



We
Hunt
the
Flame

HAFSAH FAIZAL

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*To my mother,
for shaping my heart,
and my father,
for hardening it to steel*

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*Love is for children, said the girl.
Death is for fools, said the shadow.
Darkness is my destiny, said the boy.
Allegiance is my undoing, said the eagle.
Suffering is our fate, said the beauty.
And they were all horribly wrong.*





Anadil



Abal



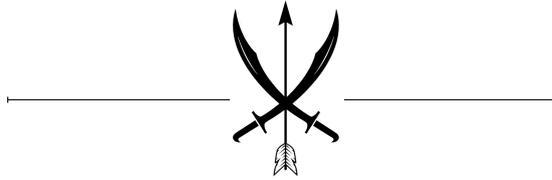
Alhena



Arawi



ACT I



SILVER AS A CRESCENT MOON



CHAPTER 1

P EOPLE LIVED BECAUSE SHE KILLED. AND IF THAT meant braving the Arz where even the sun was afraid to glimpse, then so be it.

On the occasional good day, Zafira bint Iskandar mused that she was braver than the sun itself. Most days, she couldn't wait until the evernight Arz was behind her and she was firmly rooted in the plains of her caliphate, daama snow and all.

Today was one of those days, despite the antlers rough against her hands. She stepped free of the cursed prison of a forest, pretending her sigh was due to her task being complete rather than a product of the tightly coiled fear unwinding in her heart. The morning sun kissed her cheeks in welcome.

Marhaba to you, too, coward.

Sunlight was always faint in the caliphate of Demenhur, because the sun didn't know what to do with the snow that should be sand.

Before her, the sea of white rolled out smooth and pristine, gifting her

a moment's contentment in her solitude, even as her toes numbed and the air crippled her nose. For in a caliphate where a woman's actions were always in danger of being turned against her, there was nothing easy about pretending to be a man. Not when she had the curves of a woman, and the voice and gait of one, too.

She dragged the deer carcass along, a trail of steam in her wake, the sullied snow an eerie crimson. There was a promise in the air. A stillness in the earth and in the whispering trees.

It's nothing. Paranoia had a way of visiting when he was least desired. She was a bundle of emotions because of the impending wedding, that was all.

Sukkar nickered from the rotting post where she had tethered him, blending in with his near-white coat. While she made quick work of tying the deer to her stallion's saddle, he remained still, as sweet as the name she had given him.

"We had a good hunt today," she said to the horse who hadn't helped, and swung onto his back.

Sukkar didn't react, content with staring across the distance into the Arz as if an ifrit would leap out and swallow him whole.

"Dastard," Zafira said, a smile on her numbing lips.

Though everyone was a coward when it came to the forest—each of the five caliphates that made up Arawiya were afraid of the Arz, for it rimmed those lands, too. It was a curse they'd shared ever since the land had been robbed of magic. Baba had taught Zafira that the Arz was, in many ways, simply a forest. He had taught her of ways to use it to her benefit. Ways to believe she could tame it, when in reality she could not. No one could.

His death had proved as much.

Zafira steered Sukkar away from the forest, toward the clearing and deeper into Demenhur. But the Arz was such that it always demanded one last glimpse. She paused and turned.

It watched. Breathed. Its skeleton trees reached with gnarled fingers steeped in swirling shadow.

Some said it devoured men like vultures on the dead. Yet Zafira returned, day after day, hunt after hunt. She was aware each venture could be her last, and though she swore she didn't fear much, finding herself lost was her biggest fear of all.

Still. There was a pulse deep inside her that relished those visits into the depths of darkness. She hated the Arz. She hated it so much, she craved it.

"Akh, plenty of time to stare at the Arz every daama day," she said to Sukkar, a quiver to her voice. "We need to get back for the wedding, or Yasmine will have our heads."

Not that Sukkar cared. Zafira clucked her tongue and urged him forward, the tension escaping his taut muscles as the distance between them and the Arz grew.

Until the air heaved with another presence.

The small hairs on the nape of her neck lifted, and she threw a wary glance over her shoulder. The Arz stared back, as if with bated breath. No—whoever it was stood here in Demenur, imitating the silence almost as well as she did.

Almost.

If there was one thing she feared more than losing herself within the Arz, it was being caught unaware by a man who could prove she was no hunter but a *huntress*, a girl of seventeen concealed beneath the weight of her father's hooded cloak every time she hunted. Then she would be shunned, her victories derided. Her identity, viciously unraveled. The thought closed hands around her heart, the *thud, thud, thud* racing a little bit faster.

She spun Sukkar to face the Arz, kicking against the strains of his hesitation as a low command drifted on the wind, words undecipherable.

“Yalla.” She urged him to hurry, voice tight.

He shook out his mane and cantered forward without protest. The air darkened as they neared the forest. Funny, Zafira was heading *toward* the unknown at the first sign of mortal danger.

The cold bit at her face. A blur of black sped from her right, a second blur from her left. *Horses*. She bit her lip and swerved Sukkar between them, ducking when something swung for her head.

“Qif!” someone yelled, but what kind of idiot would *stop*?

Sukkar. He froze at the border of the Arz and Zafira jerked in her saddle—a slap, reminding her that he had never ventured this close. Wood and sour decay assaulted her cold senses.

“Laa. *Laa*. Not now, you dastard,” she hissed.

Sukkar threw his head but didn’t budge. Zafira stared into the hushed darkness, and her breath faltered. The Arz wasn’t a place to turn one’s back to; it wasn’t a place to be caught unaware and unsuspecting and—

With a curse, she veered Sukkar around, despite his protests.

The wind howled, cold and harsh. She was painfully aware of the Arz breathing down her back. Until she took in the two horses snorting a mere four paces away, coats dark as the night sky, powerful bodies cloaked in chain mail. War horses.

Bred in one place alone: the neighboring caliphate of Sarasin.

Or possibly Sultan’s Keep. It was hard to tell which, when Arawiya’s sultan had recently murdered Sarasin’s caliph in cold blood, unlawfully seizing control of land and armies the sultan had no need for—not when Arawiya rested under his control, and not when he had the Sultan’s Guard at his beck and call. The caliphs existed for balance. He wasn’t supposed to *kill* them.

Atop their horses, the men’s bare arms were corded with muscle, faces cut with harsh lines. They were the color of people who knew life beneath a sun, the ebb and flow of the desert Zafira longed for.

“Yalla, Hunter,” the larger man said, as if she were cattle to be herded, and her eyes fell to the scimitar in his grasp.

If Zafira had any doubts on where they were from, the timbre of his voice was enough. Her throat closed in on itself. Being tracked by gossiping Demenhune was one thing; being attacked by Sarasins was another.

She lowered her head so that her hood obscured more of her face. She braved the darkness; she slew rabbits and deer. She had never stood before a blade.

But for all their might, the men held their distance. Even they were afraid of the Arz. Zafira lifted her chin.

“Whatever for?” she drawled over the sudden hiss of the wind. She had people to feed and a bride as beautiful as the moon to say goodbye to. *Why me?*

“To meet the sultan,” the smaller man said.

The sultan? Skies. The man had shorn more fingers from hands than hair from his head. People said he had been good once, but Zafira found that hard to believe. He was Sarasin by birth, and Sarasins, she had been told all her life, were born without a shred of good in their hearts.

Panic flared in her chest again, but she lowered her voice. “If the sultan wanted to see me, he would respect me with a letter, not his hounds. I’m no criminal.”

The small man opened his mouth upon being likened to a dog, but the other shifted his blade and drew closer. “This isn’t a request.” A pause, as if he realized his fear of the Arz wouldn’t allow him to move any farther, and then, “Yalla. Come forward.”

No. There had to be a way out. Zafira pursed her lips in realization. If there was one thing other than barbarism Sarasins were known for, it was pride.

She whispered sweet nothings to Sukkar. Maybe it was the men, or maybe it was the war horses, mighty and intimidating, but her loyal horse

took a step back. It was the closest he had ever gone to the Arz, and Zafira was going to torture him with much more. She gave the men a crooked smile, her lips cracked and likely colorless from the cold. “Come and fetch me.”

“You have nowhere to go.”

“You forget, Sarasin. The Arz is my second home.”

She stroked Sukkar’s mane, steeled her heart, and steered him into the dark.

It swallowed her whole.

She tried, tried, tried not to acknowledge the way it welcomed her, elated whispers brushing her ears. A surge in her bloodstream. Hunger in her veins.

Dark trees stood eerie and unyielding, leaves sharp and glinting. Distantly, she heard the gallop of hooves as the Sarasins shouted and followed. Vines crunched beneath Sukkar’s hooves, and Zafira’s sight fell to near blindness.

Except for his panicked breathing, Sukkar was mercifully quiet as Zafira listened for the men, her own heart an echoing thud. Despite their fear, they *had* followed, for pride was a dangerous thing.

Yet only silence drummed at her ears—like the moment after a blade’s unsheathing. The halt after the first howl of wind.

They were gone.

For once she appreciated the fearsome, incalculable strangeness of the Arz that made the men disappear. The two Sarasins could be leagues away, and neither she nor they would ever know it. Such was the Arz. This was why so many people who entered never returned—they couldn’t *find* their way back.

A soft hiss sounded from the east, and she and Sukkar froze. She could see little of his white coat, but years of returning again and again had sharpened her hearing better than any blade. She saw with her ears in the Arz. Footsteps echoed, and the temperature careened downward.

“Time to go home,” Zafira murmured, and Sukkar shivered as he edged forward, guided by her hand, by that rushing whisper in her heart. Sated only when she moved.

The darkness ebbed away to a soft blue sky and the distant throb of the sun. At once, she felt a yawning emptiness as the cold stung her nostrils, scented with metal and a hint of amber.

The Sarasins, it seemed, hadn’t been so lucky. How long ago had the three of them ridden into the Arz? It couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes, but the position of the sun claimed it had been at least an hour.

Zafira didn’t want to know whether the sultan had really sent for her. Or, if so, *why*. It was the *why* that caused Sukkar to snort beneath her, ever aware. *One thing at a time*, he seemed to say.

Where the war horses had stood, the snow was now smooth and—

She yanked on Sukkar’s reins.

A woman stood against the plains of white.

A heavy cloak of gray, no, shimmering *silver* sat on her slender shoulders above a sweeping red gown. Her raised hood barely covered the top of her stark hair, as white as the snow. Her lips were crimson, a curve of blood.

Zafira swore the woman hadn’t been there a moment ago. A gallop began in her chest.

The Arz depraves an idle mind.

“Who knew you could kill so swiftly,” the woman said in a voice of silk.

Did the Arz conjure voices to its illusions, too?

“I am no assassin. I only evaded them,” Zafira said, realizing a beat later that she shouldn’t respond to an illusion. She hadn’t killed those men—*had she?*

“Clever.” The woman smiled after a pause. “You truly do emerge sane and in one piece.” A gust billowed her cloak. Her dark eyes drifted across the first line of the Arz trees with an odd mix of awe and—*skies*—adoration.

The woman wavered and solidified. Real and not.

“It’s a lot like Sharr, isn’t it?” Then she shook her head, every movement deliberate.

Fear simmered beneath Zafira’s skin at the mention of Sharr.

“Oh, how could I ask such a tease of a question?” she continued. “You haven’t been to the island yet.”

Are you real? Zafira wanted to ask. She demanded instead, “Who are you?”

The woman fixed her with that glittering gaze, bare hands clasped. Did she not feel the sting of the cold? Zafira tightened her fingers around Sukkar’s reins.

“Tell me, why do you hunt?”

“For my people. To feed them,” Zafira said. Her back ached and the deer was beginning to smell.

The woman clucked her tongue with a slight frown, and Sukkar trembled. “No one can be that pure.”

Zafira must have blinked, for the woman was suddenly closer. Another blink, despite her best efforts, and the woman had moved away again.

“Do you hear the roar of the lion? Do you heed its call?”

Where did this loon crawl from? “The tavern is in the sooq, if you’re looking for more arak.” But Zafira’s usual candor was hindered by the tightening in her throat.

The woman laughed, a tinkling that stilled the air. Then Zafira’s vision wavered, and the snow was suddenly clothed in shadow. Black bled into the white, tendrils reaching for Zafira’s ankles.

“Dear Huntress, a woman like me has no need for drink.”

Huntress. The reins slipped from Zafira’s hands.

“How—” The words died on her tongue.

A smile twisted the woman’s lips, and with it, Zafira’s heart. It was the type of smile that meant she knew Zafira’s secrets. The type of smile that meant no one was safe.

“You will always find your way, Zafira bint Iskandar,” the woman said.

She sounded almost sad, though the glint in her eyes was anything but. “Lost you should have remained, cursed child.”

The silver of her cloak flashed when she turned, and then Zafira must have blinked again.

Because the woman had vanished.

Zafira’s heart clambered to her throat. Her name. That smile. There was no sign of the bleeding black or the silver cloak now. The snow was pristine as the claws in her brain loosened.

Then Sukkar was off before she could regain her hold on his reins.

She fumbled with a shout, sitting tall to keep from tumbling to the snow. He continued on a mad dash until they crested the slope and stumbled to a stop.

Zafira jerked back, cursing until Sukkar ducked his head with a dignified snort. *Breathe. Assess.* She looked back at the evernight forest once more, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. It was almost as if Zafira had imagined the entire encounter.

Perhaps she *had*. Zafira knew the Arz better than most, which was to say she understood that no one could *ever* know its secrets. To trust in its wickedness was to court a tortured death.

Do you hear the roar of the lion?

It wasn’t a roar Zafira heard. Something else beckoned from the darkness, enticing her. Growing with her every visit. It was as if a thread of her heart had snagged in the forest and was trying to reel her back in.

She drew in a sharp breath. Exhaustion had conjured the woman, that was all.

And now she was late. She veered Sukkar around with a huff. She had a dress to don and a wedding to catch.



CHAPTER 2

P EOPLE DIED BECAUSE HE LIVED. AND IF THAT WAS the only way to carry forward in this life, then so be it.

There had been a particularly strong blizzard in the neighboring caliphate of Demenhur three nights ago, and Sarasin was chillier because of it. The combination of desert heat and the wayward cold rattled Nasir's bones, yet here he was, far from his home in Sultan's Keep, the small portion of land from which the sultan ruled Arawiya's five caliphates.

Nasir's missions to Sarasin always gave him a sense of nostalgia he never could understand. Though he had never lived here, it was the caliphate of his lineage, and it felt familiar and strange at once.

He came here for one act alone: murder.

Leil, the capital of Sarasin, was crawling with armed men in turbans of azure. Three stood guard at the entrance to the walled city. Billowing sirwal, instead of tighter-fitting pants, hung low across their hips, vain muscled arms glistened bronze. A gust of desert air carried the musky odor of hot sands, along with the chatter of children and their scolding elders.

Nasir studied the sentries and slid from his mare's back with a heavy sigh. He had no need for a skirmish with a horde of lowborn men.

"Looks like I'll be taking the long route," he murmured, rubbing a hand across Afya's flank. She nickered a reply, and he tethered her beside a sleepy-eyed camel. She was his mother's horse, named after her favorite of the Six Sisters of Old.

He climbed a stack of aging crates and leaped from awning to awning of the surrounding structures, balancing on jutting stones, his ears still ringing with orders from the Sultan of Arawiya. He likened the sultan's voice to a snake, softly creeping into his veins and penetrating his heart with venom.

He scaled the wall and leaped onto the nearest rooftop with practiced ease, sidestepping the ornate rug sprawled in its center, jewel-toned cushions strewn to one side.

Sarasin's open skies were as bleak as his thoughts and forever downcast in gray, brightened only by the expectant hum of the upcoming camel race. He had little interest in the race itself—he was here for the cover it provided and the man it promised.

He vaulted to the next rooftop and swayed when a blade arced down a mere fraction from his face. A girl of about thirteen leaped back with a gasp, dropping one of her twin scimitars to the dusty limestone, her concentrated drill broken. Nasir's gauntlet blade thrummed, but the last thing he needed was to kill unnecessarily. *As if your kills are ever necessary.*

He lifted a finger to his lips, but the girl stared slack-jawed at his hooded attire. An assassin's garb of layered robes in black, etched with fine silver. His fitted sleeves ended in the supple leather of his gauntlets, blades tucked beneath the folds. The traditional gray sash across his middle was shrouded by a broad leather belt housing smaller blades and the sheath of his scimitar. The ensemble had been engineered in Pelusia, the caliphate as advanced in mechanics as in farming, so there was nothing finer.

"Hashashin?" the girl whispered in a way that promised his presence

would be kept secret. A winding cuff resembling a snake encircled her upper arm, blue jewels studding its eyes.

No, Nasir wanted to say to that voice of awe. An assassin lives an honorable life.

There was a time when a hashashin danced and the wicked perished, merchants rose to power, trades fell to dust. The glint of a blade turned the tides of the world. They had been poets of the kill, once. Honor in their creed.

But that was long before Nasir's time. He didn't live. He existed. And no one understood the difference between the two until they ceased to live.

The girl grinned. She was too fair for Sarasin standards, with white hair stark against her brow, but it wasn't uncommon for the snow-brained Demenhune to turn up here, particularly womenfolk. Demenhur's caliph was a biased crow who would blame women for old age, if he could.

She picked up her scimitar, continuing with praiseworthy maneuvers that would guarantee her a sought-after place in a house of assassins, but Nasir didn't comment. Fewer words worked best in his world, where a person encountered today could be a maggot's feast tomorrow.

He swept past her and leaped to the next rooftop, which overlooked houses of tan stone. The streets below were empty, except for the rare camel being pulled along. Dusty lanterns hung from eaves, the glass long ago shattered into the desert.

The rooftops ended and Nasir dropped down to Leil's sooq. Stalls with rickety legs spread across the expanse, tattered cloth in an array of colors shading goods from the meager sun. The stench of sweat and heat stirred the air. Bare-chested urchins ducked beneath tables and between swaths of fabric as a good-size crowd meandered the stands. Here, the ghostly landscape was alive.

It would be even busier at noon, when the sharp scents of nutmeg and sumac would entwine with meat-filled mutabaq as merchants catered to

the workers who mined for coal and minerals in one of the worst places of Arawiya: the Leil Caves.

Now vendors extolled other wares—bolts of fabric in bright colors muted by the dull skies; spices in enough hues to paint papyrus; carved stone platters with designs so intricate, Nasir did not see the point.

He shoved past a gaggle of women and nearly stepped on a salt merchant cross-legged on a rug, sacks of the precious commodity perched around him and a sharp-eyed falcon on his shoulder. The weathered man looked up with a toothy smile, excited at the prospect of a new customer.

Until he saw Nasir's garb and the gleam in his eyes turned to fear.

Others had begun to take notice. A woman dropped her newly purchased sack of grain. Nasir lowered his head and pressed forward. If he passed close enough, their whispers brushed his ears. If he passed closer still, they would dare to look at him. They knew what Nasir strode for, dressed the way he was.

So he pretended not to notice when a bag of dinars fell from his side and scattered across the dusty ground, sand muting the glimmer of the silver coins.

It was better this way. It was better for Nasir to be as evil as Sultan Ghameq in their eyes. Because in many ways, he was. Maybe even worse.

Still, the people of Sarasin had become hardened to the life that grew more desolate by the day. Their caliph had just been murdered, their lands wrongfully seized by their own sultan. Yet no one seemed any more disturbed than they had been before.

Stand up, he ordered them in his head. *Defy. Fight.*

Self-derision tore a sound from his chest. *Not even you defy the sultan.*

And the ones who dared to raise their heads: Nasir killed.

He finally reached the alley at the end of the sooq. A girl blinked wide gray eyes and limped into the shadows, dust stirring in her wake. Sand qit ducked into the rubble, paws silent, tails curling. Ragged papyrus covered

the crumbling stone walls, lathered with scrawling lines of poetry from some romantic fool with too much hope in his hands.

His mother used to say that a person without hope was a body without a soul. It was the loss of the Sisters nearly a century ago that had left the people this way, bereft of the magic Arawiya depended on. And here, where the sand was soot and the sky was forever dusk, there was no hope for anyone, especially Nasir.

A guard stepped from the shadows, sand scraping beneath his boots. Nasir stared down his drawn sword with cool disinterest.

“Halt,” the guard said, puffing out his chest and, subsequently, his gut.
Where do these fools find so much food?

“A bit too late for that,” Nasir said smoothly. He flicked his wrist and extended his gauntlet blade.

“I said, *halt*,” the guard repeated. He stood tall, a little too new and eager for a world that would set him crooked soon enough.

Nasir would spare him the experience. His blade flashed in the meager light. “Such pitiful last words.”

The guard’s eyes bulged. “No! Wait. I have a sister—”

Nasir pivoted a full turn to avoid the guard’s sword and slashed his blade across the man’s neck. He dragged the gurgling corpse to the shadows before straightening his robes and returning to the alley, hands sliding over the gritty stone wall to find a hold. *I’ll be an old man by the end of this.*

He scaled the wall to the rooftops north of the sooq, vaulting from terrace to rooftop until he reached the most extravagant limestone construction of the city, taller than the rest. The prestigious quarters of Dar al-Fawda. The owners of the camel race were one of the finer groups of notoriety the dead caliph had turned a blind eye upon.

Lattice screens and lush cushions sprawled across the creamy stone in soft sighs of color. A dallah pot and a set of handleless cups lay to the side, stained with dark rings. Strewn sheets and silken shawls littered the

expanse. He knew what occurred on these rooftops, and he was glad for his timing.

He pushed aside a pile of silken cushions and crouched at the roof's edge. The gray skies told nothing of the time of day, but below, the wadi where the race would take place was beginning to attract crowds—Sarasins, with dark hair, olive skin, and rueful eyes. *His* people.

Foolish people, come to empty their coffers with damning bets placed upon camels. He made a dismissive sound and looked to the tents beyond.

Any moment now.

Nasir reached into the folds of his clothes for the sweet he had saved from the night before, but his fingers touched the cool surface of a disc. He brushed his thumb over the camel-bone mosaic adorning the flat circle. Inside, a sundial lay dull with age and veins of turquoise patina, the glass long since cracked. It had once gleamed in the palm of a sultana, and he thought—

Not the time for memories, mutt. He flinched at the echo of his father's voice and pulled out the crinkling wrapper of the date cake.

These were the small ways in which he could feel like the human he was born as. A leftover cake saved for later. An aging sundial from moments past.

Where was that damned boy? Camels were being pulled forward, and Nasir needed to be down there before the crowds became impenetrable. He drummed his fingers on the stone, coating his fingers in creamy dust.

I am going to rip his—

The trapdoor creaked open and Nasir turned as a boy with knobby elbows climbed onto the roof. A sand qit meowed and curled around the child's dirty feet.

Nasir lifted an eyebrow. "You took your time."

"I—I'm sorry. I couldn't get away from Effendi Fawda." The page boy's

brown skin was smeared with dirt. The owner of Dar al-Fawda was no respectable one, but if the boy wanted to respect him with the title of effendi, Nasir did not care.

“Everything is ready for you,” the boy said, as if he had been given a tremendous task other than telling Nasir where to find the man he sought. Nasir liked that the boy wasn’t afraid to speak to him. Afraid of him? Most likely. But not afraid to *speak* to him.

Nasir played along with a small nod. “You have my shukur.”

At his thanks, the boy looked as surprised as Nasir felt, and before his pride could stop him, Nasir held out the date cake. A gasp wheezed past the boy’s chapped lips and he reached with careful fingers, unfolding the wax sheet with awestruck features. He licked the sugar from his dirty fingers and Nasir’s stomach clenched.

All he ever saw were blood, tears, and darkness. The hope in the boy’s eyes, the dirt on his face, the jutting of his bones—

“Can you . . . bestow another favor?”

Nasir blinked at the boy’s poise. He and “favor” never sat in the same sentence.

“The children slaved to the races,” he ventured. “Can you free them?”

Nasir looked to the wadi, to the children. His voice was flat, uncaring. “If they don’t die in the races, they’re bound to die elsewhere.”

“You don’t mean that,” the boy said after a long pause, and Nasir was surprised to find anger aflame in his dark eyes. *Let it burn, boy.*

“Salvation is for foolish heroes who will never exist. Help yourself and leave the rest.”

It was advice Nasir should have followed years ago. He turned without another word and dropped from the rooftop, swiftly lowering himself to the ground.

Dar al-Fawda guards in sirwal and black turbans loitered nearby. The higher-ups wore plain, ankle-length thobes and sported thick mustaches as they shuffled past. Nasir could never understand the horrid fashion

of a mustache without a beard, but these men believed the bigger the better.

He waited in the shadows of a date palm and, head low, slipped into a group of drunkards on their way to the race. They passed bookies on short stools and people cheering for their bets, damning their meager earnings for the thrill of a short-lived gamble.

More camels ambled into the wadi. Children, too, dressed in nothing but dusty sirwal. Nasir's fingers twitched when a man used a whip on a boy whose cheeks streamed with tears as he rubbed an already reddening shoulder, eyes murderous.

Only in Sarasin could vengeance start so young.

Very few protested the use of children in the races, for the lighter the rider the faster the camel, and so the atrocity carried on. Nasir's blood burned black, but he stilled his fingers.

Monsters bore no duty to the innocent.

When his drunk companions finally reached the throngs in the sidelines, Nasir slipped away, clenching his teeth against the stench. He pushed past cheering people and sidestepped sand qit and children searching for scraps.

He reached the tents.

The few he peered inside were empty. They held traditional majlis seating, with cushions spread out across the floor for private negotiations or more intimate happenings. The page boy's marker, a red shawl pinned beneath a stone, lay at the seventh tent as promised.

Nasir dropped his hand to the scimitar at his side.

The mark could be young or near death. He could have children who would stare into his lifeless eyes and scream for a soul that would never return.

He's a name. A scrap of papyrus, rolled and shoved into Nasir's pocket.

He slipped inside. The beige walls of the tent dressed the place with forlorn, wan light that stole through tears in the fabric and illuminated swirls

of dust. Scrolls and books were scattered across the carpet that covered the sand, and a gray-haired man was bent over them, scribing by lantern.

The shouts and cheers of the crowd grew louder as the races began, echoing with the grunts of camels and the cries of the children upon them. The man rubbed his beard, murmuring to himself.

Nasir used to wonder why he stopped feeling sorrow for the people he was sent to slay. At some point, his heart had ceased to register the monstrosity of his deeds, and it had nothing to do with the darkness tainting the lands. No, it was his own doing.

He was turning his heart black, no one else.

Nasir paused at the man's calm demeanor and considered killing him without his knowledge. But amid the scrolls he spotted titles written in the ancient tongue of Safaitic—even an account of the deceased Lion of the Night, a man of two bloods who had set his mind upon Arawiya's throne, doling death in his wake during the horrific Black Massacre.

A historian. This man was a historian. *That* was why Nasir had to kill him?

He pressed his foot deeper into the sand, crunching it beneath his boot.

The man looked up. "Ah, you have come. It took you long enough to find me."

Irritation stirred in Nasir's chest. It wasn't always that his marks spoke to him, that they didn't fight him. "I am no hunter. I kill when ordered."

The man smiled. "Right you are, hashashin. But once the head falls, the rest is destined to follow. You tore down our caliph, and as his advisor by name, I have been waiting for you since."

A warmth filled the man's eyes, and Nasir darted a wary glance behind, only to realize it was directed at *him*. Like the page boy's gratitude at the rooftop. But this, *this* was a hundred times worse.

No one should show kindness to their murderer.

"Owais Khit," Nasir pronounced quietly. The name in his pocket. His voice held a sense of finality, and bitter hatred sank fangs into his heart.

Owais was here for the children of the races, rallying to free them. It was unfortunate that he had another agenda, too. One that had nothing to do with the dead caliph and that made Nasir curious, as treasonous as it was. For in Arawiya, strength meant death, unless it was in allegiance to the sultan.

The man dipped his head. “Him I am. Make it quick, but know that this will not end with me.”

“You speak of treason. Your very work is treason.” Nasir should not have indulged him. He should have killed him before he had glimpsed the brown of the man’s eyes and curiosity got the best of him. What treason was there in the study of history?

“Who delivers justice to a treasonous sultan?” Owais asked. “The sultan had no place murdering our caliph, as cruel as he was. He has no right taking our land and controlling Sarasin’s army. We are one of five caliphates to govern. Think, boy. With five caliphates under his thumb and the Sultan’s Guard at his call, what need does he have to take over an army?”

“The people remain silent out of the fear that taxes may increase. The peace is temporarily ensured—for what? My work was merely unearthing the reason for change. For why a tyrant emerged in place of our good sultan. Our sultana would not have brought him into the fold if he were so dark a man. Something stirs in the shadows, boy. Soon, death will be the least of our horrors.” Owais lifted his chin, exposing his wizened neck. “Be swift. Know that my work will continue through others. Perhaps, one day, it will continue through you, and Arawiya will return to the splendor it once was.”

Impossible, for a boy whose hands were steeped in blood. Whose heart was as dark as the one Owais sought to rectify. Whatever this man and his people were trying to accomplish, it would live a short life. Their numbers dwindled with each passing day—Nasir ensured it.

His scimitar sang as he pulled it free. Owais exhaled and wound his turban around his head, eyes flashing in the glint of the blade, a brilliant

chestnut hidden beneath the folds of aging skin. A smile curved the man's lips once more, and Nasir thought of the sultan passing him the fold of papyrus. He thought of Owais's warning and realized the absurdity of killing a man for the mere act of reading.

But he never left a job unfinished.

There was a hitch in the man's breath when the metal touched his skin. One last spike of emotion before Nasir shifted his arm and blood oozed free. Somewhere, children were losing their father. Grandchildren were losing their greatest love.

He pulled a feather from the folds of his robes and touched it to the blood. It settled on the dead man's chest, its black vane tipped glimmering red.

Anyone who saw it would know Owais's killer. They would know vengeance was impossible.

The hashashin in Nasir crouched. He closed the man's eyes and straightened his turban. "Be at peace, Owais Khit min Sarasin."

Then Nasir filled his lungs with the familiar stench of blood, and left.

He pinned the flap open so that the people would know. It was the one lenience he could leave them—a marker to help them bury the dead. The people would never consider Nasir an ally, but in that moment he almost felt like they could.

They were right to hate him, for Nasir had killed more than he could count. It used to matter, before. Now it was nothing more than a swipe of his sword. Another felled soul.

To the people, he was not Nasir Ghameq, crown prince of Arawiya, no. He was the purger of life.

The Prince of Death.



CHAPTER 3

IN DEMENHUR, THEY BLAMED WOMEN BECAUSE OF THE Six Sisters. Zafira carried the knowledge like a wound that could never heal.

That word—*Huntress*—was a thorn dragged across the wound, fresh pain gritting her teeth. She had always been the Hunter. She had always referred to *herself* as the Hunter. And though she was convinced she had imagined the silver-cloaked woman, the illusion was a reminder that no matter what she did, she could always be brought to blame.

Just like the Six Sisters of Old, who had staked their lives to bring daama Arawiya to fruition and now lay as parables of shame.

Had the Sisters been men, Arawiya would still have magic. Had the Sisters been men, the caliphates would not be cursed. Had the Sisters been men, everything would be as it once was. Or so the Demenhune caliph preached.

Zafira believed otherwise.

As she and Sukkar crested the last hill that stood between her village

and the Arz, she wished, more than anything, that she could be herself. That women didn't have to be the incapable creatures the men of Demenhur claimed them to be. The one solace she had was knowing that not all of the five caliphates held the same twisted views. In Zaram, women could fight in arenas, equal beside men. In Pelusia, a calipha governed alone, surrounded by her Nine Elite.

Zafira fingered her hood. If she escaped the confines of her cloak and the masquerade of a man, Demenhur would not praise her. Her accomplishments would shift into a cause for blame. A twisted foreboding of a predicament to come.

Gloomy thoughts for a wedding day.

A lone figure came into view, and Zafira had a fleeting moment of panic before she registered the soft features and sunlit curls. Deen. One of four souls who knew she was the Arz Hunter. He waited with a blade in his hands, unflinching against the cold winds.

Zafira dismounted and nudged his shoulder. "One day, you will venture the darkness with me."

Deen smiled, eyes trained upon the Arz as he spoke his favored line. "But today is not that day." Flakes of snow dusted his curls. His dimpled cheeks were pink from the cold, and his green coat bulged around his arms, muscled from his months in the army. "You were gone quite a while." He wrinkled his nose. "Yasmine is going to have your head."

Zafira scrunched the side of her mouth. "Not when she sees the deer I caught for the wedding feast."

Deen and his sister, Yasmine, shared the same soft beauty—hair that shone like burnished bronze, rounded features, warm hazel eyes. He was beautiful, inside and out. Yet after his parents' deaths, he had plastered on a smile that Zafira loathed, barely masking the torment floundering in his eyes.

A crease marred his forehead now. She knew he couldn't see much of her beneath her hood and scarf, but his concern said he saw enough.

“Are you all right? Something happened in the Arz, didn’t it?”

“A little scare,” she said with a smile because he knew her so well. “You know how it is.”

He hummed and his eyes drifted to the dark forest again. “It’s getting closer, isn’t it?”

She didn’t need to answer. The Arz crept closer with each passing day, spearing their borders with bladed roots and swallowing the land. If the Demenhune thought they were dying with the endless snow, it was only a matter of time before the Arz swept across their caliphate—the entire *kingdom*—leaving them for the whispers of nightmares and monsters within the absolute black.

“Last night I dreamed I was on Sharr.”

Zafira froze at his words. *Sharr*. What were the odds, hearing the name of that forsaken place twice in one morning? It was an island of evil, a place warned of in the dead of night beneath the flicker of a lantern. A fear just out of reach because it lived beyond the Arz.

It had been a prison fortress before it had stolen the Sisters and magic. Now it was wild and untamed, with oases run rampant, and it reached for Arawiya with the Arz, each tree another sentinel in its army.

“In the prison it once was?”

Deen shook his head, his gaze distant. “I was trapped inside a massive tree. Darkness like smoke. Whispers.” He grimaced and looked at her. “So many whispers, Zafira.”

She did not tell him of the whispers that shadowed her every waking moment.

Deen sighed. “I don’t know what it means, but did it have to plague me today of all days?”

“At least today you’ll have a distraction to help take your mind off it.” She reached for his hand, and he slipped his gloved pinkie around hers.

“Dear snow, is that you being optimistic?”

She laughed and his face sobered as they turned back to the village, ice crunching beneath their boots.

“Do you remember Inaya?”

“The thin baker’s daughter?” Zafira asked. No one baked bread in the western villages as scrumptiously as the thin baker did. His daughter was a soft-spoken girl with watchful eyes and a mane of hair as wild as a lion’s.

He nodded. “The baker took a fall a few days back, and it doesn’t look like he’ll walk again. So word spread that she was going to take the reins.”

Zafira’s stomach dropped.

“The za’em’s men came this morning when she was opening shop.” Deen’s jaw was tight, and Zafira wanted to smooth the tension away with her fingers. “I was right there, selling skins to old Adib. One of them dragged her out. Another ordered some squat to take over and stand behind the counter, likely a man who’s never kneaded bread in his life.”

“And Inaya will be married in a few days to someone for whom she’ll make a *good wife*,” Zafira finished.

Deen murmured an affirmation.

This za’em headed their village alone, but nearly every village head was the same. Everyone listened to the drivel of the caliph—drivel their useless sultan should have shut down but couldn’t care less about. Most days, Zafira didn’t even understand the point of the sultan if the caliphs were allowed to command so freely.

Worse, most villagers believed every twisted word—if the men, desperate in their need to pin blame, said the villagers would starve with a woman taking ownership of a bakery, they would believe it. The mere definition of superstition.

“Akh, Deen, why?” Zafira’s vision pulsed red, and Sukkar snorted in concern. “Then there was that other girl last month, the one caught chopping wood in the Empty Forest, where every daama man and his

grandfather chops wood. As if her hands would kill those trees any more than the snow does.”

Deen cast her a look. “Are you worried?”

“Worried?” Zafira almost barked out.

He smiled. “Sometimes I forget you’re not like me. Just be more cautious, eh?”

“Always,” she promised as they came to his and Yasmine’s house.

He nodded at the door. “She doesn’t know. Today doesn’t feel like the right time to tell her. Especially with that goat of a za’eem coming to the wedding.”

He was right. Yasmine would rip the za’eem to shreds herself. Zafira handed Sukkar’s reins to Deen, and he left to take care of the deer. She trudged up the two short steps, but before she could knock, her friend yanked open the warped door, worry and fury written across her face.

“I was hoping you’d be smiling,” Zafira said wryly, stepping inside.

Yasmine’s scowl deepened. “Oh, I’m smiling. Kharra, I’d be smiling even wider if you had missed the wedding altogether.”

Zafira clucked her tongue and shivered when the warmth of the fire touched her. “Such a foul mouth.”

“It’s nearly *noon*.” Yasmine pressed her lips into a flat line, never one for patience, unlike Deen.

“Sabar, sabar. I have a good reason.” Zafira thought of the baker’s daughter, Inaya, whose wedding would not be as happy as Yasmine’s. She dropped her hood and shook her dark hair free, rubbing her arms to loosen the cold that had rooted in her bones.

Baba had said the heat used to be sweltering once, with sand rising in dunes across the oasis-like caliphate. Snow had been a once-in-a-year treat, until the blizzards came and never left. It was the same day they, and those in the other caliphates, had lost the magic once housed in each of the five royal minarets.

Zafira had never known that life. When aquifers once summoned water, healers aided the injured, and ironsmiths manipulated metal. Magic was as distant as a mirage now, and the lands lay in ruin, worsening as the Arz grew.

Each caliphate had been left with some sort of curse: snow for Demenhur, desolation in Sarasin, soil destruction in once-fertile Pelusia, untamable sands in Zaram. Only Alderamin lived as it once did, selfishly isolating itself from the rest of the kingdom.

Zafira accepted a warm bowl of shorba from Yasmine and stirred the soft lentils, settling before the fire. She rubbed at the ache in her chest that panged whenever she thought of the magic she had never had the chance to experience. Of the sand that had never trickled between her fingers or shifted beneath her feet.

Yasmine sat down and tucked her sweeping ankle-length gown beneath her thighs. It was unadorned and threadbare, but Yasmine glowed even in her rags. Zafira could only imagine how she would look dressed for the wedding.

Skies. This very evening.

“I’m expecting a believable reason for your delay, but guess what?” Yasmine asked as lentils melted on Zafira’s tongue.

“I don’t know if I should play this on your wedding day,” Zafira said. They’d been preparing for weeks, but she still wasn’t ready to see Yasmine with another, with beautiful half-Sarasin Misk Khaldun. There would be no sleeping over when the loneliness in her own house became too heavy to bear. There would be no curling herself against Yasmine’s side like a lost child.

“Such a bore. I pity anyone who dreams of the mysterious Hunter every night.”

“I am not a bore.”

Yasmine barked a laugh. “Sometimes.” Then she dropped her voice to a whisper. “*Most times.*”

Zafira scowled.

“I hate it when you play safe, old woman. But,” Yasmine teased, “rumor has it the caliph is in the House of Selah. So close to us!”

“I don’t see how that’s exciting,” Zafira said. In fact, her blood started to boil when the murmur of the silver-cloaked woman’s voice echoed in her head again. *Huntress*. Along with the thought of the baker’s daughter. Had Ayman, the Caliph of Demenhur, heard of the Hunter? It wasn’t as though anything exciting ever happened in Demenhur that might overshadow her.

Yasmine pushed her shoulder. “Oi. What if he’s here for the wedding?”

Zafira laughed at that. “Yes, I’m sure the old man traveled all the way here to watch you get married.” She leaned into the fire, inhaling the warmth.

“And if he— Wait. What happened?” Yasmine fixed Zafira with her feline stare, laughter diminished.

Zafira sat back with a blink. “What do you mean?”

Yasmine leaned closer, burnished bronze hair shimmering in the firelight. “Your face is like Deen’s terrible meat wraps; you can never hide anything. What happened?”

Zafira licked her lips. The Ra’ad siblings knowing she was the Arz Hunter came with its own headaches, like the one forming right now.

“I caught a pretty large deer. Should feed more people tonight if we can get it cooking.” Zafira downed her shorba and slipped her tongue out to catch the last of the lentils. Yasmine shouldn’t have to worry on her wedding day. “Let me help Deen.”

She started to get up, but Yasmine pulled her back down with a sharp yank on her cloak, and Zafira sat with an exaggerated sigh.

“You never help Deen when you get home—he must be taking care of it right now,” Yasmine snapped. “Tell me what happened.”

“Let’s talk about something else. Like Misk,” Zafira suggested hopefully.

Yasmine snorted and pulled a cushion onto her lap. It was one of three, worn and holey. They once belonged to Yasmine and Deen’s parents,

apothecaries who had died years ago when the Sarasin caliph launched an attack on Demenhur's borders. He was always leaving behind leagues of dead, or ghostly homes, their inhabitants stolen as prisoners of war. Yasmine and Deen's parents had been of the former group.

Deen had fallen in the depthless between. He was a ghost of the living, a prisoner who roamed free.

He had been a soldier then, but never since. Watching loved ones die would make even the worst of men desert an army destined for death. Not that he *had* deserted. Not that the rest of the army cared.

"Zafira, please," Yasmine said, the ache in her voice pulling a cord in Zafira's heart. Firelight cast shadows on her face. "You know we might not get a chance like this for some time. To sit here side by side. Alone."

Zafira squeezed her eyes closed. Skies, she knew. Yasmine madly loved Misk, and he promised a life far better than this. Zafira didn't envy their love; she had learned to accept it during the many moons Misk spent courting Yasmine. But a wedding was different. *Final*, somehow, and she just didn't know how to continue without her friend being hers alone anymore.

She opened her eyes. Yasmine was staring, waiting.

"I know, Yasmine. I know." Zafira bit her lip and picked a handful of words. Lying wasn't her greatest asset, so the short truth would have to suffice. "I was ambushed by a couple of Sarasins on monstrous horses that made Sukkar look like a dog. So I . . . led them into the Arz and escaped. I don't think they're dead." *Yet*.

Yasmine's eyes glowed like Zaramese honey in a ray of light.

"You escaped and they didn't? That's it? Why were they even there? They could've been assassins, Zafira."

She doubted that. "They seemed a little too big for hashashins."

"Oh, so you're an expert on hashashin sizing now? Sarasins know what they're doing."

"If they knew what they were doing, they wouldn't have been trying to

capture me for the sultan,” she said. “I’ve done nothing wrong to be persecuted.”

Yasmine’s eyebrows rose. “Kharra. Zafira, the sultan. Imagine if he had sent his son. You wouldn’t stand a chance against the Prince of Death.”

Zafira shivered. Whenever she wished the sultan would die, she was slapped with the reminder of his successor: the crown prince, whose death count was so high, he was said to have stopped washing the blood from his hands.

“Why?” Yasmine’s voice rose. “Why can’t you stop this foolishness? Stop pretending to be a man—stop hiding yourself. Meet with the caliph and his officials, show them who you are, and I’m certain they’ll send aid for the hunts. You’re helping your people. There’s no shame in that.”

“I never said there was,” Zafira lashed out. “But who’s a caliph to stop a sultan?”

Yasmine’s eyes flashed. “Who knows if the sultan actually sent the Sarasins? We don’t know what’s happening up north, now that the sultan has killed the Sarasin caliph. You don’t know what they truly wanted.”

Perhaps word was spreading of what she could do when so many could not. That a mysterious man was entering the absence of light and returning sane and in one piece. The fire hissed and shadows danced across the room.

“Do you really think the caliph will hate you for being a woman?” Yasmine asked.

This argument was one they’d had far too often, and Zafira was daama tired of it. Yasmine knew what happened in the villages—why couldn’t she understand that Zafira was no different from a girl baking bread?

“He won’t hate me, but he will twist my very existence. Do you think seeing a woman won’t make them rethink my every accomplishment? I’m no different than the scores of other girls frowned upon. Look at how they point fingers at the Six Sisters. Look at our women. They listen to this drivel that we are incapable, that we are to blame for every wrong, that we must lose all freedom when we marry—” Zafira stopped, skin burning.

She couldn't shame marriage on Yasmine's wedding day, not when the sister of her heart had wanted this for so long.

"I'm losing nothing by marrying Misk," Yasmine said, voice soft. "I'm *gaining* something."

But Zafira, and most women, didn't have what Yasmine did: a man who loved her more than the word could express. A man who treated her as an equal, maybe even more.

"I don't know, Yasmine," she whispered, digging her nails into her palms and leaving little crescent moons in her skin. She dropped her gaze to the henna curling along Yasmine's arms, her smooth skin aglow in the firelight. This was what was expected of women. To look pretty, to be married. Not for them to hunt in the darkness of the Arz. Not for them to gut bloody meat and feed the people of her village.

Yasmine shook her head. "I do. It doesn't matter what you are. You are your strength. Why must you prove the lie that they are better than us by deluding yourself and hiding beneath a man's clothes? Think of all the women you can help by being *you*."

Silence, and then Yasmine's voice in a harsh whisper.

"What are you waiting for, Zafira?"

She grabbed the empty bowl and made for the kitchen. Zafira opened her mouth. The women Misk had promised to send to help Yasmine dress for the wedding would be here any moment now. She didn't want the conversation to end like this.

She didn't know what she was waiting for. But there was something, wasn't there? Something more she needed to prove.

Conquering the Arz wasn't enough.

Zafira wasn't like Yasmine, who wore confidence like a second skin. Whose generous curves were the envy of the masses *because* she was proud of them. Zafira shied from pride; she shied from herself.

The door flew open.

“I’ve skinned the deer, Yasmine,” Deen called. He trudged inside and smiled when he saw Zafira by the fire. “Ah, you’re still here.”

His right sock was torn, revealing one of his toes as he crossed the scarred stone floor. “Akh, Zafira. You look like you’ve been given Yasmine’s infamous mincing.”

Zafira’s laugh was shaky. His eyes sparkled and fell to her lips before he looked down at his hands. Her breath hitched.

“I just came to grab a few things,” he said. “The deer is a little bigger than usual.”

“Are you complaining?” she teased. Or tried to. Everything felt heavier with Yasmine’s words and the intent in Deen’s eyes.

“Never,” he said, finding what he needed. He held up a heavy-toothed knife. “I’ll see you later?”

“If the bride allows. You know how she is.”

He laughed as he closed the door behind him, the fire crackling in the silence.

She exhaled and looked up to find Yasmine leaning against the hallway entrance, half draped in shadows. Watching her.

“One day, someone will bring color to those dead cheeks of yours.” She looked wistful.

“Don’t count on it, Yasmine. I’ve never blushed,” Zafira said, suddenly tired. She arranged the cushions again, tracing a fading pattern with her finger. She didn’t see marriage in her future, or love. “Demenhune rarely do. *You* don’t, and Misk looks at you like he could light the entire village on fire.”

Yasmine shook her head. “There are things a person knows. I know he’s out there, that someone. Probably as grumpy as you. He’ll look into those icy eyes of yours and make you blush and wish you could begin all over again. I just know it.” Yasmine’s forlorn tone didn’t match her hopeful words.

Zafira's mother once had someone like that. Umm had stood by Baba until his death, and now she existed without living. Alive, yet dead. It was thoughts of Umm and Baba that wrenched at Zafira's soul and reminded her that she was nothing but a broken girl pretending to be someone else, trying to raise a sister in a place too cold for life. Her heart still struggled to pull the shattered pieces of itself together again, to make her whole.

The blood that ran through her veins rushed with dispassion, not love, not a desire for life in a place where everyone smiled and laughed while the cold ate at their bodies and the lack of magic withered their cores. Where even the eminent Bakdash parlor was still open and bustling, serving iced cream to the people even as they shivered and craved warmth.

Zafira gathered the shards of her broken heart. She lifted her hood, and Umm and Baba faded away. Yasmine was wrong. Zafira would never make the mistake of falling in love.

There was no point to a feeling that fled. To a love she would be destined to lose.



CHAPTER 4

NASIR FELT LIGHTER, DESPITE THE NEW DEATH ON his growing list. He supposed he should feel guilt for killing a man whose only crime was curiosity. But he had killed for less.

Afyā seemed subdued on the ride back, as if she knew what act he had committed. They passed buildings and houses in a blur of dark sand and then a single flag bearing the Sarasin emblem, an eclipsed sun with a sword through its center, before they crossed the border between Sarasin and Sultan's Keep. The difference was stark—the skies brightened, the sun heaved. The sands churned flaxen.

The homes on the outskirts of Sultan's Keep were cobbled together with tan stone and flat roofs, doors of dark wood with copper-accented arches desperately shrouding the truth of the slums. The inhabitants had flocked here to Arawiya's grand capital for a better life close to the sultana, the immortal safi who had saved Arawiya from collapsing after the Sisters disappeared.

The sultana was dead now, and her husband—Nasir's father—was a monster. He was *now* a monster.

Closer to the palace, the houses were fewer and larger, sprawling with their own minarets and pointed copper domes, latticed stone leading to immaculate courtyards. Nasir doubted the people who lived in them were any happier than those in the slums.

His route didn't take him through the sooq. A mercy, for the last thing he needed was the streets to fall silent and the overzealous to drop to their knees. This route was quieter, though he passed several roaming merchants. One barreled a wagon full of Pelusia's bright persimmons and dusky grapes, sacks of olives running low. Another pushed a smaller wagon with wares of silver, his path set on the richer end of the sultan's city.

The familiar shadows of the Sultan's Palace fell upon the road. Unlike the heart of the man sitting upon the throne, the palace was an object of beauty. It stretched in a mass of limestone and detailed carvings, trelliswork giving glimpses of the shadows within. The tan stone had been polished to a gleam, competing with the minarets rising to the skies. The golden domes were cut with rays of obsidian from the volcanic mountains of western Alderamin, their spires ending in curves shaped like water drops. A reminder that without water, the people were nothing but carcasses for the hungry sands.

The guards surrounding the black gates leaped to attention when the sentry announced Nasir's arrival. He swung from Afya's back and dropped his hood, running his fingers through his unruly hair to clear it of sand before tossing the reins to whichever man scrambled forward to catch them.

"Ensure she's tended for."

"Yes, my prince," the guard hurried to say.

Nasir stepped through one of the pointed arches and into the tiled courtyard. Out of habit, he dipped a finger into the fountain in its center, staining the waters pink. Why the sultana had commissioned a fountain in resemblance to a lion, Nasir never knew. He had never questioned his mother, only appreciated her existence until she was taken from him.

He paused before the double doors and noted the undulation of the

guards' throats as they grasped the copper handles. *Fear*. Carefully cultivated, easily sustained.

Inside, the air was still and his footsteps echoed. Darkness wrapped a suffocating cloak around him. On the gilded balcony above, maids and servants bowed and scurried away like the rats they were, darting in and out of rooms. The palace was so dark, one couldn't tell the difference between rat and man anyway.

The only refuge from the shadows were dim torches lit along the way, and nothing stood in the light for long.

Nasir made his way to the stairs as a servant ambled from the opposite corridor, carefully balancing a platter of qahwa. Surprise struck the servant's solemn features when he saw the prince, and the tray tipped. Too late, the man pitched forward to steady it, crashing into Nasir in the process.

The servant dropped to his knees and whimpered—*whimpered*—beside the tarnished silver platter. Dark qahwa bled from the brass dallah.

A thousand memories flickered through Nasir's mind, flashes he had long since filed away. Coffee spilling. Cups shattering. A burning slap. He swallowed and blinked—a weakness, there and gone between heartbeats.

"Forgive me," the servant half squeaked.

Nasir's thoughts stumbled to a halt. *Don't think, mutt*, he imagined the sultan saying.

"Silence. Get this cleaned." His words were low, carefully neutral, but his pulse had quickened like a spooked child's. Two nearby maids hurried to help, and Nasir stepped over them. He didn't have to look back to know that the starved servant was nodding, eyes closed in gratitude—gratitude that Nasir hadn't ordered to have him beaten for the heinous act of spilling coffee. He clenched his jaw. Every daama time a servant associated him with the sultan, he only loathed himself more.

"Nasir! You have returned so soon," a cheery voice called. Nasir screwed his eyes shut before cooling his features. *When did that damned staircase get so far away?*

Sultan Ghameq's prized General al-Badawi wore a wolfish grin, oblivious to the servants mopping at the floor.

"Did you enjoy seeing the children in the camel races?" he asked, dusky blue eyes bright in the dim foyer. Anger feathered his jaw, revealing how he felt about those helpless children thrown atop the camels. At last, rage for something that wasn't Nasir's doing.

"I don't have time for this, Altair." Nasir turned to leave.

"So excited to see the sultan, eh? No doubt eager to put your tongue to his sandal."

Nasir wanted to tear Altair's carefully styled turban off his hair—which brushed the back of his neck as Nasir's did, the copycat—and shove it down his pretty throat. He was a person one would call beautiful, but the parts of his interior that bubbled to the surface were hateful. As if he had been *born* to hate Nasir.

But Nasir couldn't hate Altair back, for his hateful words tended to hold truth.

"Another word and you'll find my sword at your throat," Nasir growled.

"Easy, hashashin," Altair said, raising his hands. "Speaking of hashashins, the ones your father sent to bring back the Demenhune Hunter failed miserably. They never even returned! Who knew the Hunter was a cold-blooded murderer much like yourself?"

"So I'm to retrieve him?" Nasir's lips dipped into a frown. He had never been tasked with bringing back the people he found. He killed them.

Altair shrugged and placed a hand on the dagger at his waist. He couldn't have been much older than Nasir, but he acted as if everything were a jovial affair. "The sultan has moved on to plan *ba* and wants to see you. Something about a man named Haytham?"

This was how their every conversation passed: with gibes Nasir ignored as best as he could. If it was his status Altair hated him for, Nasir would have given him princedom with a smile.

Altair watched with the eyes of a hawk, noting the exact moment his

words struck, before he laughed and strode down the hall with the ease of a prince himself. The last Nasir heard was his rich voice calling to one of the few courtiers idling about.

“Yalla, fetch my falcon. I’m hungry for a hunt.”



“Nasir.”

Sultan Ghameq’s voice floated from the balcony above. Nasir looked to where emirs usually waited for entrance into the upper throne room, but there were no officials in sight now, only his father.

Ghameq’s copper skin was shadowed by a beard shorter than his fist, whereas Nasir’s was cut close to his skin. The sultan studied his son, turban swallowing light. He had completed the job much too soon, hadn’t he?

“You are getting better at this.”

Much too soon, indeed.

“Do you have another?” Nasir asked in a toneless voice that had taken years to perfect.

“Bloodthirsty, are we?” the sultan asked, raising one dark eyebrow. A thousand answers rose to Nasir’s lips, but only silence stretched between them. This was the palace of Arawiya. The center of power for five caliphates and hundreds of thousands of people. But it was empty. Ghostly. It had been *missing* something ever since the sultana’s death.

A glint caught his eye—the inscribed, rusted medallion that always hung from the sultan’s neck, partially shrouded by his layered black thobe. Nasir stiffened his shoulders against a shudder. He was a hefty man, the sultan. Bulkied with muscle and strength.

Nasir knew all about that strength.

“Are you just going to stand there, mutt?” Ghameq watched for Nasir’s flinch, which never came. As disgusted as it made him feel, the word was practically Nasir’s nickname.

“Wash the blood from your hands and fetch the boy. We have a meeting with Haytham.”

Old news, Sultani. For there was one thing Nasir could always count on Altair to do: never lie.

“I’ve received news a Sarasin contingent is missing,” Nasir said quickly, referencing a report he had received earlier that morning. He wouldn’t bother mentioning the men sent to find the Demenhune Hunter, a fool’s errand from the start. A contingent, however, was too big a disappearance to ignore.

“And?” the sultan asked, nostrils flaring. That anger, increasing.

“They were my responsibility,” Nasir said, limiting his words. “Now they are missing.”

“Only you could lose an entire contingent of the greatest army in Arawiya.” More insults and not a hint of surprise. There wasn’t even a shift in the man’s features.

He knows. Nasir exhaled. “Where have you moved them? We had no right touching Sarasin in the first place. Why haven’t you appointed another caliph? Do you intend to rule as caliph and sultan?”

In the silence, a flicker of fear burned in Nasir’s stomach before he strangled it to death.

Finally, the sultan spoke. “Do not question me, boy. They are my blood. I will do as I please.”

“You lost claim to Sarasin blood the moment you sat on Arawiya’s throne.” Nasir clenched his jaw, knowing he had depleted his allotted words.

“When will you pay heed to your own concerns?” the sultan thundered.

Nasir kept his voice level. “I’m the prince, Sultani. An entire body of armed men gone missing is cause for my concern.”

“No, scum. You are nothing.”

Nasir touched two fingers to his brow and left to fetch the boy. Sometimes he wondered why he even tried.



No one had ever expected the Sisters to die—not even they *themselves* expected to. Had the sultana not arrived at that crucial moment of ruin, Arawiya would have collapsed entirely. She had lifted the ropes and held their kingdom together, ensuring some sense of order. She had been just, smart, wise. Strong. Yet Nasir never understood how Ghameq had forced her to leave him the crown that should have been Nasir’s by succession.

Not that Nasir wanted it. He wasn’t ready for such a responsibility; he doubted he would ever be.

Scarcely a year after her announcement of the succession, the sultana was pronounced dead from a grave illness that spurred the people into a panic, for safin were immortal. Their hearts slowed once they reached full maturity, and they didn’t die from mortal ailments.

Safin rarely died without a blade to their throats.

Nasir agreed, for he knew how his mother had breathed her last.

And now more than Arawiya’s crown lay in the sultan’s grasp. A caliph-ate did, too.

The dungeon lock fell away with an echoing *clang*, and the door swung into a barren room where a boy of eight huddled against the wall. As Nasir’s eyes adjusted to the bleakness, he wondered if Altair knew of the boy shivering in the damp cold of the dungeons. Nasir hadn’t even known until a few days ago. Then again, Nasir knew very little about the royal agenda.

When he stepped within the clammy confines of the palace dungeons, they fell silent. Despite the dark, they always knew when he entered, and no one breathed a sound.

If he were truly his father’s son, he would have basked in their fear, but he was his mother’s son, too, and it only sickened him.

He stepped into the boy’s cell, clenching his teeth against the stench of rot and feces. “Get up.”

The young Demenhune eyed the lash in Nasir's hand and stood, teetering on his feet. He had been here for half a moon, no more, but already his bones jutted, his hair lay lackluster, and his skin was duller. He shuffled forward, the grit of sand scraping stone loud in the hushed silence. Nasir threw a dusty cloak around his shoulders.

"Baba?" the boy said.

"You will see him," Nasir replied softly, and in the harsh darkness, the curve of the boy's small shoulders relaxed, content with the mere chance of seeing his father.

Beside the door, the guard glanced at the boy's cloak, then dared to flick his gaze to Nasir, who paused without turning his head.

"Something wrong, guard?" he asked, looking ahead. He made the word sound like a curse.

"N-no, my liege," the guard murmured.

Nasir cut his gaze to him, and the guard dropped his head. He waited a touch longer, until he caught the flare of the guard's nostrils, fear reinstated. Then he tightened his grip on the lash and pushed the boy toward the stone stairs.

Yalla, he wanted to snap as the boy's palm slid along the onyx railing. At the top, Nasir removed the cloak and shoved it behind a cupboard. The boy's small chest rose with a deep inhale before the door to the sultan's chambers opened.

The sultan was seated on the black majlis sofa that covered half of the main room. He was barefoot and cross-legged, his sandals a hairbreadth away on the ornate Pelusian rug. He looked less kingly, seated on the floor. A scribe was kneeling before him.

Black scrolls were in the sultan's hands.

Every week, the scrolls were brought to the sultan, a new record of Arawiya's dead. Most of the scrolls listed out the men who had perished while mining in the Leil Caves of Sarasin because of a collapsed wall, a beating, or worse—the quiet deaths in which entire groups were attacked

by invisible fumes that blocked their lungs, suffocating them until they heaved their last.

Until this day, the scrolls had sat untouched in a basket beside the sultan's throne, boiling Nasir's blood. Now, he stilled at the impossible sight before him.

The sultan tapped a finger on a scroll. "I want these fumes harvested."

"Sultani?" stammered the scribe, stilling his hand across the papyrus. Ink dripped from his reed pen.

"These fumes. The vapors that suffocated these men," the sultan said thoughtfully.

The scribe nodded, jerky and fervent.

"I want them harvested or replicated and then contained and brought to me."

Ah. That was more like his father.

"I do not think we know how, Sultani," the scribe said quietly.

Disgust twisted the sultan's face. "I know you're all witless. Have 'Uday take the coterie of Pelusians to the caves and give them what they need. I want this done quickly." Nasir doubted the delegation of Pelusians living in Sultan's Keep enjoyed being ordered about. "Now get out."

The scribe murmured his respects and hurried from the room, thobe shuffling.

"Fumes," Nasir said when they were alone. He wanted to pronounce the word as a question, but his pride refused.

"Set the fire," Ghameq said instead, and met his gaze when Nasir didn't move at once. Nasir clenched his teeth, wanting to demand an answer, but the little boy was a risk.

So after one lengthy moment, Nasir left him shivering by the door and lit the fire. *Coward. Coward. Fool.*

There was only one reason for a fire in the midday heat. And the more Nasir played with magic, the more dangerous the line he trod. Rarely a day passed in which the sultan didn't order Nasir to assist him with its use.

Perhaps the magic that once lit the royal minarets was clean and good, but this anomaly was nothing near it. This was a hell of its own.

And he did not know where it came from.

The sultan toyed with the antique circle at his chest. Nasir had touched it once, that medallion. Darkness had seized his mind, whispers and half-crazed screams echoing in his ears when his fingers passed over the inscriptions in the ancient tongue. It was a darkness wrought with pain, a darkness that could never end.

It was a darkness that despaired in itself.

The medallion was special, and the fact that it was with the sultan at all times made it even more so. And if Ghameq saw the same darkness, he welcomed it.

The fire roared to life, and the sultan stood. Sweat trickled down Nasir's back when he reached for the poker, his palm slick against the metal. He was very well capable of using it himself, but he passed it to his father.

The poker. Burning flesh. A scream. He squeezed his eyes shut and released a quivering breath. It was a weakness he wished he didn't have to display, and with it came a lick of shame at his neck.

"You are still weak," the sultan murmured as he stoked the fire.

Nasir quelled the ire that quaked at the tips of his fingers. "I'm worn out, Sultani." *And there will come a time when I won't be.*

"Hmm," the sultan said absently, as if he had heard Nasir's unspoken words. "One day, you will see the flaw in your ways, in your curse of compassion, and understand what I've wanted for you from the beginning."

But his father *hadn't* wanted this from the beginning. There was a time when he, too, had valued compassion. Nasir thought he remembered the curve of a smile and a palace flooded with light. He held that flickering memory close, but with each passing day, it only withered further. Was this what Owais had been trying to understand?

The boy crouched and reached a careful hand for a grape in the bowl

by the sultan's sandals, and Nasir waited until he swallowed his stolen prize before handing Ghameq the leather folder.

He stepped back. The farther from this abomination of magic he could be, the better.

Ghameq flipped open the sleeve and tossed a strip of papyrus into the fire, its surface covered in words the near-black of blood.

Dum sihr. Blood magic, punishable by death and forbidden by the Sisters, for it allowed a person to practice magic of their choosing with the price of blood. Without it, the masses were restricted to the one affinity they were born with. But Ghameq was the sultan. He could do as he wished. What Nasir didn't understand was *how* he could use magic if it no longer existed.

He knew the Silver Witch was somehow involved—that woman who frequented the palace as if she were a sultana herself. She was the one who provided Ghameq with the strips of papyrus wrought with blood. Blood that somehow played the part of both wielder and vessel itself.

The flames crackled and burst open, fading to the color of Pelusian eggplants. The room exploded in hue and heat as a silhouette rose from the flames, giving shape to a pale face with dark eyes and the stringy beard of a man who was alive and whole in Demenhur: Haytham, wazir to the Caliph of Demenhur.

Rimaal. The Demenhune never failed to spook him; they looked like ghosts—pale, ethereal, and strangely beautiful. Like Altair, they were full of light, but *too* much light, as if snow flowed through their delicate veins.

“Where is he?” Haytham, unwilling traitor to his caliph, rasped. He darted quick glances behind him, to a room unseen.

“Here,” Nasir said.

“Baba!” the boy whimpered when Nasir guided him closer.

Haytham's strangled cry sent a sob through the boy, and Nasir tightened his grip around his shoulders.

“Give him to me, I beg you,” said the wazir. *Pathetic.*

“Begging changes nothing,” Nasir said, and the sultan stepped forward.

Men covered before Haytham. His strength as wazir was the only reason the Caliph of Demenhur still stood. Yet even with an entire caliphate between them, Haytham's fear was instant. Nasir noted it in the stilling of his form and the tightening of his jaw.

Haytham dropped to his knees. "Sultani."

"Get up," Ghameq said in staid condescension. "Has the Silver Witch approached Ayman?"

Nasir stiffened. Those were not two people to appear in the same sentence, let alone the same room. Ayman was a good caliph, if there was one. He wouldn't tolerate a meeting with the likes of the silver-cloaked witch. Even so, she was familiar enough. Ghameq could have asked her himself.

He doesn't trust her.

Haytham stared at his son. His loyalty to his caliph ranked higher than loyalty to his sultan, but his love for his son exceeded all else. He closed his eyes and the answer was *yes*, or there would be no hesitation. The sultan turned to the boy, and Nasir wanted to shove him into the shadows, away from that malevolent gaze.

"She has," Haytham said. "They met in the House of Selah by the western villages. We do not know to whom her letter was delivered, but we hope it was the Hunter. I know nothing else, Sultani."

At the mention of the Hunter, the sultan's eyes lit up. If there was anything more unnerving than the Demenhune, it was the Hunter. Nasir didn't know if everyone in Arawiya knew of him, but Nasir knew enough.

No one else could do what the Hunter could. Nasir had tried it himself. On an assassination errand, he had detoured to the Arz. The moment he set both feet into the forest, an impossible darkness had swarmed and the way out had disappeared. It had taken him hours to get back, and he had been breathless for days, heart stuttering at every little sound.

He was an assassin, stealthy, deadly, feared. Yet he had never felt such fear in his life—he had very nearly drowned from it.

The magic of the Arz and the magic of the medallion around Sultan

Ghameq's neck *had* to be one and the same. It wasn't fueled by what once lit the minarets. This magic was limitless, dark, endless.

"Does the quest begin in two days?" the sultan asked.

"We believe so," answered the wazir.

What quest? Haytham's fiery body wavered, flames casting long shadows in the room. Nasir tugged at the neckline of his thobe as sweat beaded on his skin.

"My son, Sultani. Why have you taken my son?" Haytham blustered.

Not even Nasir, the daama crown prince, knew the answer to that.

"Ensure the caliph will stand before the Arz when the quest begins, and your son will be returned to you unharmed."

"Before the Arz? But—" Haytham stopped, and Nasir made the realization as he did. "You mean to kill him."

The sultan denied nothing. First the Caliph of Sarasin. Then the army and the gas from the Leil Caves, and now this mysterious quest. The Demenhune caliph. Haytham looked at his son again, and amid the fire, the pain in his eyes shone.

"Accidents happen often in these strange times, wazir," the sultan mused. "And if you find your throne cold and empty, sit on it."

Understanding dawned in Haytham's eyes. He was to be a pawn. Because a throne with a pawn upon it was infinitely more useful than an empty one. The sultan could control Sarasin easily enough from Sultan's Keep, but Demenhur was much too far and expansive, and the people less in favor. With his son in danger, Haytham would be the perfect, obedient puppet.

Haytham threw a glance at something behind him, his hair glowing purple. The shift bathed the room in purple, too, and the boy drank in the sight with wide eyes and parted lips. Nasir loathed his childish innocence.

"Will you or will you not do as I've asked?" The sultan's voice was hard.

Haytham paused. His son leaned closer, catching every word.

"He will be there." Haytham's voice cracked with his oath. "Please— please don't hurt my boy."

If Ayman was soft, Haytham was hard. He was the one who kept Ayman standing, who kept order in Demenhur, one of the largest caliphates of Arawiya. But in that moment, Nasir had never seen a weaker man. *Love makes men weak.*

“He is safe so long as you cooperate,” the sultan said, as if promising Haytham he would water his weeds.

Safe? In a damp, cold dungeon that would kill him before anything else?

Haytham opened his mouth, to beg again by the look in his eyes, but the sultan threw a single black seed into the flames. The Demenhune and the fire disappeared.

“Take him back,” Ghameq said in the sudden silence.

There were a million things Nasir wanted to say. A million words and a hundred questions. “He will come prepared,” he managed finally. Haytham. Ayman. They weren’t fools.

The sultan didn’t even spare Nasir a glance. “He will come prepared for you, not for an entire contingent of Sarasin forces armed without blades.”

Nasir froze. Slaughter and suffocation. That Sarasin contingent hadn’t gone *missing*; Ghameq had merely given them a new order. He was already commanding the army he lawfully could not.

The Sultan of Arawiya planned to have them suffocate the innocents of Demenhur’s western villages and make sure the caliph was among them.

With the attack coming from a caliphate, rather than the sultan, there would be no more skirmishes for expanding borders. There would be war.

The caliphs existed to hold the sultan in check, just as the sultan existed to hold the caliphs in order. They were very nearly kings themselves, the sultan merely stewarding them all. A fail-safe left by the Sisters to ensure balance.

What was Ghameq trying to do?

Nasir opened his mouth, but he was an assassin, and his hands were steeped in blood—how could he argue against the death of innocents? He pressed his lips together.

And like the mutt that I am, I will do everything he says.