by some massive club. Azas gazed around, tracing the scene as it should have been whole, gasping at the change. It was then he saw the invader.

The Plague Bringer from before had locked in battle against a Bramblehorn, the flowered one that belonged to one of the men in town – Darad, recently married to Jui. The fight had raged across the plaza, smashing in the well, and eventually crushed Darad and his Bramblehorn between the Plague Bringer and the *dvitra* tree. The *dvitra*, strong and thick, had borne the weight of both golems pressing against it, but the force of the collision not only maimed Darad, but also broken the face of the Urugal golem, driving bone spikes through its rider. However, the *dvitra* paid the price for its defense with its life. The trunk was splintered and leaned back, top-heavy, and although the raw wood still was white with sap, it obviously wouldn't live much longer. Young fruit lay scattered over the ground among the broken branches, hard and yellow-green. Azas picked one up and threw it angrily at the broken Plague Bringer. It bounced off with a hollow *thunk*. Flies circled the seats of both golems, but Azas hardly paused before climbing up the Urugal golem, to see if the Durani knight was the woman from earlier.

Under his hands the bones were smooth, so unlike the bark Azas was used to scaling, but he found many handholds in the bone carapace, and reached the top with no difficulty. The dead rider remained in her seat, already beginning to smell. Azas recoiled at the scent, but his curiosity overtook him. He looked closely at her shaved head, and the intricate tattoos on her crown. They seemed to wriggle in the heat, and he realized it was a stain of flies, swarming over her skull. He nearly retched, and without thinking tried to remove the source of his sickness, straining with all his might to throw her from her mount. After all the running, he barely had enough strength to upend the corpse, its rigid limbs tumbling into the space where Darad's broken body lay. Suddenly, the hollow was empty, a yawning maw drawing Azas into its secrets. *The thing that killed Darad. The thing that killed the tree.*

Azas almost could hear it speaking. It spoke of cool night air; of destruction; of revenge.

He stepped in.

Azas' very blood began to tingle, nervous energy pulsing through his body. His veins felt like magnets, pulling the bone around him, with him. He was terrified, and turned to leap out of the saddle, to get away.

The Plague Bringer turned with him. Its mangled face crunched free of the wreckage of the tree and the Bramblehorn, crumbling bone fragments falling among the dirt and rubble. He could *feel* the twisting of its limbs, almost as though he had grown a second pair of arms. He stumbled with the weight of it and threw his arm back, and it stumbled with him, crashing into the rubble around the well. Darad and the Durani knight tumbled away from the broken tree, and Azas stopped at the sound of the bodies clattering to the ground. He stayed still. So did the golem.

What little there was in Azas' stomach came up over the front of the Plague Bringer. He and the golem both leaned forward, and it mashed its face into the corpse of its old pilot, holding its belly just as Azas clutched at his own. He stayed like that awhile, coughing, disoriented, sweating.

He stretched out their arms. Azas thought of the powerful tree that had stopped the great Durani knight, and of the laughter of Darad just the night before.

And he clenched their fists.

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The Durani Banner moving into the woods did not expect to see the Plague Bringer bounding after them, ridden by a young boy ululating a war cry a man in the Hataza desert had taught him. A knight at the very back of the procession wheeled his Harpy around, but not fast enough; Azas barreled through the Harpy, smashing the knight from his perch before he could lift a jeweled claw. His scream as the Harpy crumpled onto him spurred the remaining knights into action, and a pair of Sentinels turned around and charged back at him, teeth bared and ready for his wild onslaught.

Azas didn't have much of a plan of attack, and although he had already downed one knight, six yet remained—and every one had eyes on him. The fight quickly became no longer about revenge, but about survival. And unexpectedly, Azas was surviving. He swung wildly at them, fear driving his movements more than any thought of strategy. The Imperial knights were accustomed to opponents with more refined fighting styles, such as they practiced against in the barracks of their fine cities. Surprisingly, Azas' wild, raking strikes held them at bay.

*Maybe, maybe I'll win this,* Azas thought, his mind swimming with fear and exhaustion. *Maybe I'll—*

In his moment of self-reflection, the Knight-Captain had taken command of the situation, and with a single pound of the Winged Preserver's foot sent a shockwave through the earth, knocking the Plague Bringer from its feet and throwing Azas from his perch and into the mud. Azas watched almost impassively, thunderstruck, as the great scimitar sliced through the air toward him. A strange feeling began to wash over him, as though he were melting away into everything, and he closed his eyes. Suddenly, he was home, the mud beneath him a soft bed smelling strongly of *doitra* flowers ...

He woke up to the wind whipping across his face, and almost immediately a drop of water flew into his open eye. Azas cried out with surprise, and suddenly the wind stopped; *he* stopped. He had been moving. *But how?* He glanced up from where he lay, and there just above him was a shifting pile of leaves, branches, flowers, and small flying animals. He furrowed his brow as he tried to comprehend its shape, and in response, it – somehow – did as well, and then changed again to give a very strong impression of a smile. Azas yelled again, flailing, and the thing dropped him to the ground. It was something like a slow-moving whirlwind, made of things lying about the woods – water, insects, sticks, leaves. He pushed himself up on his elbows and scabbled backward in the mud, and it simply dropped to pieces, the leaves fluttering to the ground and the birds and insects flying off. Beyond where it had been, he could see the tower of smoke that was Arati.

The terrible weight of what had happened fell on him like a castle wall crumbling, and he could feel a sharp metallic pang in his throat, choking him with frustration. Ash matted his hair, and his clothes were soaked and

muddy. He had survived, but what could he possibly do now? He was completely lost and alone, with absolutely no notion of where to go and who to turn to. Azas bowed his head and began crying, screaming himself hoarse, his wracking sobs echoing into the rainy afternoon.

He heard a soft whispering noise, and a felt a hand resting gently upon his brow. He looked up to see the spirit had returned, whirling face smiling in its strange way. It backed away and stood to the side, pointing behind him to the deep woods. Azas stood and turned to look, and it fell apart again, then swirled itself back together before his eyes, a strange and beautiful process. It beckoned him with a shifting hand of branches. Azas smelled the ash on the wind, and began to walk after it as it led him into the deep woods. A lone *dvitra* flower circulated through the body of the spirit, bright pink among the grey and green and brown, and Azas thought of Bhaj growing up to be a tree.