

As a bit of a treat for readers in the lead-up to the publication of *The Empire of Gold*, I've decided to post some extras from the Daevabad universe. Some are new point-of-view characters, others deleted scenes from old versions, and some of this is pure fluff I wrote to distract myself from Corona quarantine hell. They're mostly just meant for fun and haven't been edited much, so apologies if you spot errors.

A couple notes: 1) These scenes don't spoil anything for the third book, but definitely do for the first two. 2) I decided to post these here instead of making them some sort of pre-order incentive because I know not everyone can afford to do that. However if you can, please consider pre-ordering the *The Empire of Gold*, especially from an independent bookstore. This is a very difficult time to publish a book, and I would deeply appreciate it (Nahri/Ali/Dara/insert character of your choice will love you forever!) If you can't, a library hold, retail/GR review or simply recommending the books to a friend are also awesome!

This is pretty long, so I've also made it available as a PDF which you can download [here](#). Please let me know if you enjoyed the scenes and if the formatting worked out for reading.

May the fires burn brightly for you!

MANIZHEH

This scene takes place a few decades before The City of Brass and contains spoilers for the first two books.

Her son was glorious.

Manizheh traced one of Jamshid's tiny ears, drinking in the sight of his perfect, little face. Barely a week old, the black of his eyes was still tempered by a fiery-hued haze. His small body was warm; soft and tucked safe in the cradle of her arms. Even so, Manizheh held him closer as she made her way out of the tent. It might be spring, but it was still early in the season and Zariaspa clung to its chilly early mornings.

The plain before her was glowing in the early dawn light, flashes of pink and purple clover twinkling with dew against the darker green. She stepped carefully over scattered stones and broken, ancient bricks. She and Kaveh had pitched their tent in one of the many forgotten human ruins that dotted this land. Little was left to distinguish it from rocky hillside save a few archways and one squat column decorated with a pattern of diamonds. But Manizheh couldn't help but wonder what this place had once been. Could it have been a castle, a royal home walked

by other anxious new parents terrified of the world into which they'd brought a child with noble blood? Blood that could carry untold blessings; wealth and privilege.

Blood that could trap one in a web of murderous politics and a lifetime of servitude before they were too young to realize they were a prisoner.

Manizheh glanced down again at her son. Her Jamshid. His was a royal name, taken from the humans long ago like many of their names—a borrowing most Daevas would deny, but Manizheh had been educated as a Nahid, learning things the rest of her people were not permitted. Jamshid was a name of legend and kingship. An optimistic name, spiraling from the last shred of hope left in her soul.

“This is my favorite place in the world,” she said softly as Jamshid’s eyelids fluttered, the baby sleepy and milk-drunk. She laid his head against her shoulder, breathing in the sweet scent of his neck. “You are going to have so many adventures here. Your baba will get you a pony and teach you to ride, and you can explore to your heart’s content. I want you to explore, my love,” she whispered. “I want you to explore and dream and get lost in place where no one will watch you. Where no one will cage you.”

Where Ghassan will not hurt you. Where he will never, ever learn of you. For Ghassan couldn’t learn of Jamshid; the very prospect nearly made Manizheh double over in fear and she was not a woman easily frightened. Ghassan would kill Kaveh, of that she had no doubt, probably in the longest, most excruciating manner he could devise. He would punish Rustam, breaking what was left of her traumatized brother’s spirit.

And Jamshid...her mind would not let her contemplate the ways Ghassan would use him. If Jamshid was lucky, Ghassan would merely settle for inflicting on him the same life of terror she and Rustam had been subjected to: enslaved in the palace infirmary and reminded every day

that if it were not for the usefulness of their blood, their family would have been exterminated long ago.

But she didn't think her son would be lucky. Manizheh had watched the years harden Ghassan into a mirror of his tyrannical father. Perhaps Manizheh had been a proud fool to deny Ghassan what his heart had wanted most, maybe it would have been best to unite their families and tribes: to force a smile to her face in a royal wedding and close her eyes in the darkness of his bed. Maybe her people would be breathing easier and her brother wouldn't jump when someone closed a door too loudly. Was that not the best choice for so very, many women; the most they could hope for?

But she hadn't chosen that. Instead she had betrayed him in the most personal way she could, and Manizheh knew if she and Kaveh were caught, she'd pay for that in kind.

She pressed a kiss to the soft downy hair lying in a messy poof around Jamshid's head. "I am so sorry, little one. But you'll have a good life here, I promise. And when I come back for you...I pray you can forgive me."

Jamshid stirred in his sleep, making a tiny sound that drove a knife of grief through her chest. Manizheh closed her eyes, trying to memorize every detail of this moment. His weight in her arms and his milky scent. The breeze whispering through the grasses and the chill in the air. She wanted to remember holding her son a final time before she took everything from him.

"Manu?"

Manizheh stilled at Kaveh's hesitant voice, her emotions freefalling again. Kaveh. Her partner and conspirator since they were children sneaking out to steal horses and wander the countryside. Her closest friend, her lover when their curiosity and teenaged pining turned to fumbling touches and stolen moments.

He'll be a good father. Manizheh knew Kaveh would make sure Jamshid had a good life, a freer and happier one out here in Zariaspa than he ever could have enjoyed back in Daevabad.

But she was going to lose him too. Manizheh had overstayed her visit by two months, ignoring Ghassan's letters ordering her back. She'd be surprised if he wasn't already mustering soldiers to retrieve her. There would be no returning to Zariaspa again while he was king.

The only way Manizheh would see Kaveh and their son again would be if her plan—her stupid, fruitless plan—finally worked.

Kaveh spoke again when she didn't respond. "I prepared everything you asked. Are you..." He stumbled over the words. "Are you alright?"

Manizheh wanted to laugh. She wanted to cry. No, she was not alright. She clutched Jamshid closer. It seemed impossible that she would have to let him go. She wanted to cry out to her Creator. She wanted to collapse in Kaveh's arms. For once she wanted someone to tell her that everything was going to be okay. She wanted to stop being the Banu Nahida, their leader, their goddess who was allowed no weakness. No emotion save strength and quiet defiance.

But hers was not a role one could ever escape. Even with Kaveh, she would always be his Nahid before his lover and friend.

She would not shake his faith now. Manizheh made sure her voice was steady and her eyes were dry before she turned around.

Heartbreak was writ across his dark eyes. "You look beautiful with him," he whispered, reverence and pain edging his voice. He drew closer, gazing at their sleeping son. "Are you sure about this?"

Manizheh rubbed Jamshid's back. "It's the only way to hide who is. Nahid magic is strong when we're children. He'll otherwise be healing his wet-nurses without intention and having skinned knees close up."

Kaveh gave her an uncertain glance. "And if one day he should need such abilities?"

The question made her sick with fear. In her arms, Jamshid seemed so tiny and fragile. There were illnesses and curses he could catch. He could tumble off a horse and break his neck.

And yet the risk was still less than getting caught. "I don't know what else to do, Kaveh," she confessed as they returned to the tent. Their fire altar smoldered in the eastern corner. "I'm hoping a day will come when I can remove the mark, but that day is not today. Even so..."

Manizheh studied the tools and dish of clean, sanctified soot she'd already set out. "It's old magic, and I couldn't find much information. I'm just hoping I can make it work."

"How will we know if it does?"

Manizheh stared at her son, trying to commit to memory every detail of his tiny, scrunched face. To imagine how it would look when he was three months old. Three years. Thirteen. She did not want to contemplate beyond that. She did not want to imagine entirely missing him grow up.

"If it works, I won't be able to control his pain," she answered. "And he will start to scream."

#

The throne room was so silent one could hear a pin drop.

"Your experiments?" Ghassan finally repeated, fury scorching his voice. "You stayed in Zariaspa, ignoring my pleas and messengers to tend to your experiments? My wife, your queen, is dead because of your *experiments*?"

Saffiyeh was never my queen. Manizheh fought not to sway on her feet. Nahid magic be damned, she was completely exhausted and everything hurt. Her legs and back ached from riding, and her breasts were swollen with milk that would not stop, the slightest pressure bringing stinging tears to her eyes.

“I did not receive your messages in time.” Manizheh was too weary and heartbroken to make her response sound sincere; even she could hear how devoid of caring the words came out. “If I had, I would have returned sooner.”

Ghassan stared at her, looking betrayed. Despite all the trappings of wealth and kingship, there was genuine grief in his expression. Manizheh had not seen those emotions in his face for a very long time. With each decade as Daevabad’s tyrant, he expressed less sentiment, as though ruling the city sucked the warmth from his heart.

She had not an ounce of sympathy. Ghassan had had her seized—well, no, not seized because not even the king was terrifying enough to make people touch her—but she’d been surrounded by soldiers and forced off her horse at the Daeva Gate, made to walk the entirety of the main boulevard through her tribe’s Quarter to the palace. Manizheh had done so, trying to keep her head held high and hide the fact that she struggled for breath as the road switch backed up Daevabad’s hills. Her people had been watching, their frightened faces visible behind windows and cracked doors. Manizheh could not let them see her falter. She was their Banu Nahida, their light.

Her duty.

But by the time she’d arrived at the palace her ancestors had built, its stones singing to her, she was a mess. Her clothes were filthy, her dress torn and streaked with mud. Her chador had slipped to her shoulders, revealing her wild hair and ash-dotted brow. They’d taken her to

the throne room. It was a sacred place to her; the chamber where the Nahid Council had once deliberated, its designs celebrating a past and heritage that had been stolen.

She wondered what her ancestors would think now, to see her disheveled and dirty, meant to grovel before the djinn who had stolen in it, seated even now in her family's magnificent jeweled throne.

If she was wise, she'd apologize. That's what Ghassan wanted, Manizheh knew. She had defied and humiliated him. Daevabad's court was vicious. Its rulers were not spared the gossip of courtiers, and Manizheh had made him look weak. Was Daevabad's fearsome king really all that mighty if his own Nahid could defy him? If that defiance had killed his wife? And truthfully, for Saffiyeh, Manizheh was sorry. She had never borne any ill will towards Saffiyeh and frankly greeted the news that Ghassan was marrying with some relief and hope he'd finally given up his marital designs on her. It would cost Manizheh nothing but pride to apologize. And perhaps a good healer would, chastened by the unnecessary loss of life.

Manizheh held Ghassan's gaze, aware of the court staring at her. His Qaid, another Geziri djinn. His Ayaanle wazir. For all Ghassan's chirping about improving relations between the Daeva and djinn tribes, there was not a single Daeva face among those staring down at her. These djinn didn't look like they were grieving. They looked eager. Everyone enjoyed seeing an uppity "fire-worshipper" shoved back into place.

We are better than all of you. I am better than all of you. Not for the first time, Manizheh was tempted to simply give in to the rage that roared inside her. She could probably break the bones of half the men staring at her, urge the ceiling to collapse and bury them all.

But they were still outnumbered, and for such an act, Manizheh knew every Daeva in the city would die. She would be run through with the weapons of every man left here. Rustam

would die, as would Nisreen, her most loyal friend and assistant. The priests in the temple and the children at school.

Manizheh lowered her gaze. It killed her to do so. “Are we done?” she asked, her voice cold and devoid of emotion.

She could hear the fury in Ghassan’s. “No. But you are no doubt needed in the infirmary by the other patients you abandoned. Go.”

Go. The command scorched through her, humiliation burning in her cheeks. Manizheh spun on her heel, putting her back to him as she turned for the corridor.

But he wasn’t done. “You will not leave this palace again,” Ghassan declared to her back, his tone filled with hateful condescending. “We would not wish for something to happen to you.”

Her hands were burning with magic. A snap of her fingers. Would it be enough to shatter the bones at the base of his skull?

She squared her shoulders. “Understood.”

Gossip rose up as she strode through the crowd toward the door. The djinn’s metal-toned gazes were hostile and accusing. A heartless witch, she heard. Jealous and cruel. Snob. Bitch.

Fire-worshipper.

Manizheh held her head high and entered the corridor.

But the corridor was no easier. It was the middle of the day and the palace was bustling with secretaries and ministers, nobles and scholars. Her filthy chador still dropped to her shoulders, Manizheh was instantly recognizable and she could only imagine how disgraced she looked, dirty and without escort after being punished by their rightful, believing king. The noise of the corridor died with people stopping to stare.

A pair of Daevas across the hall, looking worried, moved for her. Manizheh met their eyes and slightly shook her head. They couldn't help and she wouldn't put any of her people at further risk. Instead she faced the whispers alone. She was cold, it was hissed. She was evil. She'd all but murdered Saffiyeh, the sweetest of queens, to get back into Ghassan's bed.

The burning had spread up her arms, her neck. A haze swam before Manizheh's eyes. She could sense every stone, every drop of Nahid blood that had been spilled in this place.

Aware that the palace magic was going to simply *take* her rage and do something regrettable with it if she didn't get things under control, Manizheh headed towards the first door to the garden she saw, breathing fast. She seemed to startle the guard, who jumped at the sight of her, but recovered in time to slam the door and throw the latch lock once she was through.

Manizheh fell back against the stone wall and covered her face with her hands. Her entire body hurt. Her soul hurt. It felt empty and burned out, a husk. All she could see in the darkness of her mind's eye was Jamshid and Kaveh when she last left them; the man she loved holding their forbidden child in his arms among the ruins and spring flowers. She could still hear Jamshid's wails as she tattooed the mark on his shoulder, severing him from his heritage. The sound had been ringing in her ears since she left. Hiccupping screams and muffled sobs, again and again.

Then Manizheh stilled. It wasn't only the memory of Jamshid's cries she heard; there was a child weeping somewhere beyond the tangled web of greenery.

For a moment, she hesitated. This was the wildest corner of the garden, neglected for centuries more feral jungle than anything. Its towering trees soared beyond the palace walls, thorny vines choked the paths and the undergrowth was so thick that the forest floor was dark and slippery with rotting leaves and moss. Here the canal that ran through the garden was silent

and unfathomably deep, its black water claiming at least once life a year. Of course being Daevabad, it wasn't merely nature that was dangerous. The palace magic that flowed through her veins had always seemed most ruthless among these silent trees. As if something ancient and wounded had buried itself beneath the ground, fed on the blood and suffering of millennia. Accordingly, the part of the garden was avoided by anyone with sense. Things happened in these woods that djinn didn't understand. A once scrawny cat had emerged as a tiger with glass teeth and a serpentine tail. The shadows were said to peel from the ground and swallow the unexpected. A mix of gossip and actual magic, the line between stories told to frighten children and servants who went missing hard to parse out.

Stories that until now hadn't frightened Manizheh. She was a Nahid and the palace's magic had never harmed her. But she couldn't imagine what would have lured a child out here and wondered if it might have been a trick; a cruelly personal goad.

The wet, hiccupping sobs didn't stop. Concerned, she followed them. Manizheh half-expected to find some monstrously large bird making mimic calls.

It wasn't a bird. Beneath a massive, ancient cedar, swathed in roots so tangled that one would have to be very small to slip through, was a young boy. He lay curled on the mossy ground, hugging his knees to his chest as his entire body shook with sobs. He was crying so hard that he didn't look up even when a twig snapped under her foot as she drew nearer. Closer now, the finery of his clothes stood out. Where it wasn't streaked with leaves and dirt, his cotton dishdasha was so white it gleamed. The sash at his waist was silk, bronze and indigo patterned against a rich copper. Gold ringed his wrists and ears, pearls looping his neck. They weren't the garments most little boys playing outdoors would wear—certainly not her own, who would dress in home-spun wool and patched hats as he shivered during Zariaspa's winters.

Then again, the little boy before her wasn't like most. He was the next djinn king.

He was also very foolish. For a glance revealed young Muntadhir al-Qahtani appeared to be alone and unarmed, one mistake compounded with another. She couldn't imagine what had led to the cosseted, little prince being out here by himself, weeping in the jungle.

Can't you? After all, Manizheh had been a royal child and learned early to mask her emotions. They were weaknesses in the palace, liabilities others would seize upon to hurt you. And Muntadhir was not only the son of the king—he came from a family of warriors, from a people who prized themselves on their hardiness. He was clearly old enough to know the price of grieving where he could be observed.

He was also likely going to get eaten by a shadow creature if he kept carrying on out here, for which the Nahid siblings would likely get blamed and so Manizheh stepped forward. “Peace be upon you, little prince.”

Muntadhir started, his head jerking up. His wet eyes had no sooner locked on her than they went wide with fear and he scrambled to his feet, backing into the tree trunk.

Manizheh raised her hands. “I do not mean you any harm,” she said softly. “But this is not a safe place for you.”

The little prince only blinked. He was a beautiful child; big, bright gray eyes framed by long dark lashes. A hint of russet gleamed in the black locks that fell in perfect curls past his chin. Closer now, Manizheh could see that tiny amulets of sand-blasted glass had been pinned to his clothes. A necklace of similar materials wound around his neck, the pale glass beads interspaced with those made of wood and shell. A pendant of hammered copper hung from it as well. It would be filled with holy verses written on miniscule scripts of paper, Manizheh knew. Country superstitions to protect the young royal from all manner of evil. His mother had been

from a small coastal village, and if Manizheh found Saffiyeh meek and quiet, she could not help but note how fiercely she had tried to protect her son.

Now she was gone. Muntadhir had frozen, like a rabbit in the presence of a hawk.

Manizheh knelt, hoping to appear less threatening. Despite what the djinn believed, she would never hurt a child. "I am very sorry about your mother, little one."

"Why did you kill her?" he blurted out. "She never did anything to you." Muntadhir wiped his running nose on his sleeve, starting to cry again. "She never did anything to anyone. She was good and kind... She was my amma," he wept. "I need her."

"I'm sorry. I lost my mother too when I was young." 'Lost' was a cruelly accurate word because Manizheh's mother had been among the many Daevas disappeared under Khader's, Ghassan's father, brutal reign. "And I know it seems impossible now, but you will survive her. She would want you to. You have people here who love you, and they'll take care of you." The last part seemed like a lie. People would indeed be flocking to the motherless young prince, but they'd have their own schemes.

Muntadhir just stared at her. He looked completely lost. "Why did you kill her?" he whispered again.

"I didn't," Manizheh said, her voice gentle but her words firm. "Your amma was extremely sick. I did not get your father's message in time, but I didn't mean to hurt her. I never would."

Muntadhir had stepped closer. He was gripping one of the mossy branches that separated them so hard that his knuckles had paled. "They said you would say that. They said you would lie. That all the Daevas *do* is lie. They said you killed her so you could marry my father."

Hearing such rumors and bigotry whispered by adult courtiers was one thing; out of the mouth of a believing, mourning child was so much worse. Manizheh found herself struck speechless by the accusation in his eyes. Muntadhir was standing tall now, every bit the future emir.

“I will see you dead one day.” The Qahtani princeling trembled as he said the words, but he said them, as though testing out a new skill he had not yet mastered. And then, before she could respond, he fled.

Manizheh watched his retreating back. He looked so very small against the gloomy undergrowth.

And this is why you left Jamshid behind. Abandoning her son might have broken her heart, but at least *he* wouldn't be broken, raised in this awful place.

There was nothing Manizheh could do to help Muntadhir so she kept walking. She was even more exhausted within minutes, the wet heat sapping what little strength she had left. Her legs were so shaky that her entire body trembled, and she felt a sudden new slickness where they joined. It had been a couple weeks since Jamshid's birth, and she was still bleeding. She had no idea if that was normal; no idea how Nahid bodies might react differently to the process of birthing. By the time she was old enough to ask such questions, there were no other Nahid women left who could tell her. All she knew was she was in more physical pain than she thought members of her family could experience.

It didn't matter. Because the closer she got to the infirmary, the clearer it was that another needed her.

If the palace magic had claimed Manizheh, its overgrown jungle interior was Rustam's. Her little brother had never been the healer she was—mostly because no one was the healer she

was—but he was all but a savant when it came to plants and botanicals. The Nahid garden was as attuned to him as a loyal, adoring dog to its master.

And it had gone wild. New vines of ivy and gigantic trumpet-like flowers spread everywhere; the bright green of fresh growth stark. Long before it was visible, Manizheh could smell his beloved orange grove; the too-sweet aroma of over-ripe citrus and rot thick in the air.

Even so, her breath caught when she came around the bend. The infirmary garden looked like it had taken a dozen doses of growth potion. Waist-tall silver-mint bushes were now the height of trees alongside roses the size of a child’s head whose thorns could serve as daggers. Rustam’s orange grove, his joy and point of pride, had gone savage, hulking over the rest of the garden like a looming spider. Its explosion of fruit must have been too much even for the volunteers who collected the extras for the Temple food pantries for fruit lay rotting on the ground.

Manizheh picked her way through the undergrowth as fast as she could—which was not very. Her head was pounding, and a layer of ash coated her skin. Her chador was gone, snagged by a tree and her dirty hair loose around her shoulders. Even so, she’d only made it to the pavilion when a sharp pain tore through her pelvis. She bowed over, stifling a cry as tears pricked her eyes.

“My lady?”

Manizheh glanced up to see Nisreen dropping the medical instruments she’d been laying out in the sun and rushing to Manizheh’s side.

“Oh, my lady...” Nisreen stopped, her wide worried eyes looking at Manizheh with open sorrow. “Are you all right?”

Manizheh was very much not all right. She was a wreck and she thought she had about ten more steps in her before she fell apart, weeping in pain and grief as she bled out in the garden. The sight of which would probably destroy any remaining faith her people had in their Banu Nahida.

She gritted her teeth as the ache came again in her womb. *Breathe. Just breathe.*
“Rustam?” she managed.

“He’s in the middle of a procedure,” Nisreen answered. “He’d already started when word came you were back.”

“Is he all right?”

Nisreen opened and closed her mouth. The devout daughter of murdered southern priests, she’d never been able to lie to Manizheh. “He is alive.”

It was not a reassuring answer. Manizheh knew he’d be alive. Ghassan could not risk killing his only Nahid, particularly while Manizheh was still gone. But there were a very great number of things he could do to Rustam instead.

“My lady, you need help,” Nisreen said when Manizheh didn’t respond. “Let me take you to the hammam.”

Manizheh pressed a fist harder against her belly. Right now she wasn’t sure she could make it to the hammam, let alone clean herself up without passing out. But the signs on her body would be obvious.

She met Nisreen’s eyes. Her assistant, the closest thing Manizheh had to a friend. Perhaps more importantly—a woman who would go to her death before betraying a Nahid. She hesitated only a moment longer before taking Nisreen’s outstretched arm and leaning heavily onto it.

“No one else can see me,” she whispered. “When we get to the hammam, make sure there is no one there. Lock the door behind us.”

“Lock the door?”

“Yes,” Manizheh breathed. “I’m going to need your help, dear one. But I’ll need your silence even more.”

#

Manizheh didn’t end up passing out in the bath though she was so dazed that she might as well have been unconscious. Time passed in a blur of steam and hot water, the smell of rose soap and old blood. Nisreen was gentle and quiet. There had been a moment of hesitation when she first peeled off Manizheh’s dusty, bloody clothes but then she got to work, as reliable as always. As she was bathed and scrubbed, the water turning an ugly gray, Manizheh might have wept, tears running with the soap down her face. She wasn’t sure. She didn’t care.

Once in her familiar bed, however, she did pass out and slept hard. By the time she stirred from sleep, her room was dark save the fire altar in the eastern corner and a small oil lamp that had been placed on the table next to her bed.

She wasn’t alone. Still disoriented, Manizheh tried to draw up and only succeeded in provoking another sharp pain in her belly.

“It’s all right,” a soft voice assured. “It’s just me.”

“Rustam?” Manizheh blinked. Her brother came to her in blurry pieces in the dim room; the black eyes they shared and the bright white of his veil.

“Baga Nahid right now.” Rustam carefully eased another pillow under her head and then put a cup of something utterly foul to her lips. “Drink.”

Manizheh obeyed. When Rustam e-Nahid personally brewed you a potion, you drank it. The relief came so fast that Manizheh choked; her aches, the swelling all over her body, and her pounding head immediately eased.

“Creator bless you,” she said hoarsely.

“You should eat,” he said in response, his voice a little stiff. “And take some water.”

She drank from the new cup he offered but shook her head when he reached for a small platter of cut fruit and plain bread. “I am not hungry.”

“You need to eat, Manu. Your body’s weak.” Rustam reached for her hand.

Manizheh jerked her hand back. “I said I’m not hungry.”

There was a moment of silence. She still couldn’t see him very well. His gaze was downcast. It usually was. Rustam rarely made eye contact with people anymore, and when he did, he visibly struggled to maintain it.

He spoke again. “I may not have your talents, sister, but I am as Nahid as you. I do not need to touch your hand to know.”

Manizheh felt fresh tears burn in her eyes. She hadn’t cried in years before Jamshid was born, and she hated it. “I’m fine. It was a rough journey.”

“Manizheh—”

“*It was a rough journey,*” she repeated, her voice fierce. “Do you understand? There is nothing to talk about. Nothing more to know. You can’t be blamed for what you don’t know.”

“You and I both know that’s not true.” Rustam snapped his fingers and the oil lamp burned brighter, throwing wild illumination and shadows across the room. “Do not carry this alone. You can’t. Not this.”

“There is nothing to tell.”

“There is! You cannot vanish for a year and come back after having—”

The entire room shook. There was a blast of heat and the flames in the fire altar soared, scorching the ceiling and making Rustam’s effect look like child’s play. Her brother instantly drew back. In the dancing firelight, she saw a flicker of fear in his black eyes before he quickly looked down again.

“If you finish that sentence you will never speak again,” she warned. “Do you understand?”

Rustam grabbed the empty glass from her hands, but he was visibly trembling. His hands shook when he was afraid, an affliction he couldn’t control and one that had only gotten worse over the years. He could barely hold an object without it rattling in Ghassan’s presence and when they had to attend public functions, he and Manizheh had taken to putting binders on his wrist with knotted rags he could grip to control himself.

And now *she* had made him tremble. Manizheh had no choice—he was foolish to speak openly when Ghassan had hidden eyes and ears everywhere.

But regret immediately washed through her. “Rustam, I’m sorry. I just—”

“I understand,” he said harshly. “That you would threaten me is answer enough.” He opened and closed his fists and then pressed his hands to his knees, fighting for control. “I hate this,” he whispered. “I hate them. That I cannot even ask you if...”

“I know.” Now she did take his hand. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Would you add that which I cannot tell you to your prayers?”

Rustam lifted his gaze to her again, and Manizheh knew in an instant that he knew. He squeezed her hand. “Every day, sister.”

Yet even as she watched him make the connection, Manizheh desperately wanted to tell him. She wanted to fall apart in Rustam's arms or huddle together under her blanket like they did when they were children. As she had back in Zariaspa, she wanted someone to tell her it was all going to be okay. Manizheh wanted to have a single moment of weakness without destroying the faith and spirit of the people she loved who relied on her strength.

But staring at her now... Rustam looked awful. He was still shaking, his skin pale with a sick yellow tinge. He had such deep shadows under his eyes, it looked like he'd been punched and he'd clearly lost weight. She couldn't see the rest of his face. Rustam removed his veil so rarely that she sometimes had to remind him to do so when they ate. Manizheh knew it wasn't just piety. He'd turned inward to survive their lives here, retreating behind every wall he could to a place no one could touch him.

But what she saw in a glimpse was enough to paint a picture of the way her brother must have suffered in the year she'd been gone. There would be no other signs, of course. There never were. Rustam's bones healed when Ghassan's thugs broke them, as did the gashes left by whips and the burns left by acid. Ghassan had never raised a hand to Manizheh; he didn't have to. He'd learned long ago that beating her brother made her submit faster than anything else. Not all his invisible marks had been put there by Ghassan, however. On Rustam's wrists, there would have been a different story, equally grim. Her brother had tried to kill himself more than once, but it was difficult for a Nahid. His last attempt—a poisoning—had been years ago. Manizheh had been the one to bring him back and had fallen to her knees afterward and begged him not to do it again. Begged him not to leave her.

Come to think it, that was probably the last time she had wept before Jamshid's birth.

So, no, she would not tell him. Instead Manizheh tried to bring a steady expression to her face. “Could you have the kitchens bring me some ginger tea?” she asked. “I think it will settle my stomach enough that I can eat.”

Relief washed over his face. Ah yes, she knew the look of a healer pleased to have a concrete task. “Of course.” Rustam rose to his feet and then fumbled in the pockets of his robe. “I got you something. I know you like to keep it hidden away, but I thought...I thought it might bring you some comfort.” He quickly placed a small, hard object in her hand, closing her fingers over it before stepping back. “May the fires burn brightly for you, Manu.”

Manizheh’s heart twisted. She knew what was in her hand. “For you, as well, beloved.”

He left with a bow and Manizheh settled back into bed, curling in on herself. Only when she heard the door close, did she command the flames to constrict, turning the room dark again.

Then she slipped the ancient ring he’d given her onto her finger. It was brass, badly battered. Manizheh was familiar with every single one of its dents and scratches. She brought the cold emerald to her lips and alone in her room, she finally let her tears fall.

“Please come back,” she whispered. “Please save us.”

MUNTADHIR

This takes place about seven years before the events in The City of Brass and contains spoilers for that book only.

“Dhiru.” A hand shook his shoulder. “*Dhiru.*”

Muntadhir al Qahtani groaned, burying his face in his pillow. “Go away, Zaynab.”

His sister’s small body landed next to his, jolting the bed and sending a fresh throb of pain into his pounding skull. “You look awful,” she said cheerfully. He felt her pluck away the hair plastered to his cheek. “Why are you all sweaty?” She let out a scandalized—and rather thrilled—gasp. “Were you *drinking?*”

Muntadhir pressed the silk pillow over his ears. “Uhkti, it’s too early for this. Why are you in my room?”

“It’s not that early.” Zaynab’s hands scrabbled around, tickling him, and she laughed as he tried to wriggle away. Abruptly, her fingers stilled, closing over something lying near his head.

“Is this an earring? Dhiru, why do you have a woman’s earring in your bed?” Excitement lit her voice. “*Oh*, does it belong to that new singing girl from Babili?”

In a moment of sudden panic, Muntadhir shot out his hand to sweep the other side of the mattress. Relief swept through him when he found it empty. The earring’s owner must have already left, and thank God for it. That was *not* something he needed his gossipy, thirteen-year-old sister to see.

He rolled over, squinting in the dark; Muntadhir’s servants all knew to pull the shades before the Emir woke from one of his “evenings,” so Zaynab came to him in blurry pieces: her gray-gold eyes and small dark face, her mischievous smile... the intricate gold and emerald jhumka dangling from her fingers.

“Give me that.” Muntadhir snatched the earring back as Zaynab giggled. “Could you at least make yourself useful and pour me a glass of water?”

Still grinning, Zaynab bounced off the bed and poured the contents of his blue glass pitcher into a goblet, making a face as she examined it. “Why does this smell funny?”

“It has medicine for my head in it.”

She came back and offered the cup to him. “You shouldn’t drink wine, akhi. It’s forbidden.”

“Lots of things are forbidden, little bird.” Muntadhir drained the glass. He wasn’t setting the greatest example for his sister, but at least last night’s drinking had—technically—been in the service of his kingdom.

Zaynab rolled her gray-gold eyes. “You know I hate when you call me that. I’m not a child anymore.”

“Yes, but you still flit around everywhere, listening and seeing things that are not your business.” Muntadhir tapped the top of her head. “A tall bird,” he teased. “You and Ali are going to leave me behind with all this growing.”

She fell back onto the bed. “I tried to see him,” she complained, sounding glum. “Wajed brought the cadets over from the Royal Guard to spar. I went to the arena, and Abba made me leave. He said it was ‘inappropriate,’” she added, flicking a hand dismissively.

Muntadhir was sympathetic. “You’re getting older, Zaynab,” he said gently. “You shouldn’t be around all those men.”

Zaynab glared at him. “You smell like wine and have some lady’s earring in your bed. Why do you get to do whatever you want, and I can’t even leave the harem anymore? If we were back in Am Gezira, I’d be able to go out. Our cousins do all the time!”

“But we’re not in Am Gezira, and our cousin aren’t princesses,” Muntadhir said. He didn’t entirely disagree with Zaynab, but he didn’t feel up to debating Daevabad’s archaic traditions with his sister right now. “Things are different here. People will talk.”

“So, let them talk!” Zaynab balled her hands, her fists punching the quilted blanket beneath her. “It’s not fair! I’m *bored*. I can’t even go to the market park in the Ayaanle Quarter anymore. That was my favorite place. Amma used to take me there every Friday to see the animals.” Her lower lip trembled, making her look younger than her thirteen years. “Ali too.”

Muntadhir sighed. “I know, ukhti. I’m sorry…” Zaynab looked away, her face crumpling, and Muntadhir’s chest tightened. “I’ll take you, alright?” he suggested. “No one is going to stop me. We’ll stop at the Citadel on the way and drag Alizayd too.”

Zaynab’s face instantly brightened. “Really?”

He nodded. “I’ll insist I need a particularly small zulfiqari to keep us safe. As long as *you* promise to deal with his chattering. He’ll probably subject us to an entire afternoon’s ramble on the history of the market park.”

“It’s a deal.” She smiled again, the grin lighting up her whole face. “You’re a good brother, Dhiru.”

“I try.” He nodded towards the door. “Now will you let me go back to sleep?”

“You can’t. Abba wants to see you.”

Muntadhir’s mood immediately darkened. “About what?”

Zaynab shrugged. “I didn’t ask. He seemed annoyed.” She inclined her head. “You should probably hurry.”

“I see. Thanks for letting me know so quickly.” His sister merely laughed at his sarcasm, and he shooed her away with a sigh. “Go on, you trouble-maker. Let me get dressed.”

Zaynab skipped off, and Muntadhir rolled out of bed, swearing under his breath. He hadn't expected to see his father until this evening: had he known he'd be summoned so early, he would never have had so much to drink last night.

He splashed some rosewater over his face, then rinsed his mouth and ran his hands through his hair and over his beard, attempting to smooth their disarray. He exchanged his rumpled waist-cloth for a crisp dishdasha patterned with blue diamonds, then grabbed his cap and turban cloth and hurried out, winding his turban rapidly as he half-jogged towards the arena. His limbs felt heavy; his abused body did not appreciate the speed at which it was being compelled to move.

When he finally reached the arena, Muntadhir took the stairs leading to the viewing platform with great care, easing one foot ahead of the other, but trying not to appear impaired. Ghassan would not be pleased to see him lurching around like a newborn karkadan.

The pavilion that overlooked the palace arena was well-shaded, with drapes of brightly patterned gold and black silk and thickly planted potted ferns rising overhead to protect Daevabad's royals and their privileged retainers from the city's merciless midday heat. A half-dozen servants waved wetly gleaming palm fans, dipping the branches in a fountain of enchanted ice before churning the darkened space.

Muntadhir breathed deeply outside the curtained archway, inhaling the smoky scent of frankincense and trying to calm his pulse. His mouth tasted sour and thick, last night's wine not entirely gone. Not that it mattered. He could be impeccably turned out, and Ghassan would see

through the façade—he always did. His father had a stare that opened a man up and dissected him out as he squirmed. And he was most accomplished at turning that stare on his eldest son.

At least today Muntadhir would be able to counter it with some useful information. Steeling himself, he stepped through the filmy curtain.

He winced. Light came in dappled rays through the drapes. The chatter of the men on the pavilion, the clash and sizzle of the zulfiqars below, and delicate music coming from a pair of lutes all competed to make his head pound in a dizzying manner. Ahead, he caught sight of his father sitting on a brocaded cushion, his attention focused on the arena below.

Muntadhir began to move toward him, but he didn't get halfway there before a young Daeva man abruptly stepped in front of him. Muntadhir jerked back in surprise, barely keeping his balance.

“Emir Muntadhir! Peace be upon you! I hope you are having a most excellent of mornings!”

The man was dressed in the garb of a priest... or maybe some sort of priest-in-training—Muntadhir was not up to deciphering the intricacies of the Daeva faith right now. A short crimson jacket went to the fellow's knees, underneath which he wore striped azure and fire-yellow trousers. A cap of the same color sat upon his curly hair.

The effect was bright. Very bright. Far too bright for this particular morning, though there was something about the man's long-lashed black eyes, overly enthusiastic manner and rural Divasti accent that tugged at Muntadhir's memory.

The pieces slowly came together in his foggy head. “Upon you peace,” he answered warily. “Pramukh, yes? Kaveh's son?”

The other man nodded, grinning. He was actually rocking back and forth on his heels with excitement, and Muntadhir suddenly wondered if he wasn't the only one who'd had too much to drink.

“Jamshid! That is...I am meaning, that is my name,” the other man replied, bumbling the Djinnistani words. He blushed, and even in his preoccupied state, Muntadhir could not help but note that it was rather fetching. “I cannot tell you how thrilled I am to join your service, Emir.” He brought his fingers together in the Daeva blessing, then added a smart Geziri salute for good measure. “You will find none more loyal than me!”

Joining my service? Muntadhir stared at Jamshid in complete confusion for a few heartbeats before his gaze slid to his father. Ghassan wasn't looking at him, confirmation in Muntadhir's mind that he'd just become the pawn in some new scheme.

He returned his attention to the bouncing, starry-eyed priest. His eyelashes really were suspiciously long, the effect captivating.

Muntadhir cleared his throat, shutting down the thought. There was no damn way this man was joining his service. He feigned a smile, inclining his head to motion Jamshid out of his way. “Would you mind...”

“But of course!” Jamshid sprang back. “Should I wait for you outside?”

“You do that.” Muntadhir neatly stepped past him without a backward glance.

Ghassan didn't look up as Muntadhir approached. His admiring gaze was still locked on the arena below.

“Look at him fight,” his father said by way of greeting. Appreciation and proud awe—two sentiments he rarely directed towards Muntadhir—were clear in his voice. “I have never seen someone so young handle a zulfiqar with such skill.”

There was only one person who'd earn such praise from Ghassan al Qahtani, and as Muntadhir glanced down upon the sand, apprehension rising in his chest, he spotted Alizayd. His little brother was sparing against a soldier who looked twice his height and three times his bulk. Both fighters had their blades aflame, and a group of young cadets were ringed out in a wide circle around them, cheering their royal fellow.

Muntadhir frowned, stepping forward as he caught sight of the greenish haze at the heart of the whipping fire. "That's not a training blade."

Ghassan shrugged. "He's ready to move on."

Muntadhir whirled on his father. "He's *eleven*. Citadel cadets don't start using live blades until they're fifteen, if not older." He tensed, cringing as the weapons met with a clash. "He could be killed!"

Ghassan waved him off. "He would not have advanced if Wajed and his instructors did not think him prepared. I spoke to him, as well. He desires the challenge."

Muntadhir bit his lip. He knew his little brother well enough to know it wasn't the challenge Ali desired. It was the chance to prove himself. To prove to his fellow cadets—boys taken from hard-scrabble villages in Am Gezira, the ones now shouting him on—that the half-Ayaanle prince was just as good as they were. Better. And child or not, there was no denying the deadly focus in Ali's eyes when he returned his opponent's strike, taking advantage of his small size to duck under the man's arm.

My future Qaid. The young man who, but for a quirk of timing and politics, could be in his older brother's thoroughly privileged position.

Troubled, Muntadhir forced himself to look away. “May I sit, Abba?” Ghassan nodded at a cushion, and Muntadhir sank into it. “Forgive my tardiness,” he continued. “I didn’t realize you wished to speak to me so early.”

“It’s noon, Muntadhir. If you didn’t drink until dawn, this wouldn’t seem early.” Ghassan threw him an exasperated look. “You are too young to be so reliant on wine. If it doesn’t put you in an early grave, it will make you a weak king.”

Muntadhir had no doubt which of those possibilities bothered his father more. “I’ll try to temper my intake,” he said diplomatically. “Though last night was not without its uses.”

He fell silent as a servant approached to pour him a cup of coffee from a steaming copper carafe. Muntadhir thanked him and took a long sip, willing the drink to dispel the pounding in his head.

“What uses?” Ghassan prodded.

“I think your suspicions about al-Danaf are correct,” he replied, naming one of the northern Geziri governors. “I was out with his cousin last night, and he was making some rather interesting promises to one of my female companions. I’d say they’ve either learned to conjure gold from rocks or they’re skimming from the caravan taxes due to the Treasury.”

“Proof?”

Muntadhir shook his head. “But his wife is from a powerful clan. I suspect they would be none too pleased to learn the promises he was making to another woman.” He took another sip of the fragrant coffee. “I thought I’d pass him over to you.” It was their usual way: Muntadhir getting what he could with charm, and his father stepping in when it was time to turn to different—darker—methods.

Ghassan shook his head, his mouth pressed in a grim line. “That bastard. To think I was considering him for your sister’s hand.”

Muntadhir went cold. “What?”

“It would be smart to strengthen our relationship with the north. Alleviate some of the tension that has built over the past few decades.”

“You’d give your daughter to some snake with a half-century on her just to alleviate some tension?” Muntadhir’s voice was sharp. “She doesn’t even speak Geziriyya. Do you have any idea how lonely she’d be out there? How miserable?”

Ghassan waved him off the same way he’d waved off Muntadhir’s concerns about Ali’s safety. It was a profoundly irritating gesture. “It was only a thought. I would not do anything without talking to her.”

As though her opinion would matter. Muntadhir knew his father meant no true unkindness...but Zaynab was a princess, a powerful piece in the deadly game that was Daevabad’s politics. Her future would be determined based on whatever course Ghassan deemed best for their reign.

“And the reason you had me summoned—does it have to do with Kaveh’s rather loud son thinking that he’s joining my service?”

Ghassan glanced at his son. “He *is* joining your service. He’s offered himself for the Daeva Brigade. He’ll train at the Citadel with the aim of becoming your personal guard, and in the meantime, he can join your circle. He’s apparently quite the talented archer.”

An *archer*? Muntadhir groaned. “No. Do not make me take some country noble with aspirations of being an Afshin under my wing. I beg you.”

“Don’t be such a snob.” Ghassan’s gaze returned to the arena as Ali landed another blow. “Jamshid is a Temple-educated Daeva noble. I’m sure he’ll fit in with your little retinue of poets and singers well enough. Indeed, I want you to make sure of it.”

Muntadhir frowned at the intent in his father’s voice. “Is something going on?”

“No.” Ghassan’s mouth tightened. “But I think it would be good if Jamshid was in your orbit. If he was loyal—truly loyal. It cannot hurt us to have a reliable Daeva so highly placed.” He shrugged. “And were that reliable Daeva to be in the Grand Wazir’s household...all the better.”

Even though they were speaking quietly in Geziriyya, Muntadhir darted a peek past his father’s shoulder at the surrounding nobles to make sure no one was listening. “Do you suspect Kaveh of something?”

“You sound hopeful.”

Muntadhir hesitated. He had been uneasy with his father’s choice to name Kaveh e-Pramukh as Grand Wazir a few years back, but he’d been too young—and too fearful of disagreeing with his father—to protest.

Ghassan must have sensed his thoughts. “Speak your mind, Emir.”

“I don’t trust him, Abba.”

“Because he is Daeva?”

“No,” Muntadhir replied, his voice firm. “You know I’m not like that. I trust many Daevas. But there are some we will never win over. I can feel it. You can *see* it. Behind the polite smiles, there’s resentment in their eyes.”

Ghassan’s expression didn’t waver. “And you think Kaveh is one of them? He has done very well as Grand Wazir.”

Muntadhir twisted the silver ring on his thumb. "I think a man as close as he reportedly was to Manizheh and Rustam is a man we should be careful of," he said delicately. "Abba, there are times Kaveh looks at me...it's like he sees an insect. He never lets it color his actions, but I'd bet coin that behind his walls, he's calling us sandflies in need of swatting."

"All the more reason to put someone behind those walls."

"And his son is the best way?" Muntadhir asked. "You could easily place a proper spy in his household."

Ghassan shook his head. "I don't want a spy. I want his son. I want someone I can use, someone Kaveh *knows* I can use, and a person he wouldn't dare risk."

Muntadhir knew what his father was truly saying. It was a dynamic he'd seen play out before: The sons of political opponents taken into the Citadel: ostensibly for honorable careers, but also so there would be a ready blade at their throat should their parents step out of line. Wives "invited" to serve as companions for the Queen, then detained in the harem when suspicion fell upon their husbands.

The memory of Jamshid's bright smile sent prickles of guilt across his skin. "Do you intend to harm him?" he finally asked.

"I hope not. You have a talent for dazzling people. There are courtiers who would spill blood to be one of your companions." Ghassan's eyes narrowed. "So, take that bright-eyed, aspiring Afshin, and make him your closest friend. Show Kaveh's son the charm, the riches, the women...the paradise his life could be. And make damn sure he knows his fortunes are tied to ours. It should not be difficult."

Muntadhir considered that. Knowing his father, he supposed he should be pleased Ghassan was asking him only to befriend Jamshid, not poison him or frame him in some sort of scandal. “That’s it? Make him one of my companions?”

There was a flicker in his father’s eyes he couldn’t decipher. “I would not be averse to you encouraging his tongue to spill about his life back in Zariaspa. About what he knows of his father’s relationship with the Nahid siblings.”

Muntadhir ran a finger around the edge of his coffee cup. Whether it was the wine still churning in his belly or his father’s words, he’d lost his taste for it. “Understood. If that is all…”

Ali’s cry drew his attention. Muntadhir turned just in time to see his brother’s zulfiqar go spinning out of his hand.

Relief flooded through him. He doubted Ali wanted to lose, but the sooner his little brother was done playing with that fiery, poisoned death blade, the better.

Except Ali’s opponent didn’t stop. He charged after him, kicking his brother square in the chest. Ali fell hard, sprawling in the sand.

Muntadhir shot to his feet in outrage.

“Sit,” Ghassan said flatly.

“But, Abba—”

“*Now.*”

Muntadhir sat, his skin burning as Ali’s opponent stalked after him. The other cadets were frozen. His brother seemed suddenly, horrifically, young and small; a scared little kid scrambling backward, his terrified gray eyes darting between the looming bulk of his opponent and the spot where his zulfiqar had landed.

Men died trying to master the zulfiqar. The training was ruthless, meant to separate out those who could properly wield and control such a destructive weapon from those who couldn't. But surely not here. Not the king's *son*, not before his own eyes.

"Abba," Muntadhir tried again, tensing as Ali barely ducked the next strike. Flames whipped around the warrior's copper sword as he lunged. "Abba, stop this. Tell him to stand down!" His voice broke in fear.

His father said nothing.

Ali's expression abruptly changed; determination sweeping over his features. He grabbed a handful of sand and hurled it in his opponent's face.

The man jerked back, his free hand going to his eyes. It was enough time for Ali to hook his foot around the other man's ankles, knocking him off balance and sending him tumbling to the ground. Ali drew his khanjar in the next moment, ramming it into the hand holding the zulfiqar. He did it again and again, and then *again*, the brutal movement drawing blood from the other warrior.

His opponent dropped the zulfiqar.

Muntadhir let out a shaky breath of relief. Despite his father's order, he'd risen back to his feet, drawing close to the platform's edge. He must have been visible for Ali glanced up, meeting his eyes.

In the space of time it took for his little brother to give Muntadhir a trembling smile, his opponent had drawn his own khanjar.

He smashed the dagger's handle across Ali's face.

Ali yelled in pain, blood pouring from his nose. Muntadhir's angry shout was drowned by the whistle marking the end of the match.

His hand dropped to his own khanjar, which he intended to go put through the throat of the man below immediately.

Ghassan grabbed his wrist, jerking him close. “Stop.”

“I’m not going to stop! Did you see what he just did?”

“Yes.” His father’s voice was firm, but Muntadhir didn’t miss the dart of his eyes back to Ali before they settled on his eldest’s face. “The match had yet to be called. Alizayd shouldn’t have lost focus.”

Muntadhir wrenched his arm free. “*Shouldn’t have lost focus?* They were both disarmed! A man does that to your son, and you say nothing?”

Anger flashed in Ghassan’s face, but it was a weary sort of anger. “I would rather see his nose broken than hear of his death on some faraway battlefield. He is learning, Muntadhir. He’s going to be Qaid. It is a violent, dangerous life, and neither you nor I do him any favors by softening his training.”

Muntadhir looked at his little brother. His white sparring uniform was now filthy, stained by scorch marks, blood, and the arena’s dirty sand. Ali pressed a grimy sleeve to his nose to stem the bleeding as he limped over to retrieve his zulfiqar.

The sight broke Muntadhir’s heart. “Then I don’t want him to be Qaid,” he burst out. “Dismiss him from the Citadel. Let him enjoy whatever is left of his childhood and then let him have a normal life.”

“He’s never going to have a normal life,” Ghassan said softly. “He is a prince from two powerful families. Such people do not have normal lives in our world.”

Muntadhir said nothing, feeling sick as Ali re-sheathed his zulfiqar, the blade looking too big against his small body.

Ghassan joined him at the pavilion's edge. "It is not for Alizayd alone that I do these things," he chided, not ungently. "You have good political instincts, Muntadhir. You are charming, you are an excellent diplomat..." He put a hand on Muntadhir's shoulder. "But you are neither an ambassador, nor a wazir. You are my successor. You need to harden your heart, or Daevabad will crush you. And you cannot risk that, my son, not for a moment. The city rises and falls with its king."

Daevabad comes first. Muntadhir's lip curled. It was his father's mantra. The thing he said when brutally putting down those who dared to dissent. When ruining the lives of his young children.

Things Muntadhir would one day be expected to do.

Nausea welled inside him. "I... I should take Jamshid to the Citadel." It was the first excuse he could think of to leave.

Ghassan lifted his hand. "Go in peace."

"Upon you blessings." Muntadhir touched his heart and brow, backing away.

Jamshid was still there, and he was no less exuberant the second time, leaping to his feet like someone had touched him with a hot coal when he saw Muntadhir approaching. "Emir!"

"Please stop that." Muntadhir rubbed his head. He had no desire to go to the Citadel. Despite his promise to his father, the only thing he felt like doing was drinking away their conversation, and the memory of Ali's pained cry and Zaynab's sad eyes. But his usual cup companions were likely still hungover in their beds, and Muntadhir knew his own weaknesses enough to know he was in no state to drink alone.

He narrowed his eyes at Jamshid. "Does your priesthood forbid wine?"

Jamshid lifted a thick eyebrow, looking baffled. "No?"

“Then you’re coming with me.”

#

Jamshid strolled the length of the carved wooden balcony. “This is an extraordinary view,” he admired. “One can see all of Daevabad from up here.”

Muntadhir made a grunt of assent from his cushion but didn’t move. He didn’t feel like looking down at the city he’d be expected to one day tyrannize, even if it was beautiful.

Jamshid turned around, leaning against the railing. “Is there something the matter, Emir?”

“Why would you ask that?” Muntadhir said.

“You look a bit sad.” Jamshid shrugged. “And I’d heard you were more talkative.”

Muntadhir stared at the man in disbelief. People did not ask if the Emir of Daevabad was *sad*. Not even his closest companions spoke so freely. Ah, they would have noticed his reticence surely, but they wouldn’t dare question it. Instead, they’d compose poems to praise him or offer up diverting tales, all while discretely beginning to water down his wine.

But Muntadhir couldn’t find it in himself to be annoyed. After all, palace etiquette probably wasn’t taught at the Daeva’s Grand Temple. “Tell me of yourself,” he said instead. “Why did you wish to leave the priesthood? Are you no longer a believer?”

Jamshid shook his head. “I’m still a believer. But I didn’t think shutting myself up with dusty texts was the best way to serve my people.”

Now that was intriguing. “And your father agreed? Kaveh seems so orthodox.”

“My father is in Zariaspa on family business.” Jamshid’s knuckles paled as he tightened his grip on the wine cup. “He doesn’t know.”

“You left the Grand Temple and joined the Royal Guard without your father’s permission?” Muntadhir was astonished...and a bit impressed. That was *not* the way things were

typically done among Daevabad's powerful noble families, and the man before him didn't seem the rebellious type. At all.

Jamshid looked amused by his reaction. "Does your father know everything about you?"

There was a twinkle in the other man's dark eyes that, combined, with the question sent a sharp buzz down Muntadhir's spine. He drew up, his gaze flickering over Jamshid. Under different circumstances, he might have wondered if there had been an undercurrent of intent lingering in those words. He might have been tempted to find out; with a flash of the smile he knew had broken a fair number of hearts in Daevabad and an invitation to sit.

But very few people in Daevabad looked at Muntadhir al Qahtani with such directness... and even fewer spoke to him with the kind of genuine warmth that emanated from Jamshid. He cleared his throat, trying to ignore the blood rushing under his skin. "My father knows everything," he found himself saying.

Jamshid laughed, a rich sound that sent Muntadhir's stomach fluttering. "I suppose that's true." He left the balcony, coming closer. "That must be difficult."

"It's terrible," Muntadhir agreed, suddenly having a hard time looking away from the other man. He wasn't a great beauty but there was something pleasing about his winged brows and slightly old-fashioned mustache. To say nothing of the long-lashed black eyes that hadn't left his face. Still in his Temple attire, Jamshid looked as though he might have stepped out of one of the chipped paintings of the Nahid Council that clung to the palace's ancient walls.

Jamshid sat without invitation and then quickly stood back up, looking embarrassed. "Forgive me...am I allowed to sit? I know there's all sorts of protocol..."

"Sit," Muntadhir urged. "Please. It's nice to get a break from protocol."

Jamshid smiled again. It seemed to be a thing he did easily—Muntadhir supposed people who grew up without having to worry about ridiculous court etiquette and its related political intrigue did so. “My father would disagree. He’s always worried we’re showing our ‘terrible’ country ways.” Jamshid made a face. “You’d think after a decade in Daevabad, I would have lost my accent.”

“I like your accent,” Muntadhir assured. He took a sip of his wine. “Why did you leave Zariaspa?”

“My father wanted me educated at the Grand Temple. Or so he says.” He drank from his cup, his gaze fixing on the sky. “I suspect it was easier to start fresh here.”

“What do you mean?” Muntadhir asked, his curiosity getting the better of his urge not to follow his father’s orders so immediately.

Jamshid glanced at him, surprise in his dark eyes. “My mother... I assumed you knew.”

Muntadhir winced. He did know, and his words had been clumsy. “Forgive me. Your mother died when you were young, correct? I didn’t mean to bring it up.”

“I don’t mind,” Jamshid said quickly. “Truly. I don’t get to speak about her with anyone. My father refuses.” His expression clouded. “She died when I was born, and they weren’t married. I think she might have been a servant, but no one will tell me anything more about her. They’re too ashamed.”

Muntadhir frowned. “Why? You have your father’s name. Is it that much of an issue?”

“For Daevas, yes. My people are obsessed with tracing their roots back on every which side.” He drank back the rest of his cup. “It determines what we do, who we marry... everything.” He spoke lightly, but Muntadhir didn’t miss the flash of pain in his face. “And half of my roots are missing.”

“Maybe that just means you’re free to write your own destiny. Maybe it’s a gift.”

Muntadhir said softly, thinking of his Ali and Zaynab.

Jamshid stilled, his eyes locked on Muntadhir’s, his expression serious. When he finally spoke, his voice was solemn. “I had heard...” He paused. “That you tended to become overly poetic when drunk.”

Muntadhir’s eyes went wide as heat rushed to his face. Had Jamshid just... *insulted* him? He was shocked. Outside his family, no one dared speak to Daevabad’s emir with such disrespect. They probably feared the king would execute them.

But as Jamshid’s eyes suddenly danced with mirth and a laugh escaped his lips, it was not anger Muntadhir felt. He didn’t know *what* he felt; there was a strange lightness dancing in his chest that was entirely unfamiliar.

Even so, he tried to muster an indignant glare. “Your father is right to worry over your manners,” Muntadhir shot back. “I was trying to be nice, you ass!”

“Then perhaps I am blessed to join your service.” Jamshid smirked, and Muntadhir began to fear his father’s cold assignment was going to be much more difficult than he had anticipated. “You’ll have plenty of time to teach me.”

JAMSHID

This takes place less than a year after the Muntadhir scene above. No spoilers.

The sounds beyond the closed door were really quite ridiculous.

Jamshid e-Pramukh shifted on his feet, deeply apprehensive as he again glanced at the wall of ceremonial weapons displayed along the long marble corridor in which he stood guard. A spear that looked as though it could only be wielded by a giant and mace studded with zahhak teeth. Dented shields, swords, and oh...an axe with blood and gristle still encrusted on its blade.

Perhaps unsurprising ornaments considering the reputation of the fearsome warlord from the Tukharistani frontier currently residing here. The warlord rumored to be gathering soldiers and coins, intent on protecting his own little fiefdom. One who supposedly made a golden cup out of an enemy's skull and caught and boiled an ifrit alive. The warlord who had greeted the Emir of Daevabad boasting about how his ancestors once drunk Geziri blood.

The warlord now ensconced with Muntadhir and what sounded like at least three other people, including the woman he was pretty sure was the man's wife and an extremely off-key singer.

Behind the closed door, Muntadhir laughed lightly, a teasing sound that made Jamshid's stomach flip. Jamshid couldn't make out his words, but his jesting tone didn't sound afraid or intimidated. Then again, Muntadhir never seemed afraid or intimidated. Daevabad's emir seemed to float through life blissfully confident and amused, unbothered by things such as basic safety. Why would he? He had other people who worried about those things on his behalf.

People like Jamshid, who found himself gripping his dagger as the warlord let out a cackling bellow. It was the only weapon Jamshid had been allowed; Muntadhir saying they

wouldn't want to seem rude or distrustful. Heavens no. Far better for his emir to get murdered and then Jamshid and the rest of the Daevas persecuted for letting it happen.

Maybe you should have thought of that before quitting the Temple and joining the Royal Guard. Granted when Jamshid presented himself before Ghassan, he'd thought he'd be joining the Daeva Brigade as an archer, proudly protecting his tribe's quarter. Not guarding Ghassan's eldest son and getting a crash course in Muntadhir's extremely specific kind of politics.

The door crashed open. Jamshid shot to attention as drunken laughter and warm candlelight spilled into the corridor. For a moment, he panicked, and then Muntadhir al Qahtani was there, Daevabad's emir framed in the doorway. No matter the noises and implied activity Jamshid had been listening to, Muntadhir looked untouched and remarkably sober. The silk of his pale silver-blue waistcloth was still pressed flat, the moonstone buttons running up the collar of his tunic, dyed and cut in the most modern style, still in place. His silver turban, crowned with an lovely emerald and pearl ornament might have been slightly tilted, but it only gave him a more rakish air.

Muntadhir's gray gaze seemed to fall upon Jamshid and then he smiled. Muntadhir had a slow, drawling smile that brightened his entire face—a smile that did things to Jamshid's nerves he suspected were not professionally helpful. His eyes sparkled as he leaned closer to whisper in Jamshid's ear. He looked delighted and blissfully content, as though he'd opened the door simply to request more wine or perhaps another participant, and his breath was warm upon Jamshid's neck.

“We need to get out here.” Muntadhir spoke in Divasti, his tone still light and airy as though nothing were wrong. “Right away.”

Jamshid jerked back, his eyes darting over Muntadhir's shoulder. The glimpse was enough to make him blush. The party very much appeared to be in full swing, the warlord and his companions deeply unconcerned about Muntadhir's foray toward the door. Or perhaps simply more focused on some the rather acrobatic moves being performed.

Acting on instinct, Jamshid quietly pulled Muntadhir out and eased the door closed. Keeping a hand on the small of his back, like they were just two completely normal nobles out for more wine, Jamshid carefully led Muntadhir down the corridor.

"The door's down this way," he whispered.

Muntadhir stopped. "We can't go out the main door. Trust me," he said when Jamshid met his gaze, confused.

"All right..." Jamshid swallowed. "We're a bit high up, but there was a window down the other..."

"Perfect." Muntadhir was already turning around. Jamshid raced to catch up, overly conscious of the sound of his boots clipping on the stone floor. Muntadhir had slipped his sandals back on, but his steps were silent. He clearly had more experience sneaking through darkened homes than the man who was ostensibly here to protect him.

The window was sand-blasted glass, thick and hazy. Through the swirls of etched roses and climbing vines, the street was visible but at least three stories down.

Muntadhir frowned. "Do you think we can break the glass?"

"No need." Jamshid placed his palms against the cool glass, calling heat into his hands. It began to simmer and melt, falling in glimmering molten waves until there was an opening big enough for them to slip through.

Muntadhir gave an impressed whistle. “When this is over, you need to show me how to do that.” He stepped through the window.

“Wait!” Jamshid grabbed his wrist. “We’re three stories up, and you’ve been drinking. Are you sure you’re going to be able to climb down?”

“It’s better than staying here. And I’m perfectly steady, see?” Muntadhir held out his hand. “Not even I’m foolish enough to get drunk in front of massive, angry warriors with more weapons than wits.”

Creator help me. This was not what Jamshid had signed up for. But as he crawled after Muntadhir, he could not help the spike of thrill that raced through him. It was indeed more exciting than memorizing dusty texts in the Temple.

They went hand over foot down the tiled roof, then it was a mercifully short drop to garden balcony of lushly potted palms and hanging baskets of ferns. They crept through the flowers, Jamshid tapping Muntadhir’s shoulder and nodding in the direction of a drain pipe.

“Do you think you can slide down this?” he whispered.

The emir went a bit pale but then there was an enraged bellow from above them. “Yes,” Muntadhir agreed. He threw himself at the drain pipe with the zeal of a school boy and slide down. Jamshid waited until he had stumbled away, cursing and limping and then followed.

He landed far more gracefully than the emir, albeit in a puddle that sent a spray of dirty water across Muntadhir’s fine clothes. Jamshid froze, certain he’d just broken some arcane rule of palace etiquette that recommended banishment for those who smeared their royals, but then Muntadhir grabbed him by the wrist and pulled him forward.

“Come on!”

They hurried through the darkened alleys of what seemed a seedy section of the Tukharistani Quarter, certainly grimmer than anything Jamshid was experienced with. Muntadhir seemed to know where he was going, however, taking the turns of the narrow winding streets like he walked them all his life. As they neared one of the main avenues, Muntadhir loosened his turban, pulling it a bit further over his head to shadow his face and wrapping the tail over his nose and mouth.

“Do you do this often?” Jamshid could not help but ask.

“What? Sneak around my city?” Muntadhir winked, his steel eyes sparkling in the light of the colorful glass lamps strung across the street. “Usually with far more companions and a good deal more weapons, which makes the sneaking part more difficult.” He threaded his arm through Jamshid’s and pulled him close. “Might be fun to be anonymous for once. Who’d be expecting the Qahtani emir to be gallivanting around with only a Daeva for protection?”

Again the extremely unhelpful fluttering in Jamshid’s belly. His face grew hot. “I should remind you I’ve had less than a year of weapon’s training.”

Muntadhir patted his hand. “All the more challenge for us both.”

Jamshid probably should have been annoyed by that, but as the two of them made their way into the bustling commercial heart of the Tukharistani district, arm in arm like normal men out for a night on the town, it was difficult to be upset. He’d lived in Daevabad for more than a decade now, but his life in the city had been constricted from the very moment he stepped past the gates. A mix of justified fear and prejudice kept most Daevas from venturing outside their quarter to mix with the djinn tribes, let alone any shafit. His world had revolved around the Temple and socializing with other nobles. Nights in the glittering Tukharistani district—in the company of even more cosmopolitan prince—were a new and rather thrilling experience.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been here,” Jamshid remarked.

“Truly?” When Jamshid nodded, Muntadhir whistled. “You weren’t kidding when you said your father was overprotective.”

“I’m surprised your father isn’t *more* overprotective.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Jamshid regretted them. It seemed impossible to check himself around Muntadhir, as though the emir couldn’t have him killed and his family destroyed with a snap of his fingers. He rushed to apologize. “Forgive me. Not that—”

Muntadhir waved him off, the movement unsteady. “There’s nothing to forgive. My father adheres to a very different sort of protection.”

“Meaning?”

“That it would be more dangerous for both Daevabad and myself if I appeared weak.” Muntadhir met his gaze. Behind the facecloth, it looked like he was attempting to smile. “If my father had his way, I would have spent my childhood in Am Gezira, living off the land with my cousins and battling zahhak.”

“So why did you not go to Am Gezira?”

“My mother didn’t want me to leave. We were very close.” A hint of old grief softened Muntadhir’s voice.”

You prying idiot. “I’m sorry,” Jamshid blurted. “I shouldn’t be questioning you like that.”

“I probably shouldn’t be answering,” Muntadhir replied lightly. “And yet I find myself continuously doing that with you, Pramukh. You would have made a good priest. Or an even better spy, were you so inclined.”

He shuddered. “I don’t think I’d make a very good spy.”

“Ah, you never know.” But then Muntadhir stumbled, nearly falling to his knees. “Oh, all right. So that’s what they meant when they said try the mushrooms.”

“*What?*”

Muntadhir clutched his arm. “You should probably get me back to the palace.”

#

Jamshid eased Muntadhir into his bed, trying not to trip. As out of it as Muntadhir clearly was—and he was *out* of it: Muntadhir had spent their walk back to the palace reciting poetry to his hands and falling asleep—Jamshid didn’t think collapsing onto the Emir of Daevabad was a good career move. But Muntadhir’s body was heavier than Jamshid would have expected, his limbs uncooperating. Finally Jamshid got him more or less onto the mattress, and Muntadhir let out a sigh of contentment that made Jamshid’s thoughts go in a series of inappropriate directions.

Control yourself, he chided, a command that was easier chanted internally than obeyed as he leaned over Muntadhir’s body to reach for a pillow. Jamshid was overly conscious of the silky feel of the sheets between his fingers. The plumpness of the pillow and the perfume of Muntadhir’s breath. Jamshid slipped it carefully under the emir’s head, his heart going wild at the brief brush of Muntadhir’s hair. He’d never seen the emir’s head uncovered before. He had beautiful hair, the black warmed by just a hint of russet. It was cut short, curling at the ends, and Jamshid found himself wondering what it would look like if it was grown out. If it might catch his fingers.

He swallowed loudly, aware that imagining how Muntadhir’s hair would feel in his hands was definitely not part of controlling himself. He let go of the pillow.

“Is there anything else I can do, emir?” he asked, trying to steady his voice.

Muntadhir's eyes fluttered open. His gaze was still bleary, but laying down seemed to have helped, a little alertness returning to his expression. "Travel back in time and tell me not to eat anything tonight?"

"They haven't taught me that particular skill in the Citadel yet." A small, exhausted smile lit Muntadhir's face, and fresh worry knotted Jamshid up. "Are you sure I cannot call someone? Nisreen perhaps? She could brew you a tonic or—"

"I'm fine. Truly. I mean...there are currently three of you and one of them is dancing with stars, but I'm at the point where I recognize only one is real. I just need to sleep." Muntadhir seemed to smile and then reached out, still looking a little dazed. His fingers brushed Jamshid's cheek, tracing down the line of his jaw. "You look very good in starlight."

Everything in him went entirely still. Jamshid was only conscious of the light touch of Muntadhir's fingers and the heavy wonder in his gray eyes. It scorched him, heat rushing to his cheeks.

Kiss him. Had it been any other man, under any other circumstances, Jamshid would have done just that. But Muntadhir was the emir, and he was *very* obviously impaired.

Which is why when Muntadhir's thumb moved over Jamshid's bottom lip, making everything in him tremble, Jamshid stayed still.

"We are not good for you," Muntadhir said softly.

Jamshid let out a choked breath. It was everything he had right now not to jump into this bed and crush this man's mouth to his, so the warning took a moment to land. "Wh-what?"

Muntadhir's thumb went over his mouth once more, and Jamshid would swear he literally did see stars.

“You would have been safer at your Temple,” Muntadhir explained. “This place, this palace, it eats people up from the inside. It takes everything that is kind and gentle in your heart and turns it to stone.” He dropped his hand. “And you...you are good and perfect, and it is going to destroy you.”

There was genuine fear in Muntadhir’s still-glazed eyes. And though being warned in such a way by one of Daevabad’s most cunning and powerful should have frightened Jamshid, it didn’t.

Not until Jamshid sat back on his heels and caught a glimpse of the opposite wall. Muntadhir’s chamber was opulent and almost absurdly lavish, with fine rugs so thick and soft your toes sank deep, gilded and painted silk landscapes covering the walls and rosewood partitions carved so finely it looked like one was in a garden. It occupied a prime location in the ancient palace, its balcony offering an unparalleled view of both the city and deep lake that surrounded it. It had always belonged to the highest of nobility.

And Jamshid knew that: because painted in pale fragments that still clung to the wall was a circle of roaring shedus. Nahid symbols. Daeva symbols.

You will always be a Daeva to them first. It was something his father had shouted until he was blue in the face when Kaveh returned from Zariaspa and learned his son had traded in his Temple garb for a spot in the Qahtani’s army. *Do you understand that? Everything you do there reflects on us, every mistake risks us.*

Jamshid lowered his gaze. “Your concern is noted, my emir,” he said, forcing a cool professionalism into his voice. “Is there anything else?”

He could hear Muntadhir swallow. Jamshid didn’t want to look up. He didn’t want to see the flicker of regret in the other man’s face that would soften him, that would make him seem

real and genuine instead of the untouchable, deadly charisma of the emir who could—and would—ruin or elevate you with a single gesture.

“Would you stay?” Muntadhir’s voice was faint. “Just poke me every once in a while to make sure I haven’t stopped breathing. And talk to me,” he added, already sounding like sleep was beginning to overtake him again. “It makes me feel less like I’m hallucinating.”

“What would you like me to talk about?”

“Anything,” Muntadhir answered. “I just want to hear your voice.”

DARA

The scene is meant to take place during Nahri and Dara's journey to Daevabad, shortly after they flee Hierapolis.

No spoilers.

This human-blooded scoundrel was going to be the actual death of him.

Dara peeked again at the merchants arguing in the street, the cobbler angrily accusing the fruit-seller of intentionally spilling his cart and then darted a glance at Nahri. "Will you please hurry up?" he implored. "He's going to come back any minute."

Surrounded by a pile of mended boots and leather slippers, Nahri languidly stretched out a foot, wiggling her toes in the shoe she was currently trying on. "They're still fighting. Relax." She made a face and then removed the shoe, tossing it aside. "Too stiff."

"For the love of the Creator, will you just pick something?" Dara hissed under his breath. "It cannot make that much of a difference!"

"Maybe if my feet were made out of smoke, it wouldn't. But alas...oh." Her dark eyes sparkled as she plucked up a pair of leather boots. "These look comfortable. And how pretty," she said, admiring the swirling pattern of leaves stamped up the toe. "I bet I could trade them if needed."

Dara forced himself to count to ten in his head, reminding himself that this woman was the closest thing to a Nahid healer left in the world, he was an Afshin, and a pack of ifrit were after her. Losing his temper and causing the pile of shoes surrounding her to burst into flames was probably ill-advised.

"*Nahri*," he said, stressing her name. It felt strange to speak it, an intimacy he was not yet accustomed to, but she had pointedly stopped responding to 'thief,' 'girl,' and 'human.' He

raised his hands, half-praying, half-begging. “Our people have rules. If that human man comes in here and catches you, I cannot harm him.”

“Why? Will you melt? Turn to ash?” She rolled her eyes. “What’s the use in being some all-powerful djinn if you have to run and hide from humans?”

Blood might no longer pump through his veins, but Dara was fairly certain something was boiling. “I have told you a hundred times. I am *not* a—”

“I know.” Nahri smiled sweetly. “It just gives me exquisite pleasure to make you angry.”

Between her mocking grin and roiling emotions, Dara was not quite prepared for the phrase “exquisite pleasure” in Nahri’s teasing voice. His face went hot. “Please just steal something and be done with it,” he said gruffly.

“Fine.” She rose to her feet, still wearing the boots. “I suppose these will do.” She picked up her bag, already filled with other pilfered items and shoved it in his arms, taking back a pot she’d stolen and then forced him to carry. “Let’s go.”

She turned for the front door of the tiny shop, and Dara immediately put an arm out to stop her. “You can’t mean to go out that way. He’ll see you!”

“He will,” she agreed, shoving past him. In horror, Dara watched as she stepped out of the shop, neatly winding between piles of leather soles and spilled fruit, heading directly for the arguing merchants.

I am not going to save her. I am not. Dara hurried after her.

Nahri was fighting with the fruit-seller, one hand on her hip. She was shouting in that human tongue Dara barely understood, but judging from the righteous fury in the fruit-seller’s face and the cobbler’s stammering denial, she had taken sides. Within moments, the cobbler had

thrown up his hands, cursed them both and stormed off. Dara watched Nahri kneel to help the fruit-seller.

“Thank you, dear one. Thank you!” he said sincerely, clearly unaware Nahri had been the one to stick one of the cobbler’s tools in his cart’s wheel. “Please, take a few for yourself for coming forward as a witness.

Nahri smiled. “You are too kind,” she insisted, sweeping at least a dozen oranges into the pot. The fruit-seller’s expression grew slightly dismayed, but she was already rising to her feet, dismissing him with a wink that made the man’s cheeks go pink.

“You are...the most dishonest person I have ever met,” Dara said when they were finally a few blocks away. He was as awed as he was scandalized.

“Then you have lived a very boring number of centuries whose exact count you still refuse to confess.” Nahri glanced back with another of her winks. “Surely you’ve broken at least one rule in your life. Stayed out past curfew, lied to your mother. Slept with the wrong woman.”

I have slaughtered thousands of people like you. “No,” Dara lied. “Centuries of being dull and rule-abiding. Just as you say.”

Nahri narrowed her eyes at his tone but then shrugged. “Sounds like a waste of life to me.”

Dara felt like he’d been punched. He didn’t disagree. But he kept his mouth shut, following Nahri as she continued through the market, quietly filching vegetables and new clothes like she was at harvest and the crop was stolen goods. This was the third human town they’d visited after fleeing Hierapolis and the last he hoped to see for a long time. They certainly had enough supplies to see them through the rest of the journey to Daevabad.

Daevabad. Even imagining being across the lake from its mighty walls made Dara's chest tighten with longing and regret.

But not for long. Because out of the corner of his eyes, he spotted Nahri neatly cut a purse—with the dagger he'd given her to protect herself from the ifrit—off a man as large as Dara.

"You are done," Dara proclaimed, seizing her wrist and pulling Nahri through the crowd of shoppers. Humans shivered as he swept past, their vacant gazes trailing over him with unseeing eyes. He hated it. Dara already felt like a ghost with his own people; the Daevas he'd been carefully avoiding since he'd been freed, despite the heartache of being alone. Being surrounded by humans in their world of dirt and iron blood where he truly was an invisible wraith was too much.

They'd left their horses along a bed of lush grass bordering the river, Dara summoning a particularly malevolent looking patch of smoke to shroud them. He dissipated it now and then turned towards Nahri. "We should...wh--what are you doing?" he stammered. "Why are you *taking your clothes off?*"

Nahri continued unlacing the strips of torn cloth she'd used to make his spare tunic fit her much smaller frame. "Getting out of this giant tent of shirt and then bathing so I don't smell like a brooding fire warrior." She wrenched off the tunic, and Dara caught a glimpse of her ebony curls spilling over bare shoulders before he swore under his breath and spun around.

"You are going to drown," he spat as he heard her splash into the river. "Then I will have been dragged across the world for nothing."

"Oh, did I pull you from some sort of engaging social life? What exactly were you doing before you met me? Prowling the plains and scowling at deer? Please. I bet saving a secret Nahid

shafit is the most exciting thing that's ever happened to you, *Darayavahoush*." Nahri all but purred his name. Since prying it from him in the ruins of Hierapolis with her ridiculous stunt, she'd taken to using it as often as possible, probably to irritate him.

And it did irritate him. Because Creator, did he like hearing his name out of her mouth.

Get a hold of yourself. Dara sat with his back purposefully to the water, fighting the urge to check on her. It cut too close to his urge to *look* at her, and he was not letting this shafit thief beguile him any further. Despite his horrified shock when he first realized what Nahri was, Dara was beginning to have sympathy for whatever distant Nahid ancestor had crossed with one of her human ones. If they were anything like Nahri, they would have been all but impossible to resist. He scrubbed his hands through his hair, trying to think of anything that wasn't the sound of her swimming.

"Hurry up," he insisted. "We still have ground to cover before nightfall."

"And *you* still have a whole slew of questions to answer, like you promised back at Hierapolis. Maybe I'll stay in the river until you start talking about this supposed war Khayzur says you got yourself involved in."

Dread crawled over Dara. There were a vast number of things he did not wish to discuss with Nahri, the war chief among them.

And yet he knew he was running out of time. The thought of allowing Nahri to present herself before the Qahtani king without knowing the deadly history behind their families was abhorrent.

Particularly since Dara had no intention of being at her side when she did. He had no intention of even going beyond Daevabad's gates. How could he? Not only had he lost the right to return home when he failed his people and his Nahids—if he was honest, he was afraid. Nahri

might not know what he'd done during the war, but Dara was damn sure even fourteen centuries later, the djinn had not forgotten. He'd be locked up, caged in one of the infamous cells beneath the palace and left to suffer for eternity. Which might be a fate he deserved, but not one he'd willing rush into. He didn't hate himself *that* much.

The darkness of his closed eyes dimmed even further, and Dara glanced up, blinking in surprise to see Nahri standing before him, outlined against the sun. Dressed in her newly stolen clothes, her skin was still damp, beads of water glistening in her hair.

Suleiman's eye, she was beautiful. What might have been breath knocked out of him, which of course was not possible as Dara did not breath, and the feeling only lasted as long as it took Nahri to aim a sharp kick at his foot. "Are you done berating yourself over here? If it makes you feel better, you were pretty much a useless accomplice."

Dara stared at her. If only being a useless accomplice was the crime he was currently berating himself for. "You are the rudest person I have ever encountered," he said, trying to force some rancor into his voice.

Nahri snorted in derision, a mocking sound that had no business increasing Dara's extremely unhelpful desire to pull her into his lap and see if he couldn't convince her to say his name in a very different tone of voice.

She picked her belt back up and unsheathed the dagger he'd given her. Sunlight played on the iron blade. "Can you teach me how to throw this?"

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to be able to protect myself from the pack of ifrit hunting me?"

Dara winced. "Fair point." He climbed back to his feet. "Let us travel a bit further. I do not like remaining this close to a human settlement."

They re-saddled the horses, Dara quietly noting that Nahri clearly remembered what he'd shown her. He arranged her new purchases, threading a cord through the pot's handle.

“What exactly do you mean to do with this?” he asked, tapping the pot.

“Attempt to learn how to cook?” But Nahri didn't sound optimistic. “I stole some vegetable and figured if I cooked them with some water...that's soup, isn't it?”

Dara frowned. “If you do not know how to cook and have always lived alone, what did you eat?”

“Whatever I got my hands on,” Nahri replied. “If I was able to scrounge up enough coin, I'd occasionally buy some fried beans and maybe a bit of grilled meat. Otherwise, it was mostly day-old bread and bruised fruit.” She flushed. “And when I was a child...mostly garbage and left-overs, to be honest.”

A lifetime of warm, home-cooked meals flashed before Dara's eyes. Despite the war that engulfed his world, Dara had grown up beloved and well-cared for in a wealthy home full of bustling relatives, including the mother he adored and a dozen aunts who would have taken it as a personal affront if he'd left the house hungry. There was always a hot bowl of stew, freshly steamed dumpling or butter pastry being pressed on him; a privilege he hadn't realized.

He stared at Nahri, remembering anew the sharp lines of her face and the sallow color to her skin when they first met. He could not even imagine how lonely and difficult it must have been to grow up the way she did.

“I will cook something for you,” Dara said. “Conjure it anyway, I mean.” He'd never tried to—he didn't need to eat very often in whatever form this was—but conjuring food couldn't be much harder than conjuring than wine, and he was exceedingly practiced at that.

A guarded expression immediately slipped across her face. “And what’s that going to cost me?”

A few more days of believing my worse crime is being a useless accomplice. A few more days for Dara to savor being an ordinary soldier with an irrational crush on an unobtainable woman instead of the Scourge of Qui-zi.

“Merely your company and the promise not to stab me during knife-throwing lessons,” Dara replied, trying to sound as sincere as possible. “I promise.”

“Does that mean I *can* stab you if you don’t successfully conjure up some food?”

Dara couldn’t help but smile. “Whatever makes you happy, little thief.”

JAMSHID

This scene takes place towards the end of The City of Brass, picking up from the night Ali is attacked by an assassin and following through the next few days. Spoilers for the first book.

There were a great many times in his life that Jamshid e-Pramukh had questioned his decision to leave his safe, boring life at the Temple and pledge himself to Muntadhir al Qahtani. But as he crept after the emir now now through a cursed garden in the middle of night, with an unconscious prince in his arms, his regrets had never loomed larger.

Baba warned you not to get involved with them. He tried. You have no one to blame but yourself. Jamshid ducked, narrowly avoiding a vine hanging across the narrow muddy path. Enormous thorns jutted from the vine's pebbly bark, gleaming wetly in the moonlight. The only sound beside the dripping leaves and chirping night insects was Muntadhir's labored breathing. Muntadhir had been visibly struggling with his share of Ali's body, huffing and gasping as he tried to hold onto his brother's long legs.

Good, a petty part of Jamshid thought. *I hope you struggle.* He'd been trying to keep a lid on his emotions since he'd strolled onto the palace roof expecting his lover and instead walked into an assassination attempt. Jamshid liked to think he'd behaved in accordance with his training: he'd obeyed Alizayd's orders and gotten him to the Banu Nahida in time to save his life. He'd cleaned up the scene and then discreetly sought out Muntadhir, knowing he'd be able to handle the situation. All in all, not bad for the captain of the Emir's guard: the man who was expected to be Muntadhir's capable shadow, the man who protected Daevabad's next king and sorted out his messes. A good captain would note the stress in Muntadhir's face and assure him that all would be well. Jamshid had done so back in Nahri's bedroom, stepping in before Muntadhir spoke too freely.

But there was no Nahri here now. Jamshid was alone with Muntadhir in the eerie midnight garden, and so the professional mask he clung to so desperately finally slipped.

“Why were you at Javitri’s?” The question burst from Jamshid’s lips.

Muntadhir swore as he accidentally knocked off one of Ali’s sandals. “What?” he asked distractedly.

“Javitri,” Jamshid pressed, hating the jealous edge he couldn’t keep from his voice. “Why were you there? We were supposed to meet after you were done stargazing with your siblings, remember? Why do you think I was on the roof?”

Muntadhir sighed. “You’re really doing this? *Now?*” he asked, nodding to Alizayd’s unconscious body hanging between them.

“Yes. It will give you less time to concoct a lie!”

Muntadhir stopped walking, and the look he shot Jamshid over his shoulder was his royal one. This was the Muntadhir who could seduce a business rival as Jamshid quietly watched and order the imprisonment of a Daeva writer who’d spoken against Ghassan. “Lower your voice,” he hissed. “You’ll get us caught.”

Jamshid had to bite his tongue, but he did as his emir commanded and stayed silent as they made their way to Alizayd’s apartment. The canal was wilder here and wider, crashing against the tall stone walls before rising in a reversed waterfall. It was a bit of conjuring that took Jamshid’s breath away, and had he a moment to himself he might have stopped to admire it. Though Daevabad’s ancient palace frightened most people with its bloody past and unpredictable, vengeful magic, Jamshid found it entrancing. It felt like stepping into the pages of a storybook, like seeing fables brought to life before his eyes.

But right now, he did as he was told. After a quick peek to make sure the apartment was empty and devoid of further assassins, he and Muntadhir carried Alizayd inside. The younger prince had yet to stir and judging from the opium on his breath—Creator only knew what Nahri had given him—he wouldn't be waking up anytime soon.

They laid him carefully on the bed. Muntadhir called a flame into one hand and then lifted his brother's shirt to check his bandages. Jamshid watched, saying nothing as his emir removed Alizayd's sandals and pulled a light sheet over his body. Alizayd muttered in his sleep, and Muntadhir pressed a kiss to his forehead. "You're going to be the death of me, idiot."

"Yes," Jamshid said plainly. "A number of your followers fear exactly that."

Muntadhir threw him an aggravated look and then rose to his feet. "Come." They left Alizayd's bedroom. Muntadhir pulled the door closed behind him and then pointed to a cushion. "Sit."

Jamshid grated at the commands but sat. Muntadhir poured two cups of water from a glass pitcher on a small table. His hands were shaking. The emir might be acting like he had everything under control, but Jamshid was as experienced at reading the emotions of the man he'd been cursed to fall for as Muntadhir was at concealing them. And Muntadhir was worried.

Jamshid was too. "Shouldn't we tell your father?" he pressed. "This is madness. An assassin guts your brother and you're not summoning the guard? What if there are more? They could come for you next!"

Muntadhir set one of the cups before him. "The assassin was shafit, you're sure?" he asked, ignoring Jamshid's question.

"Yes." Jamshid opened the coat he'd stolen to reveal the crimson blood staining his tunic underneath. "Trust me."

Muntadhir didn't bat an eye at the blood. "And Ali told you to get rid of him? And make sure no one but Nahri knew he was hurt?"

"Yes."

"Fuck." Muntadhir sat back, looking even more exhausted.

"Do you have any idea who it might have been?" Jamshid asked. "It looked...Muntadhir, it looked personal. A true assassin would have been quick. Whoever this was, he wanted to cause a lot of pain. Your brother is lucky to be alive."

Muntadhir pulled at his beard. "But he's dead now? You're certain?"

Suleiman's eye, I hope so. But then it hit him, the memories returning. Alizayd's growled order and the sickening splash as the assassin's body hit the distant lake. Had the man been dead? Or had Jamshid sent him to an even more brutal end?

Nausea swept him, and Jamshid took a deep breath. He was a soldier; this was technically what he had signed up for, wasn't it? Protecting the royal family, killing those who would threaten them.

But Jamshid had always imagined that if he had to kill for the Qahtanis, it would be on a battlefield against a clear enemy. Not whatever this was.

"Jamshid?" Muntadhir prompted, sounding more concerned. Whether that was concern for Jamshid or a loose end, Jamshid wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He cleared his throat. "Your brother bashed the assassin's head in with his own, cut his throat with a telescope lens, and then ordered me to dump the body in the lake." Jamshid held his emir's gaze even when the other man blanched. "He's dead. I'm certain. Now will you tell me what's going on?"

Muntadhir's face instantly closed off. "A family matter. Nothing I can't handle."

“Except you didn’t handle it,” Jamshid pointed out, growing angrier. “My Banu Nahida did. And if she gets in trouble—”

“She won’t,” Muntadhir cut in. “I give you my word. Neither you nor Nahri will come to any harm over this. If my father gets wind of anything, I’ll cover you both.”

That made Jamshid feel slightly better, but Nahri wasn’t the only one he was worried about. “And you? I’m the captain of your guard. And you’re keeping things from me, I know it. You been all tense and--”

“There’s a Geziri-murdering, Qahtani-despising, millenia-old Afshin in my city with powers we don’t understand. Of course I’m tense!”

“This started before Darayavahoush arrived,” Jamshid persisted. “It’s been since your brother moved back to the palace...” Muntadhir exhaled, looking away, and Jamshid resisted the urge to go shake him. “You can *trust* me. If there’s something going on with Alizayd...”

“There’s not.”

“Muntadhir, you know what people say—”

“Then they’re wrong,” Muntadhir snapped, an angry edge in his voice. “I trust Ali with my life, and we are done with this conversation.”

A few years ago the heat in Muntadhir’s command would have sent Jamshid to his knees in apology. Emir Muntadhir rarely spoke in genuine anger; he was a forgiving, good-humored man. If you betrayed him, you were likely to wake up without your spouse, your fortune, and your house—but you would wake up, which was more than what one could expect if they displeased the king.

Jamshid wasn’t going to his knees. Muntadhir didn’t want to talk about the assassination attempt? Fine.

“Then if you are truly recovered from your worries about Alizayd, perhaps we can return to the conversation we started in the garden,” Jamshid suggested coolly.

Muntadhir raised his eyes to the ceiling. “You really are spoiling for a fight.”

Spoiling for a fight...oh, but this man made him see red. Jamshid set down his cup, fighting the desire to fling it at Muntadhir’s head. “You lied to me. I haven’t seen you in three months and then you leave me on some rooftop to go drink with—”

“You were my first stop when I returned! God, I know I’m somewhat out of practice after trekking across the desert with Dara-I would like to shoot you full of arrows-yavahoush, but surely you remember me surprising you this afternoon?”

The very knowing look Muntadhir gave Jamshid made part of him melt while also stoking his anger further—something his royal lover excelled at. Jamshid very much remembered this afternoon. Feigning an errand, Muntadhir had quietly diverted from his royal procession to surprise Jamshid at the Pramuhk’s home. Kaveh had been out, the servants easily dismissed and the sudden shock of having his emir, looking incongruous and yet terribly fetching in dusty traveling clothes and overgrown beard...well, perhaps neither of them had been as discreet as they should have been.

And yet the memory, the precious slice of intimacy and domesticity they would never have—Muntadhir stretched out in Jamshid’s plain bed, washing from the same basin, sneaking into the kitchen to scrounge for snacks—Muntadhir himself had just torn it to shreds.

“So is that it then?” Jamshid asked. “I get you in the afternoon, Javitri in the evening, some starry-eyed visiting diplomat tomorrow morning...no wonder you stood me up. It must be hard to keep us all in track. You should hire an additional secretary.”

“That would make for an interesting job posting.” When Jamshid glared at him, Muntadhir raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “Listen, I’m sorry, okay? You’re right and I apologize. I shouldn’t have left you on the roof like that. I was distracted by a fight I had with my father, but that’s no excuse.” The half-pleading jest in Muntadhir’s gray eyes tore at Jamshid’s heart.

But Jamshid wasn’t letting him slip so easily out of this. “And Javitri? You told me it was over when you left with the Afshin. I wouldn’t...I mean, this afternoon—” Jamshid stumbled for words. “I can’t have that with you and then watch you go to her.”

Muntadhir looked pained. “I can’t end things with her yet. Jamshid, she’s got half the court at her salon every night; spilling secrets to her students. I can’t look away from the kind of intelligence.”

“Of course not,” Jamshid said, his voice hollow. “Daevabad comes first.”

Muntadhir flinched but said nothing. Neither of them did for a long moment, tense silence sprawling between them. It ripped Jamshid apart. If this was love—choking back your own rage and hurt out of fear of burning another—it was almost as awful as it was precious. He wanted to scream at Muntadhir just as much as he wanted to make sure *no one* screamed at Muntadhir.

Muntadhir rose to his feet. There was a stiffness in his posture that meant he was about to say something emir-like that would no doubt be frustrating.

“Daevabad will always come first,” he said softly. “It must. I cannot offer you any more of my heart and my loyalty than I already have, Jamshid. I’ve always tried to be honest about that.”

He had. If there was one thing Jamshid could not fault Muntadhir, it was that Muntadhir had always been honest--brutally honest, about where his Daeva lover ranked in comparison to his kingdom and family. For all that Muntadhir could be profligate and careless—with money, with wine, with hearts—he'd been cautious with Jamshid. It had *Jamshid* who'd pursued Muntadhir. *Jamshid* who'd broken down the emir's well-constructed walls and initiated their first kisses, brazenly ignoring Muntadhir's warnings. For all that Jamshid had learned about the cruelty of Daevabad's court, about what it was like be a beaten, persecuted people in the city that should have belonged to his tribe... part of him was still the country boy from Zariaspa raised on legends and romance.

“We could run away,” he said, only half-joking. “Explore the world and live off the humans like our ancestors.”

Muntadhir gave him a broken smile. “I have a team of servants to dress me. How do you think I would take to the wild?”

I would teach you. I would do anything to be with you and see you free of your duties and safe from this city's awful, murderous politics. But Jamshid didn't say that. He already knew the answer.

Daevabad came first.

But Muntadhir was still staring at him, a despair in his eyes that Jamshid didn't like.

“Jamshid...about my duties. There's something I should tell you before you hear it from Kaveh. The fight with my father...” Muntadhir cleared his throat. “It was about your Banu Nahida.”

Jamshid had a terrible feeling this was going to be bad. “What about her?”

“He wants me to marry her.”

“*Marry her?*” Jamshid rocked back on his heels. Of all the things Muntadhir might have said... “But that’s ridiculous,” he sputtered, objecting before the words had even properly settled in his brain. “She’s a Nahid. You’re a—”

“A what?” Muntadhir had jerked up, surprised hurt in his expression. “A djinn? A sand fly?”

Jamshid back-pedaled; ashamed at how quickly he had rebelled at the prospect of one of his sacred Nahids marrying a non-Daeva. Of course, it should have been a possibility. It was the ideal alliance. It made perfect sense that Ghassan—one of the few kings who made a concerted effort at improving things with the Daevas—would want to marry his heir to the Banu Nahida.

But she’s not theirs. Banu Nahri was a miracle, a *Daeva* miracle. Her arrival at the Afshin’s side had electrified their tribe. She was a blessing, the promise of a brighter future. And Jamshid liked her. She was witty and funny and well, a little scary, but he liked her.

He didn’t want to see her made into Ghassan’s pawn.

“You can’t marry her,” Jamshid said again, more insistently. “It’s not right. She just got to Daevabad; she doesn’t deserve to be ground up by your father.”

Muntadhir’s eyes flashed. “Thanks for assuming I’d be the sort of husband to allow my wife to be ‘ground up.’” He was twisting one of his rings, the plain gold one he wore in memory of his mother. Muntadhir had elegant hands, his fingers untouched by callouses. Jamshid loved his hands; quietly lacing their fingers together had been their earliest form of intimacy: a sign from Muntadhir that he needed Jamshid to help extract him from whatever circumstance he’d embroiled himself in.

Then a far more personal cost of this marriage became clear. Nahri was Jamshid’s Banu Nahida. If she married Muntadhir...

“We would be over,” Jamshid said, realizing it aloud. “This...whatever this is between us. It would need to end. She’s my Banu Nahida; I couldn’t betray her like that.”

There was no surprise in Muntadhir’s face, only resignation. Of course, his emir would have already worked this all out.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I imagined as much.”

Jamshid felt like he was going to be sick. “Do you want to marry her?”

The uncertainty in Muntadhir’s expression said it all. “No. But...” He bit his lip. “It could be a new beginning for our tribes. I feel like I’m being selfish if I don’t consider it.”

So be selfish, Jamshid wanted to say. He couldn’t. Muntadhir didn’t give up his mask easily and right now he just looked shattered. Jamshid had no doubt that if it weren’t for him, Muntadhir would have already agreed, trapping himself in a political marriage for the good of his kingdom.

He was always going to be trapped in a political marriage. Muntadhir might have broken his heart more times than Jamshid could count, but Jamshid was the only one of them who had a choice. Muntadhir would never escape his fate. Jamshid could. If he wanted to give up his position or run back to Zariaspa, tongues would wag, Kaveh would be furious, but there would be no real consequences.

Muntadhir spoke again when Jamshid didn’t respond. “I hope you know that if this ever got to be too much, I-I would look out for you either way. It’s not contingent on you—on us being...” He stumbled over his words, sounding uncharacteristically nervous. “I can find you another position. Anything you want, anywhere you want. You wouldn’t have to worry about money or—”

Oh, my love. “No.” Jamshid was a decisive as Muntadhir was uncertain. He closed the space between them and took Muntadhir’s hand. “Someone just broke into the palace to try and assassinate *one* Qahtani prince, and the Afshin has the Daevas all riled up. I’m not leaving your side.”

“My protector.” Muntadhir gave him a small haunted smile and brought Jamshid’s hand to his mouth. He kissed his knuckles. “Maybe you could be my Afshin.”

Hoping Alizayd was still asleep, Jamshid pulled Muntadhir closer. He wrapped his arms around him, and Muntadhir let out a shaky breath, relaxing into his embrace. Jamshid ran his fingers through Muntadhir’s hair. “You know when I was younger, I would have found that a terribly romantic comparison.”

“Of course, you would have.” But Jamshid heard hesitation in the other man’s voice. “May I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

Muntadhir broke away enough to look Jamshid in the face. “What do you mean the Afshin has the Daevas riled up?”

#

Dara leaned back against the cushions that had been set up over the remains of their feast and grinned at the rapt faces of the spellbound Daeva nobles surrounding him.

“It knocked me clean off my horse,” he said, laughing as he continued the story he’d been sharing. “I barely even saw the damned thing. One moment I am examining my bow before the archery competition; the next, there is a blur of flying stone, and—” He smashed his hands together then shook his head ruefully. “I awoke in the Nahid’s hospital three days later. Years of

looking forward to my first Navasatem and I spent the majority of it in a sickbed having my skull pieced back together.”

Saman Pashanur, one of his father’s oldest acquaintances and a severe man Jamshid had never seen smile, leaned forward, looking as excited and entranced as a schoolboy. “Was it truly a shedu that struck you?”

Dara chuckled and picked up his date wine. A couple months ago no one Jamshid knew drank date wine. Now half his friends swore by it.

“Not quite,” Dara replied. “Even in my day, it had been centuries since any of us had seen a real shedu. The one that struck me was a statue. One of the young Baga Nahids was experimenting with the ones that lined the palace walls. I believe the hope was to have them shoot flames over the arena.” He smiled sadly. “I wish you could have seen the Daevabad of my youth, my friends. It was a jewel, a paradise of gardens and libraries with streets safe enough that a woman could walk upon them at night alone.”

“We’ll make it that way again,” Saman said fervently. “One day. Now that the Creator has returned a Banu Nahida to us, anything is possible.”

It could be a new beginning. Jamshid shifted on his cushion as Muntadhir’s words returned to him. He knew the kind of glory age the Daevas around him were dreaming of had no place for Geziri kings.

Even so he could not help but watch the Afshin. Jamshid wasn’t immune to the way he bewitched the rest of them. The very ease, the confidence with which Dara sat and grinned and laughed. His open nostalgia as he waxed poetic about the days of the Nahid Council and Daevabad before the invasion.

He's not afraid of them. It was a thing plenty of foolish, young Daevas might boast about in the safety of their homes, mocking the Geziris. But not like Dara did. The Afshin wasn't boasting. He wasn't trying to show off. He simply wasn't afraid of Ghassan's regime. He hadn't been beaten up by the Royal Guard for the "crime" of looking a djinn soldier in the eye or had a politically-outspoken parent disappear. Dara hadn't been crushed like the rest of them, raised to guard their words and bow their heads.

It was captivating. Jamshid couldn't fault the Daevas who'd been flocking to the Pramukh's home since the Afshin had taken up residence there. It was easy to be lulled by Dara's words. By the dream of a world in which their people were legends.

"Not stuck in the palace with the Qahtanis circling her, Banu Nahri isn't—" The words pulled Jamshid back to attention. It was another of his father's acquaintances, a scholar in the Royal Library. "She spends every afternoon in the company of that crocodile prince. The djinn are already trying to convert her; to steal her away from our religion and culture."

"I wish them luck," Dara said drily. "Banu Nahri has a will that could break a zulfiqar. There is no convincing her of anything." Despite the words, he looked briefly troubled. "Relations between the princes...surely this alliance people speak of between them is exaggerated. Muntadhir and Alizayd would seem obvious rivals."

"They are." It was the scholar again, his expression fervent...or perhaps drunk. "People say Emir Muntadhir begged the king not to let his brother be raised as a warrior, but the queen interfered. They are setting us all up for catastrophe."

Jamshid wasn't sure what prospect was more ridiculous: Ghassan being cowed by anyone or the notoriously secretive Qahtani royals exposing family turmoil to outsiders. He did know, however, that he should probably quell such talk. If Kaveh were here, he would have hushed

them several treasonous comments ago. There were nearly a score of men dining with them tonight; one did not speak freely of the regime when that many ears were listening.

But his father was still at the palace and Jamshid was tired of feeling torn between his people and his emir. So when Saman started up again, railing about the djinn, Jamshid left. His spot was immediately claimed, the press of men all trying to get closer to the famed Afshin. No one seemed to notice him leave; Jamshid was used to being overlooked.

He breathed freer once he was outside in courtyard that fronted the stables. With his father's elevation to Grand Wazir had come a large, well-appointed mansion close to the palace and set against the city's outer wall in a garden distract. It wasn't Zariaspa and never would be, but the fresh air blowing from the island's forest and the smell of flowers let Jamshid briefly imagine he'd escaped the city. He'd have done anything for a ride beneath the stars along the hill trails right now, but of course Daevas weren't permitted outside the city walls after sunset.

"May I join you?"

Jamshid jumped. It was the Afshin. The ground here was pebbled stone but somehow Dara walked without a single sound, his steps undetectable.

"I'm not as good company as your audience back there," Jamshid warned.

Dara snorted. "I am glad to know I am not the only one for whom it feels like a performance."

Jamshid felt his cheeks warm. "I didn't mean it like that."

The Afshin smiled. "You need not apologize, Pramukh. Believe it or not, I find your honesty refreshing." He drew nearer to the stables and clicked his tongue, pulling a handful of sugar pieces from his pocket. Judging by the speed with which their horses, even his father's ancient half-lame mare, appeared, Jamshid was guessing Dara had made a habit of spoiling them.

“But you modern Daevas are all so fancy and glamorous; it is making me nervous. I talk too much when I am nervous. A whole group of you and I cannot hold my tongue.”

Jamshid couldn't believe what he was hearing. “*We're* glamorous? You have a shrine in the Temple!”

Dara laughed. “A shrine built in a simpler time, trust me. All of these feasts with foods from around the world, your silks and jewels and what not...Let alone all the gossip and politics. I have never felt more like a dull, blundering traveler from another century than when I am at these parties.”

Jamshid joined him at the fence. “I suppose a lot changes in fourteen hundred years.”

“It is beyond change,” Dara said softly. “It is an entirely new world.”

The sadness in the other man's voice took him aback but by the time Jamshid met his gaze, the Afshin was already shaking his head, blushing with embarrassment. “Forgive me. I tend towards brooding when I have had too much drink, and your date wine is *far* stronger than what I am used to.”

“Was Daevabad really as you say?” Jamshid asked. “I can't imagine being able to walk alone in the shafit district nowadays let celebrate our holidays so openly.”

“It was all that and more,” Dara answered. “I do not quite know what I was expecting to find in Daevabad but having to stop a mob of shafit from breaking into the Daeva Quarter was not inspiring.”

“It doesn't seem to have affected you much,” Jamshid replied. “You seem so...unafraid.”

Dara shook his head. “If I seem unafraid, it is because I am much practiced at hiding it. I spent the entire journey here worry whether your djinn king would send me to rot in the dungeon or simply execute me. And I am afraid for my Banu Nahida,” he confessed, genuine worry

knitting his brow. "Very afraid. I fear for her every moment she is trapped in that palace, surrounded by sly-talking glamorous djinn."

"She seems very capable. Smart and strong-willed like you said earlier."

But Dara didn't look reassured. Jamshid watched as he gave one of the horses a last pat. "You do not like when people speak poorly of the Qahtanis, I have noticed."

The change in subject threw him for a second. "No, I don't," Jamshid agreed. "Beyond the fact that it's dangerous to speak poorly of them, I count Emir Muntadhir as a close personal friend."

"It seems to me a strange thing to be afraid of a close personal friend."

Jamshid cleared his throat. "It's complicated."

"No doubt." Dara turned to look at him. "Is he a good man?"

Yes. But Jamshid held his tongue, not missing how intently Dara was looking at him. He was a politician's son; he knew a shift in conversation when he heard it. "You just returned from traveling with him. Was that not enough time to form an opinion?"

Dara clucked his tongue. "Yes. Of a clever diplomat trying to keep peace with an enemy returned from the dead. I want the opinion of someone who knows him better."

Why is he asking me this now? Could *Dara* had heard the rumors about Ghassan wanting to marry Nahri and Muntadhir? The prospect made Jamshid shudder; it was clear to anyone who spent time in his company the Afshin's feelings for the Banu Nahida went beyond duty.

"Yes," he said finally. "Muntadhir is a good man and a very capable emir, which are not always complimentary things. But he had a good heart and tries to do right by his people and his kingdom."

"He has a weakness for drink."

Jamshid found himself bristling on Muntadhir's behalf. "Says the man who just admitted being overcome by our date wine."

Dara's bright eyes danced. "Ah, you must be friend to him truly to be so defensive! Then let me ask you something else, Jamshid e-Prumukh, and I pray you answer just as truthfully. Do you think he will be a good king for *our* people?" When Jamshid opened his mouth, Dara held up a hand. "No, do not answer as a friend. Think on it. Tell me as a Daeva man."

Tell me as a Daeva man. There was weight behind those words, especially coming from the Afshin who'd fought and died to free their people once before.

Did Jamshid think Muntadhir would be a good king? Strangely he'd never forced himself to objectively consider it before. It didn't matter what Jamshid thought; Muntadhir was *going* to be king. Jamshid had been sworn to him even before he fell in love. It was more a matter of Jamshid wanting to help him be the best king he could. And he was a good man. He tried to do the right thing.

Unless the right thing isn't what Ghassan wants. Jamshid thought about Nahri. Would she have a say in this royal marriage? Would Muntadhir even care? How many times had he pleaded with Muntadhir to save some of the Daeva artists and poets he patronized when they slipped and said something in public about the king? How many times had he watched Muntadhir lower his head and hold his tongue when Kaveh was insulted at court? When his Geziri companions got drunk and asked Jamshid if he truly worshipped flames? Jamshid did know Muntadhir. Probably better than anyone did. And each additional year he served him and loved him, he watched more of Muntadhir's spark—his goodness—dim beneath his father's fierce and unrelenting pressure.

“If it happens...sooner rather than later,” Jamshid said hesitantly. “He’s a good man and he means well, but his family...it’s a lot of pressure. I think his father is determined to shape him into his own image. And with Alizayd...I think the sooner succession is confirmed, the better.”

Dara tilted his head, seeming to regard that. “It sounds like someone should kill Ghassan.”

Jamshid felt the blood leave his face. “What? *No*. That’s not what—”

Dara burst into laughter. “Oh, but your face! It was a joke, my friend!” He clapped Jamshid on the back, the movement nearly knocking him off his feet. “Be glad you are not a Nahid else I would have flown to carry out your command.”

“It wasn’t a command,” Jamshid said weakly, beginning to wonder just how much Dara had drunk and whether this extremely dangerous idea would stay with him. “I was just—”

“Afshin?” One of the Pramukh’s servants stepped out from the entrance leading back to the compound, bowing when he spotted Jamshid. “Didn’t mean to interrupt, my lords. There was an invitation for the Afshin, delivered personally by ah...” He cleared his throat. “A woman.”

Jamshid stared at the man as he handed Dara the letter, baffled by his tone. “A ‘woman’?”

The servant met his gaze, knowing in his eyes. “A messenger from Khanzada’s salon, my lord.”

Oh for the love of the Creator... “Khanzada sent the Afshin an invitation?”

With a look that all but said ‘leave me out of this,’ the other man nodded. “I figured it was best to pass along.” He bowed again and was gone.

Dara toyed with the scroll. “Who is this Khanzada?”

If Dara was dazzled by a simple dinner with friends at the Pramukh's, Jamshid had no idea how he was supposed to describe Khazada's glittering salon of obscenely wealthy patrons, world-renowned entertainers, magic, criminals, and sex. What would the Nahid Council have thought.

"She's a famous dancer and singer from Agnivansha," Jamshid finally replied. "Recently arrived in Daevabad. She runs a salon that's quite popular with the city's noblemen."

Dara frowned, looking uncertain. It was a strange expression to see on the face of a man who'd just been joking about murdering Daevabad's king and could probably kill everyone in the compound in under ten minutes.

He handed the invitation to Jamshid. "Will you read it for me?"

Jamshid reluctantly opened the scroll and had to fight not to scowl as he scanned the overly flowery words. "She says she would be honored if you would grace her home with your presence tonight. They are putting on a special performance."

"A performance? Tonight?"

"Tonight." Jamshid handed it back. "You *are* famous, Afshin," he added when Dara blinked in surprise. "She's probably hoping some of your admirers will follow."

Dara looked thoughtful. "I have never been to the Agnivanshi Quarter. What is it like?"

"You've never been to the Agnivanshi Quarter? But you grew up here!"

"We were not permitted many things," Dara said, sounding embarrassed. He bit his lip and slipped the scroll into his coat. "Would you go with me?"

Jamshid didn't understand what he meant at first, and then the hopeful look in the Afshin's green eyes took a horrifying turn. "Wait, you *want* to go to Khazada's?"

“I confess myself intrigued. I have not...” Dara seemed to be struggling for words. “There is so much I have not seen, have not experienced. I feel like an outsider in my own city, crashing about with blinders on.”

“I’m not sure Khanzada’s salon is the sort of experience you’re after,” Jamshid warned. “All the gossip and deadly politics you’re worried about? That’s something she excels at. She has an entire team of courtesans dedicated to pulling the kind of secrets from men that topple dynasties and ruin fortunes.”

Dara didn’t look intimidated in the slightest. “I assure you, I have very little interest in her courtesans. But I would like to see the Agnivanshi Quarter and hear some music. To learn how you Daevabadi men of today spend your nights. Please,” he said again, looking at Jamshid with open beseeching. “I am sure to make a fool of myself without you.”

Jamshid could think of few worse ways to spend his evening than playing babysitter to a large—already tipsy—deadly warrior, with a list of grievances that length of his arm, and in the salon of a woman who hated him. And none of that even factored in Muntadhir’s presence.

Bur Muntadhir probably won’t be there. Since the attack on his brother, Muntadhir had been withdrawn and depressed. He’d been retiring to his apartments and the harem garden after court, places Jamshid couldn’t follow without invitation.

And the Afshin just looked so eager. Jamshid was putting together a very different picture of the famed Afshin than the one people celebrated. Dara had lived a stifled, short life in different world, returning to one in which he was lonely and bewildered. Jamshid could take him to hear some music, marvel at some novelty, and make absolutely sure no one lured him into one of the rooms below the dance floor.

“All right,” Jamshid grumbled. “But only for a little while.”

#

It had all gone so terribly wrong.

Jamshid pushed his way through the soldiers crowding the infirmary doors. A sea of hostile grey glares met him. Serving Muntadhir had given Jamshid plenty of experience in being the only Daeva in the room, but the hateful glances aimed at him right now put all that to shame. The soldiers here now were proper Citadel men. Alizayd's men.

And they were out for blood. Jamshid couldn't even blame them. Not when he finally shoved his way into Nahri's infirmary.

It was a wreck. Virtually all the furniture had been smashed, and the curtain ripped to shreds. Bits of wreckage were still smoldering, and blood—a lot of it—was splashed across one glistening stone column.

In front of the column was Ghassan.

Jamshid froze; the sight of the Qahtani king sending ice into veins. Muntadhir was at his side, his head lowered in shame, but it was Ghassan who held Jamshid's attention. The djinn king was dressed more plainly than Jamshid had ever seen him, his ebony robe swapped for a homespun shawl. On another man it might have aged him, made him appear a harmless, worried old man.

It didn't age Ghassan. The homespun shawl made him somehow look even more terrifying, reminding Jamshid that for all his appearance, Ghassan was not some softly-bred city king. He'd been raised in a hard land and spent his first century on the battlefield as his notoriously cruel father's righthand. He might think more fondly of Daevas than his predecessor, but he kept the peace by brute force. There was nothing Ghassan hated more than chaos, burning to the ground any inkling of civil strife.

As if he could feel Jamshid's stare, Ghassan turned to look at him. The king's gray eyes—a mirror of Muntadhir's—traced Jamshid from his head to his toes. The rage in his eyes nearly sent Jamshid to the floor.

Then his rage was gone, vanishing beneath the king's usual cool mask. “Captain Pramukh.” It sounded like Ghassan might have attempted to drawl Jamshid's name, but there was no playful court ruse here; there was lethal intent in every syllable of Ghassan's voice. “Your house-guest has made some very poor decisions tonight.”

All his years at Muntadhir's side, all Kaveh's careful tutelage, everything Jamshid had ever learned about surviving at court fled from his mind. A wise man would have dropped to his knees, apologized profusely and begged for mercy.

But despite everything that had happened tonight, the memory of Dara's confidence, the defiance Jamshid envied, burned in him.

Jamshid would not grovel before this man. Instead he bowed his head. “How can I help, my king?”

At Ghassan's side, Muntadhir's eyes flashed in warning.

But the king didn't react to Jamshid's bravado save a slight thinning of his lips. “You've been training with Afshin since his arrival, yes?”

“I have,” Jamshid answered.

“Then stay by the Emir's side tonight. We go to meet them on the lake.” Ghassan shoved a bloodied scrape of fabric into Muntadhir's hands. “If your brother dies tonight, I will see you punished in this life and the next.”

The king swept past them both, and Muntadhir rocked on his heels. He stared down at the bloodied fabric, and Jamshid's stomach flipped as he recognized it as the cap Alizayd had been wearing earlier.

Jamshid cleared his throat, his mouth dry. "Is he..."

"We don't know." Muntadhir sounded like he was going to throw up. "Nahri's patients were hysterical, and one can't speak at all. It sounds like the Afshin took them hostage, but... There's so much blood, Jamshid. If something happens to him—"

Jamshid gripped Muntadhir's wrist. "Nahri is a Nahid, Muntadhir. She could have healed him with a single touch."

"This is all my fault," Muntadhir whispered. "I shouldn't have said those things at Khanzada's. I made him angry and now he has my little brother." He glanced up, his eyes bloodshot with drink and glimmering with tears. "Do you know how Darayavahoush's sister died?"

Jamshid did, and he had nothing to say to counter Muntadhir's fear. Because God forgive him, but Ghassan was right. Muntadhir had been a fool to speak so crudely of Nahri in front of Darayavahoush. He'd been cruel. His words had angered even Jamshid, but he at least would have settled for unbraiding Muntadhir later when they were alone.

Darayavahoush...the Afshin was not like them. He was from a different time, a different place. He was charming and funny and Jamshid genuinely liked him, but even as he smiled, Dara wore death like a cloak. Muntadhir in his sheltered, royal arrogance had made an awful mistake.

Now they were all going to pay for it.

But Jamshid didn't say that. "Darayavahoush isn't a fool, Muntadhir. And he knows me." For the Afshin's faults, he struck Jamshid as a honorable man. He'd be reluctant to harm another

Daeva, particularly the son of the man who had hosted him. “I will be at your side tonight, every minute of it. I’ll try to talk him down.”

Muntadhir was still trembling but nodded. “All right.”

Jamshid resisted the urge to hug him. Muntadhir had to look strong tonight—especially in front of the Citadel men who would blame him if something happened to their favored prince.

So instead Jamshid bowed, deeper than he had with Ghassan. “Come, my emir. Let us be sure to get on the first boat that goes out.”

#

And Jamshid had kept his promise. He hadn’t left Muntadhir’s side.

But he’d been very wrong about Dara’s unwillingness to hurt him.

ALI

This was a scene I couldn't quite fit in The Kingdom of Copper, so I decided to pull it out and make it a slightly satirical look at some of the old folktales. It takes place about two years after The City of Brass. Spoilers for the first book.

It is said by the djinn in the deserts of Am Gezira that there is no sight lovelier than the glisten of water. Fire may burn in their blood, but it is water that gives life; water that is precious and rare in the ruins of forgotten human kingdoms in which they make their homes. A man might find all his crimes forgiven should he discover a new well, a woman made chief for inventing a new water catchment.

Therefore, one might imagine the sight of the mighty Sea of Reeds would bring a djinn to tears. Especially on a night such as this, when a thick cluster of stars stretched across the velvet sky like a jeweled garter, mirrored in shimmering movement in the expanse of dark water below. There was not even the barest breath of wind, and it was silent, a silence so deep it felt sacred; the air aromatic with salt rather than incense. A bright moon shone silver as a new coin, its light dappling the sea below. This far from the beach, there were no waves; instead the sea slightly swelled, rising and falling like a breathing beast.

Such a comparison did not put Alizayd al Qahtani at rest.

Ali dipped his oar into the dark water, pressing his small boat further. *A damn fool quest, Ali*, his friend Lubayd had declared.

Ali frowned. Did sharks eat djinn? It suddenly seemed a question he should have asked before embarking alone upon such a dangerous mission. But the stolen girl's family had been desperate, her parents weeping, and when it came to helping people, well...Ali had never been one for thinking things through.

Just ahead, the water took on a strangely luminous appearance, as if it were shallower, showing through to a golden sandbar. Ali rowed until he was over the patch and then put the oars aside, picking up the boat's anchor. He threw it in the water, letting the anchor's rope out as he gazed across the still sea. No land was visible, but Ali knew what lay beyond.

Egypt.

I wonder what it's like there. The utterly foolish thought came to him that it might be nice to visit Nahri's home, to wander after her in Cairo's streets, touring the grand mosques and trying the sticky fried sweets she'd laughingly described.

The rope jerked in his hands as the anchor hit the seabed. Ali flushed, embarrassed at the direction of his thoughts. What was he thinking? He'd never leave Am Gezira, and Nahri would never leave Daevabad, especially not now. Word had come last month that Emir Muntadhir and the Banu Nahida had married in a spectacular ceremony. It was supposed to be a new dawn for the djinn world, its warring royal families finally united in a political alliance Ali himself had discreetly encouraged. An alliance he had betrayed a friend to support.

Enough. Pushing aside thoughts of Daevabad, Ali slipped out of his robe. Underneath he wore a sleeveless tunic and a waist-wrap. His zulfiqar tied to his back, he checked the bindings holding the khanjar at his waist and another small knife at his ankle. Weapons secure, he moved on to the small clay pot he'd been given with the boat. He unscrewed the top, scrunching his nose at the smell of bitumen and some acrid herb: a magical concoction the Sabaen djinn swore would make the sea path visible to him. Ali smeared it across his lids and under his eyes before stepping to the edge of the boat.

He dove. The water embraced him, warmer than he would have expected, and welcoming, rushing to pull him deeper into its depths. Ali swam fast, much faster than any

djinn—beings of smokeless flame who typically fled water deeper than one’s knees—should have been able to. A blessing and curse from the marid’s possession.

The water abruptly vanished, and Ali tumbled onto perfectly dry sand. Before him stretched a narrow path, the water pulled back and suspended above the sea bed as though contained by invisible glass. Beyond, he could see the black shadows of flitting fish against the moon-lit water. An enormous stingray passed overhead, its blue-spotted body rustling like the hem of a woman’s gown, and Ali gawked at the incredible sight.

It was beautiful. Magical. Which meant it was almost certainly deadly. The anchor rested beside him, tethering his boat. The sandy path stretched until it hit a sheer rock wall covered in bright coral and undulating sea plants. At the base of the cliffs, and nearly hidden by a burst of frilly red seaweed, a pair of doors gleamed white as bone.

Ali headed for them, sand crunching beneath his bare feet. Small wonder the doors gleamed in such a manner; they looked to have been carved from a single massive piece of mother of pearl. Adding to the effect, a jagged line separated the two like the mouth of a clam.

Taking a deep breath, Ali drew his zulfiquar and then carefully nudged open the doors. They drew back with a whisper, revealing a narrow corridor. He stepped inside.

They snapped shut behind him

Ali jumped, his fingers tightening on his weapons, but nothing else happened. His heart was racing; the dark was so thick it was oppressive.

A promising start. Swallowing back his dread, he urged his zulfiquar to brighten. The blade obeyed, bursting into flames. Fiery tendrils danced down its copper length, throwing light upon the corridor’s sandstone walls and grimy cobbled floor.

And upon the gleaming steel swords of several dozen warriors.

Ali instantly dropped into a fighting stance. But he needn't have—the warriors didn't move a muscle. They were *statues*, he realized, gazing in shock at their placid faces. Some appeared to be crafted from stone, others from bits of shell and coral though eerily enough, they all held identical steel swords. They were otherwise a remarkably diverse lot: their clothes a mix of Rumi togas, Nabatean wraps, Sabaen tunics, Egyptian pleated skirts, and garments Ali couldn't recognize. Statues that might have been taken from a dozen different civilizations during the thousands of years humans had called this land home.

He stepped closer, examining a statue wearing a carved thobe. A tooth-cleaning stick was tucked into its fraying belt, the miniscule stone details a perfect replica.

Almost too perfect. Ali shivered, studying the lines in the statue's face and what might have been a pox scar. Dread gripped him, his imagination racing.

Get the girl, he told himself. And get out.

He kept walking, his zulfiqar in one hand and his khanjar in the other, the only sound the snapping of flames and his quickened breath. The zulfiqar's firelight flickered on the close walls, illuminating an intricately carved façade of mysterious figures and bizarre animals. What appeared to be an alphabet was entirely indecipherable; a scrawl of lines and perfectly round circles.

These look human-made. Ali pressed his zulfiqar closer. A lot of the cliffs and sandstone tombs back in Bir Nabat were covered in similar carvings: long-dead kings and hunters caught in action, forgotten deities and prayers in lost tongues. But these drawings went in a far grislier direction: giant sea snakes devouring fleeing humans and lion-headed bulls roaring among a sea of severed limbs.

The end of the corridor beckoned, shining in the distance—another set of pearly gates. Unable to fight the feeling this was all a trap, Ali stepped through.

The moment he crossed the threshold, the chamber lit up, dozens of suspended glass lanterns swirling to life and illuminating an enormous cavern—easily twice the size of his father's throne room.

And entirely filled with treasure. Mountains of gold coins, glass beads and cowrie shells surrounded chests overflowing with jewels in every color; emeralds and rubies and sapphires larger than his fist. Strands of pearls long enough to bind a man, animals of carved ebon wood and ivory, brass bowls of frankincense, ambergris and musk. Folded brocades of silk and precious damask cloth. Even the walls were plated in gold, inlaid with jade and coral in sweeping floral designs. None of it was organized, on the contrary, broken vases littered the ground and necklaces worth a kingdom were strewn across broken furniture. Several marble columns had collapsed and the sheared stone face of a bearded man lay covered in dust. It looked as though some wrathful spirit had wrecked vengeance upon whatever human civilization had once called this place home, dragged it into the sea, and filled it with the plundered treasure of its murdered people.

Which quite frankly...seemed a likely possibility.

Ali couldn't take his eyes off the fortune surrounding him. A single handful would change the lives of the villagers who'd bravely sheltered him, several handfuls might buy more. Safety. Security. Soldiers. A way to challenge the grim future his father had handed him.

A way to make it easier for him to decide to execute you. Ali shook off the thought.

Ahead an orchard of jeweled trees burst from the marble floor, trunks of brown topaz braided with brass that stretched to the ceiling. Their branches were heavy with fruit and flowers

in glass and precious stone. Golden birds perched between emerald leaves, frozen in the act of tending to pearl eggs, coral worms in their sculpted beaks. At the base of each tree was a silver plinth. Ali stepped closer and then stilled. Upon each plinth—of which there were dozens—was a shrouded form.

Bodies. Some of the shrouds had started to rot, revealing rusted bangles hanging from skeletal wrists and tarnished ornaments twisted around decaying black braids. And there, on a plinth towards the back was a single uncovered girl, the smoky shimmer of her brown skin a dead giveaway she was djinn.

Ali dashed to her side, sighing in relief when he saw her chest still rising and falling. She certainly looked like she could be the daughter of the wealthy Geziri governor who begged his assistance. A heavy gold collar ringed her neck, the floral ornaments of blue lapis, brilliant rock crystal and bright rubies laying against the hollow of her throat. She wore an embroidered purple robe patterned in ikat, but it was unfastened and had fallen back to reveal the rose silk gown clinging to her body.

Ali quickly pulled his gaze from the curves he knew he was not supposed to be looking at. Not that it helped, she was still beautiful, her lips colored with ochre and a stylized bird—its wings outstretched—painted over her delicate brows. Her long, black hair was uncovered, the top portions arranged in elaborate braids around gold discs that hung from her ears.

“Abla?” Ali called softly. “Is that you?”

There was no response. But Ali would swear her mouth moved slightly, her lips seeming to purse. He frowned.

“Abla?” He reached out to shake her shoulder. “Are you—”

A pair of lovely gray eyes fluttered open, her long lashes batting. She stretched her arms languidly above her head, the robe falling further back, and then smiled. “You’re supposed to kiss me.”

Ali could not have been more baffled if the girl had jumped from the plinth and turned into one of the stone soldiers from the corridor. “I’m supposed to do what?”

She pushed up into a sitting position, her tresses falling in midnight waves. “Kiss me,” she teased. “Haven’t you ever heard a story?”

Heat instantly filled his cheeks. He cleared his throat, trying not to look at her lips. “I don’t-I mean, there are rules forbidding…”

Her grin widened. “But of course.” She turned her head, making a face as her neck cracked. “By the Most High, this thing is uncomfortable,” she said, nodding to the stone plinth before glancing at him again. “Ooo, you’re Ayaanle!” Her voice grew dreamy. “I’ve always wanted to visit Ta Ntry. I’ve heard your castles are made of coral and enchanted to sing love poems at night.”

“I…I don’t have a castle,” Ali stammered, flabbergasted. “I mean…I suppose I used to have a palace, but not anymore. And I’m not just Ayaanle. I’m Geziri.”

Abla’s grin vanished. “You’re Geziri and you used to have a palace…” Her eyes locked on his, seeming to recognize the gray. “Oh my God, are you Alizayd al—”

“Shhh.” He held a finger to his mouth. “Let’s talk more when we’re not surrounded by decaying bodies. Where is the creature that took you?”

Abla shivered. “I don’t know. It grabbed me when I was collecting shells and returns once a day—in the morning, I think. Makes me drink some awful tea that keeps me asleep.”

“In the morning?” Ali repeated, his heart sinking as he remembered the line of burning dawn he’d seen in the sky just before diving. When she nodded, he took her hand. “Then let’s go. We don’t have much time.”

She glanced behind him. “Where are the rest of your men?”

“It’s just me.”

“Just you?” A trace of uncertainty crossed her face. “Forgive me...how soon did you say dawn is?”

The chamber gave a violent tremor. “Soon,” a voice boomed, a sound like the grating of rocks. “Quite soon.”

Ali spun around, brightening his zulfiqar. He almost wished he hadn’t.

The creature that had snatched Abla looked like a demon from the most gruesome of ancient tales. Twice the height of an elephant, it had the body and horns of a bull, the tortured, purpling face of a woman, the wings of a bat, and a striped serpent’s tail that vanished into the depths of the jeweled orchard. Instead of hooves, its front feet ended in taloned hands and as it reared on its powerful hind legs, it raised an enormous trident.

Ali gaped. “*That’s* the thing that took you?” The smell of iron blood, of decay and dust and utter foreignness swept over him. Whatever the beast was, it seemed as alien to the sea as the pair of fire-blooded djinn standing before it. An earth demon, he realized, stunned. Such creatures were said to be exceedingly rare, beings that belonged to the age of legends.

The creature grinned; stained ivory tusks jutted from its crimson mouth. “The heroes always come,” it sneered. “Chasing their beauties to their deaths.” It regarded him with glittering eyes. “A fine addition to my stone warriors, a slave of Bilqis will make.”

Abla rolled her eyes. "I keep trying to tell it that we don't belong to Bilqis." She turned to the creature. "The djinn are free! Suleiman has been dead for thousands of years!"

The creature snarled. "Lies. The djinn always lie. Who has set the marid, the children of the accursed Tiamat, to flight if not Suleiman?"

Ali blinked, thoroughly confused, but Abla waved him off. "It's been rambling about marid and Tiamat for days. Not that it matters." She put a hand on her hip, raising her chin defiantly. "You've not challenged just any warrior, beast... this is the Afshin-slayer."

Ali grimaced. He really hated that name.

The creature cackled, tossing the trident from hand to hand. "I know of no Afshin, and I do not fear its slayer. I am Shardunazatu, He Who Humbles." It lurched closer, looming over them. "Ten thousand years I ruled this land, shaking human cities into dust and bringing up mountains with a clap of my hands until the wicked Tiamat imprisoned me! But she shall despair when she meets my army of stone warriors, yes!" Its giant eyes pinned him, looking like churning pits of mud. "And you shall lead them!"

From the corridor came the distinct sound of marching, stone sliding against stone. The earth demon's army...surely he didn't mean...

Shardunazatu charged forward.

Shoving Abla out of the way, Ali met the first thrust of the demon's trident with his zulfiqar, the metals clashing in a spray of sparks. The creature reared back and Ali lunged forward, intending to plunge the zulfiqar into a patch of exposed belly.

It was like he'd attacked a block of iron. His zulfiqar stuck hard, the shock reverberating through his arms. He let loose his magic, the flames racing across the demon's chest.

Shardunazatu laughed and then it opened its horrible mouth wide. A torrent of mud gushed out, extinguishing the zulfiqar's flames as easily as Ali might have stomped out a candle. The smell of rot filled the air, foul and thick.

It grinned, towering over him. "Not all earthen creatures are as weak as humans, little djinn. And there's not much magic for a fire-blood to pull from under the sea."

Its tail moved in the blink of an eye. No longer a serpent's tail, rather something like living unbaked clay. It smashed into Ali's ankles, sweeping him off his feet as a taloned hand ripped the zulfiqar from his grip.

Ali tried to scramble back, but its tail had wrapped his legs, bubbling mud rippling across his body, heavy and smothering. It pinned him completely, encasing his arms and creeping up his neck. His fingers went numb and then horribly still, the sensation creeping up his wrists.

Shardunazatu was turning him into stone.

He could hear Abla screaming his name. Gagging on the awful smell and desperate to writhe free, Ali tried to call upon his magic, but he'd no sooner sparked a flame than another gush of mud extinguished it. A wave of tar-like bile rolled over his face, and he choked, the foul substance pushing through his clamped lips.

He called for his fire again, but it did nothing more than bake the mud covering his limbs.

There's not much magic for a fire-blood to pull from under the sea.

Acting on instinct and desperation, Ali reached once again for magic. But he didn't try to conjure a flame, nor a choking cloud of smoke. Instead he pulled on the distantly cold presence that had been swimming quietly in his mind since the marid took him. The part of Ali that delighted when he dove into the sea, that sent his senses tingling when he walked past a hidden spring.

Everything went very quiet. And then a violent shiver swept Ali's body, icy water pouring from his skin. In seconds, the stone had dissolved, gray mud dripping from his limbs. His eyes snapped open, an almost predatory focus narrowing his gaze.

Shardunazatu appeared before him, an offensive thing of living dirt and molten rock that had no place in Ali's sea. And yet that wasn't all the earth demon contained. There was moisture in Shardunazatu: iron blood in its veins, liquid lubricating its joints, the delicate gurgle of humors and fluid in its spine and brain. The wet muscles that moved its mouth into a confused frown.

Ali seized its tail, yanking at the liquid with his mind's eye. Silver blood burst from demon's skin, flooding past Ali's fingers. Shardunazatu screeched and whipped his tail, throwing Ali across the room.

Ali landed hard, cracking the wall behind him and causing a mountain of coins to collapse. But Ali barely felt the impact. He rose lightly to his feet with an unnatural grace, the world still gray. Magic, more powerful than anything he'd known, pulsed in his veins; an ancient anger stealing over him. How dare this earthen abomination challenge him in his own waters? His zulfiquar flew to his hand on a wave, and Ali rushed forward.

Shardunazatu struck with the trident. But Ali was stronger now, the sea outside the cave beating in his head, in his blood. Catching the trident between the forks of his zulfiquar, he twisted hard, wrenching the weapon from the demon's hands and sending it skittering across the floor. He ducked a swipe of Shardunazatu's talons that would have left him in gory ribbons and then swept his zulfiquar across its giant muddy eyes. The creature shrieked, grabbing its face.

“Alizayd!”

At the sound of his name, the marid presence vanished from his mind, and Ali stumbled, his grace gone.

Abla had darted forward, grabbing his wrist and pulling him back.

Shardunazatu was screeching, a howl like an earthquake. “A trick!” it wailed, clutching its ruined eyes. “Marid liar, I’ll send you back to Tiamat in bloody waves!”

Ali was barely aware of the nonsensical charge, too busy dodging the creature’s tail as it lashed the floor. He and Abla were almost at the pearly doors. But as he ran, he could not help but give the chamber one last admiring look. Whatever humans had designed this place had done an incredible job. It really did look like a thing from a story, a tale to be told in crowded coffee shops and women’s courtyards. A long-vanished world. A palace of gold, a temple of jewels.

A city of brass.

The doors burst open. Shardunazatu’s stone army had arrived.

Had they not been the enslaved and transfigured bodies of long-dead warriors eager to murder him, Ali might have marveled at the sight of the statues rushing to surround them, moving as smoothly as living men, their massive broadswords glinting in the candlelight. But right now even Ali’s curiosity had limits.

“Run!” he shouted.

A warrior dressed in the garb of a Rumi soldier lurched at him, and Ali shoved the trident in its chest. The statue shivered and then burst apart, shattering into shell fragments. But in the time it took Ali to strike, three more had surrounded him. Ali ducked, letting two of the statues smash into each other. He buried the trident in the knees of the third, diving out of the way and rolling to his feet.

Shardunazatu was still howling, searching blindly for the djinn. More stone warriors were emerging from the orchard and then with a single motion, the slain girls abruptly sat up, the shrouds falling away from their exposed skulls. The statues he'd destroyed were already piecing themselves back together, mud wrapping the stone fragments like living mortar.

Ali's regret vanished. The sea could have this place. He caught up with Abla, grabbing her hand as they entered the corridor, the statues hot on their heels.

But the pearly doors that had clamped shut behind him were still closed. Ali tried to smash through, but neither his shoulder nor zulfiqar nor trident had any success. Beyond the doors, he could sense the weight of the sea over the enchanted path, aching to burst free.

The warriors were but moments away. Ali stepped back, edging himself and Abla into a small niche in the wall.

He met her frightened eyes. "When I tell you, take a deep breath and hold it for as long as you can." Ali secured the trident to his back, feeling oddly fond of it, and then pulled Abla close, clutching her tight enough to provoke a gasp.

Ali closed his eyes, the weight of the ocean dragging on his shoulders, part of his heart longing for its embrace. And then a word—in a language he did not speak—slipped his mouth.

"Come."

The seabed shook.

Water crashed through the pearly doors, smashing them aside as though they were paper. As if the ocean were a thing alive, a creature long annoyed by this dry human refuge, eager to stamp out the alien upstart and take back its home.

In seconds the water was at his neck. “Abla, hold your breath!” Ali took his own deep breath as the water closed over his head, but he’d learned years ago when an assassin threw him down a desolate desert well that he needn’t be concerned with such things.

Ali couldn’t drown.

Still holding Abla, he waited until the force of the water had lessened and then slipped out, swimming hard for the surface.

But it was too far away. Abla squirmed in his arms, her face bright with panic. He swam faster, but her grip was lessening, her body going limp...

Without a second thought, Ali pressed his lips to hers, breathing into her mouth.

They broke through the surface a minute later. Abla jerked away, spluttering and gasping for air. She was a wreck: Shardunazatu’s foul-smelling blood sticking to her messy braids, her make-up running down her face in streaks and one earring missing. Gashes covered her arms, her fine robe long-gone.

“Are you alright?” he breathed.

Abla let out a wail. “No! We were almost killed by a mob of statues! A demon tried to turn you into stone!”

Ali nodded, treading water as he recovered from his latest brush with death. “Yes. I don’t think the stories are as enjoyable when you’re in them.”

THE SCOUT

This was originally an alternative prologue for The Kingdom of Copper. Spoilers for both books.

“So, what did you do?”

Cao Pran bristled at the question; his horse dancing nervously on the snowy path in response.

He shot a dark look at the Geziri soldier riding alongside him. “Who says I did anything?”

Jahal snorted. “Because soldiers don’t get tossed out of the Citadel and sent to scout the northern border of Daevastana unless they did something wrong.” His grey eyes twinkled with amusement...and not a little bit of his characteristic smugness. Entirely swathed in furs, Jahal’s eyes were all that could be seen of him. Ice crusted on the spiky black fur of his cloak, made from some former beast, some animal of earth and crimson blood.

The sight turned Pran’s stomach. Though Jahal looked warm, Pran could not yet bear to cover himself in furs like the humans in this region did. It seemed wrong, unclean.

Jahal pressed again. “I’m your superior officer, you know,” he reminded Pran for what felt like the hundredth time. “I could order you to tell me.” He let the threat linger, his eyes still sparkling as if they were joking, as if Pran found amusing the constant intimidations that his companion could gut him without charge or simply abandon him in this wild land. “So, tell me. Did you try to catch a bribe from some minister’s cousin? Sleep with the wrong woman?”

Just tell him. It’s easier. Pran exhaled, his breath coming out in a smoky burst that clouded in the frigid air. “I’ve got a bit of problem when it comes to wine and punctuality,” he confessed. “Missed my watch a time too many.”

“You missed your watch?” Jahal repeated in disbelief. “That hardly seems worth freezing to death on the edge of the world.” He chuckled. “Too bad you’re Tukharistani. If you were Geziri, you would have gotten by with a warning.”

You think I don’t know that? Pran bit back the retort, suspecting Jahal would not appreciate it. They’d been traveling together along the northern border of Daevastana for over month. It was a miserable mission, one assigned every century or so to check upon a part of the world rarely given thought by the powers that be back in distant Daevabad – well that, and to collect as much tribute as possible from the savage Daeva fire-worshippers who called it home. He pulled his cloak closer, shooting a dark look at his desolate surroundings. Snow swirled through the dark trees, falling silently upon the icy blanket already smothering the forested valley floor. Past the bare trees, a river ran fierce under a delicate crust of ice, and in the distance, rocky, snow-covered peaks tore at the sky.

He conjured a pair of flames to warm his hands. *Our people were not meant for such a place.* Pran felt that in every drop of his smoky, black blood, an instinctual urge to retreat. Not to Daevabad, the brass city conjured by Nahid magic and inspired by a thousand different human civilizations. But to something older, to the scalding sands his ancestors before Suleiman would have called home.

A wolf howled, pulling him from his reverie. He shuddered as a cold gust blew through the scarf covering his face. “Why in the Creator’s name would anyone choose to live out here?”

Jahal shrugged. “Who knows? The Daevas are all crazy.” He pulled a clay pipe from his bag and began packing it with dried khat.

Pran nodded at the pipe. “I take it that’s what got you sent here?” His “superior” had spent more than half their nights in a khat-induced haze.

“This?” Jahal gestured to the pipe. “No. I slept with the wrong woman. Several actually.” The pipe smoldered in his hand, the khat catching light. “I suspect one of them must have finally complained.”

Pran went a little still. There was something unnerving about the way Jahal had phrased that last part, an implication he didn’t like but didn’t feel comfortable questioning.

So, he changed the subject. “How long have you been out here?”

“Couple decades.” Jahal exhaled, sparks fluttering upon the snowy ground. “Though never this far north. Don’t think anyone’s been this far north in a hundred years. The palace must be getting desperate for new people to tax.”

“I guess.” Politics had never been Pran’s thing. He was from a military family, meant for the Royal Guard like his father and grandfather before him, but he’d been content to serve as a foot soldier. “I mean... I suppose things *have* been bad in Daevabad. We got our rations reduced just before I left and our salaries cut before that.” He fingered the worn hem on his sleeve. “Can’t remember the last time we got new uniforms.”

“The fire-worshippers are probably stealing from the Treasury,” Jahal said. “They’ve been extra-mutinous since their Scourge got turned into a pile of ash.” He shook his head. “Though I bet that was a battle to witness though.” He whistled. “The Scourge of Qui-zi against the crocodile prince?”

Pran stared at his reins. “Not many of those witnesses survived,” he said softly. “I had a friend on that boat, and the Afshin put a sword through his throat.”

“Sorry to hear that.” There was little sympathy behind the words; more a phrase thrown out so that Jahal could continue. “You would have trained with him though, right? With Alizayd al Qahtani?”

Pran actually laughed. “No. Royal zulfiqaris and wine-swilling Tukharistani infantryman don’t typically train together at the Citadel.” He paused, recalling his memories of the intense young prince. “Used to watch him though. Everyone did; he was terrifying with that blade. He’s in Am Gezira now, right? Leading a garrison?”

Jahal’s voice sounded a little tight. “Something like that.”

Pran shifted in his saddle, trying to relieve his cramping muscles. “Shouldn’t we be in Sugdam by now?” Sugdam was their next stop, a small Daeva village on the other end of the valley.

“Knowing our luck, the fire-worshippers heard we were coming and sabotaged the marker stones.”

“We could stop,” Pran suggested. “Make camp for the night.”

Jahal shook his head. “Our tent’s not going to offer much protection against this weather, and the snow’s only getting worse. Let’s keep going.” He nodded forward. “That might be smoke up ahead.”

Pran saw nothing but prayed Jahal was correct. He hated spending the night with Daevas—their demon-black eyes filled with resentment towards the foreign soldiers who’d claim a hefty tax payment the next morning—but right now he’d take a fuming fire-worshipper over the snow.

They stayed silent as they spurred their horses faster. Darkness fell swiftly around them. A wolf howled again and from deep in the black forest, Pran heard the crash of dead wood, perhaps an ancient tree finally collapsing under the weight of the snow. He gave the forest a nervous look. A shadow swooped through the trees. *An owl*, he decided, his heart beating faster.

Thankfully they hadn't been riding long when he caught glimpses of the smoke Jahal mentioned and then something far more promising: a stone cottage nestled in a snowy glen.

The cottage was small but well-built with firelight flickering from behind the thick curtains covering its narrow windows. A felt tent had been constructed to its rear – Pran could smell the musk of grain and horses. The remnants of a garden – nothing but blackened roots and empty trellises in this bitter winter – clung to one stone wall.

Pran slid off his horse, immediately colder once he parted from the animal's warmth. He retrieved one of his bags, checking to make sure his sword hadn't frozen in its sheath before leading his horse to the tent. Jahal followed, freeing his zulfiqar.

Pran frowned. "Are you expecting trouble?"

"You never know with Daevas."

But the tent was empty. A soft orange gloom filled the air, a reflection of the snow-bright night sky outside. On the opposite side, a rough wooden trough waited, filled with grain; enough for at least a dozen horses. Some sort of storage rack, a metal he couldn't identify, sprouted from the frozen ground like the skeleton of a tree. A single pair of reins hung from one limb, the others empty.

Pran's unease grew. "Riders are due back," he realized, glancing again at the waiting grain. He spotted two similar troughs in opposite corners. "Could be quite a few."

Jahal pulled free his saddle and dumped it unceremoniously on the ground. "Well, should they show up, they'll find themselves with company." He nodded at Pran's horse. "Hurry up. That cottage looks warm, and I'm starving."

Pran quickly unsaddled his horse. They stomped back to the cottage, the snow gathering in knee-high drifts.

Jahal pounded on the thick pine door. “Royal Guard!” he shouted in broken Divasti.
“Open up!”

They waited a long moment, but there was no response. Jahal cursed and banged on the door again, this time with the hilt of his zulfiqar.

“I’m not going to pleasant company if you make me break down this door!”

It opened a moment later. Pran tensed, but it was a young woman who greeted them, hastily veiled in a faded floral chador the color of ash. Her black eyes – God, he never got used to that dark absence of color – swept their faces, darting to Jahal’s zulfiqar, and brightening with alarm.

Even so, she stepped boldly into their path, blocking the doorway with her body as she held one edge of the chador across her face. “Can I help you?”

“We need a place to spend the night.”

Pran didn’t miss the way her dark eyes flickered to the snow-swirled forest before she responded. She was definitely expecting someone. “We’ve no room.”

“There’s that famous Daeva hospitality.” Jahal raised his zulfiqar, letting a glitter of fire dance upon its copper surface. “I suggest you make room.”

The woman instantly backed away. Pran averted his eyes, embarrassed by Jahal’s behavior.

His mouth fell open as he crossed the threshold. Expecting the home of some magic-poor trader or fire-cult aesthetic – for who else would live in this frozen wasteland? – Pran anticipated little more than a stone hearth and faded rugs.

What greeted his eyes was anything but. The inside of the cottage was warm and bright, filled with dozens of oil lamps in brass and gold, glass and sculpted stone. Candles burned in

ornate chandeliers and cedar smoldered in silver braziers. An enormous fireplace, tiled in the colors of a setting sun dominated the western wall while another was given over to shelves packed with books crammed into every available nook. Opposite the books was a large worktable covered in twisted glassware and bizarre copper instruments. A wooden ladder led to a large lofted bed, with more bed folds—at least a dozen—tucked neatly away beneath the structure. A fire altar smoldered in the eastern corner, filling the room with more cedar wood fragrance.

In all, it looked like the lair of some sort of crazed scholar and her minions, or perhaps that of an alchemist who'd inhaled the fumes of one too many experiments. Neither possibility helped with his growing unease.

Jahal didn't seem as bothered. "No room?" he crowed. "You could host a score men in comfort here." Not bothering to remove his muddy boots, he explored the cottage, running his hands over the ornaments. "When are your people expected back?"

The girl dropped her gaze, her fingers trembling on the chador. "Soon," she insisted, pointing to a sheet spread on the floor. "I was just preparing dinner."

Pran glanced at the sheet. Upon its brocaded surface, rested several covered silver tureens. Small bowls were scattered between them, filled with chopped greens and yogurt, browned onions and speckled radishes. A feast.

Jahal made a face. "I guess I'm hungry enough for Daeva food." He kicked off his boots, splattering the rug with mud. "You can serve us."

The girl opened her mouth to protest. "It is not meant for—"

Jahal laid a hand on the hilt of his zulfiqar, and she went pale, stepping back to let him pass.

Pran removed his boots more neatly, though he doubted one polite gesture would excuse Jahal's rudeness.

"Wine," Jahal demanded as he sat down. "Surely with a place like this, you have wine. Warm it first."

Pran shrugged out of his icy cloak, hanging it on chair near the fire before joining his fellow scout. "Captain..." he started. "She seems pretty scared. Maybe you should..."

Jahal cut him off with a wave. "Don't. I've lived amongst these people for decades now. You've got to keep them scared, make sure they know who's in control." He picked up a fine-worked silver chalice and held it up to the dancing firelight. "I mean, look at this thing. You'd have to be crazy to be able to afford something like this and still choose to live in some desolate, snowy hell."

"Maybe they're illusionists."

Jahal rapped his knuckles on the chalice. "Feels real to me." He dropped the chalice and then lifted the top of silver tureen. A thick stew simmered inside: some sort of leafy green with lentils, smelling of cream and spices. "Doesn't smell too bad for a bunch of vegetarians."

His stomach grumbling, Pran unwrapped a warm cloth bundle besides him to reveal discs of fresh-baked bread. Starving, he dug into the food without reservation.

The girl returned. She'd wrapped her chador across her face so she could hold the large platter upon which a teapot and samovar of wine rested with both hands. She set it down and went to step back.

Jahal grabbed her wrist. "Join us."

She tried to wrench free, but Jahal was stronger, pulling her down to sit beside him. "What? Worried your baba won't like you dining with strange men?" Still holding her wrist, he

reached for her chador with the other hand and then yanked it off her head, laughing as she tried to snatch it back. “A pretty thing you are living out here in the wilderness.”

The knot in Pran’s stomach tightened. “Captain...”

“Oh, calm yourself. We’re just having fun.” Jahal let go of the girl but only after tossing the chador in the fireplace. He laughed as the flames licked at the cloth. “Consider it an act of worship.” He nodded at his chalice. “Come now, Daeva, the wine won’t fill itself now.”

Looking close to tears, the girl obeyed, filling their chalices with shaky hands. Pran didn’t know what to say. Jahal had always been obnoxious to the Daevas they called upon, leering at their women and insulting their faith. But not like this.

We’ve never come upon a Daeva woman alone before, he realized, suddenly remembering what Jahal had implied got him kicked out of the Citadel. Unsettled, he reached for the wine, a familiar companion. He took a small sip, and then a longer one. God, it was good. Date wine... a little sweeter than he typically liked... but warm, swirling in his belly like some sort of nectar.

Strange to find date wine this far north, he mused, wine being one of the things he did know well. It was popular with the Daevas who’d grown up in Daevabad proper; he was pretty sure he remembered a Daeva soldier telling him they drank it in honor of the Afshins for whom it had been a ceremonial drink. But he didn’t remember for certain. The soldier had been thrown out of the Royal Guard shortly after, along with the rest of the Daevas; the fire-worshippers now banned from enlisting.

Jahal must have shared his opinion about the wine, finishing his goblet even before Pran. He held it out for more as the wind howled outside. “I don’t think your people are coming back tonight, dear one.”

She lifted her gaze. Though she was trembling, there was a bit of defiance in her expression. “You should hope not.”

Jahal’s eyes lit in outrage. “What did you say?”

Pran raised his hands, trying to diffuse the tension between them. “The-the food was really quite delicious,” he said quickly. “Thank you. But it’s been a long journey, and I know we’re both tired.” He gestured to the bedrolls stacked neatly beneath the loft. “Captain, why don’t you and I borrow a pair of those and get some sleep?”

“You can go ahead,” Jahal said coldly. “The Daeva and I need to have a conversation about hospitality.”

Pran bit his lip. “Captain, you heard her...her people are coming back. Maybe it’s best we—”

“It’s best you mind your own affairs and go to bed,” Jahal interrupted. “Unless you’ve suddenly learned the way to Sugdam.” He shot Pran a cool look. “It’s a very inhospitable land, Pran. You wouldn’t want to get lost.”

The threat stopped him cold. The girl was staring at him, her eyes imploring. But he had no doubt Jahal meant his words.

She’s just a fire-worshipper, Pran told himself. By the Most High, people said the Daevas out here were so feral they slept with their own fathers.

He cleared his throat. “I understand.”

“Then good night.”

Pran stood up, his legs shaking as he turned around. He kept his back purposefully to them as he retrieved one of the bedrolls. He unfurled it as far away from the feast as he could, in a dark corner under the loft, crowded with supplies. He lay down, still facing away.

There was a clatter, the dish or the chalice being shoved aside. A muffled scream. “You think you’re so much better than us,” he heard Jahal hiss. “All of you do.”

Pran curled into a ball, catching sight of a glimmer of metal as he covered his ears. He didn’t want to hear this.

And then he drew up like a shot, the glimmer of metal coming into better focus.

It was a massive silver bow.

He blinked rapidly, convinced he was seeing things. Half concealed in a quilted pad, the enormous bow was probably half Pran’s height and with a heft both imposing and impossibly delicate; its silver surface covered in fine brass filigree. It looked like a weapon from some ancient legend, certainly not a thing meant to be wielded by any modern man. An artifact, priceless and deadly.

That’s what he told himself... before he noticed the quill of arrows beside it, their ends fletched with fresh feathers.

The door slammed open.

Pran scrambled up, his heart in his throat. Expecting to see some massive warrior, the vengeful archer he assumed matched the fearsome bow, he whirled around, reaching for his sword.

He dropped his hand. It was another Daeva woman at the door and well... not a particularly fearsome one.

She looked even shorter than the girl. Older too, at least a century and a half if the silver in her roughly shorn black curls was anything to judge by. Dressed in the thick coat and baggy pants Daeva men typically wore, she had a hunting knife tucked in her belt and felt chador resting on her shoulders.

Her eyes though, those were sharp: somehow even blacker than the rest of the Daevas, hooded and owlsh. They ignored him, her gaze settling upon Jahal like the raptor she resembled. Bloodless lips pressed in a thin line.

Jahal snorted. He had a hold of the girl by her black braids. "This auntie is who I was supposed to be so afraid of?"

The girl was staring at the woman with open veneration. "Yes."

The Daeva woman snapped her fingers.

Pran heard Jahal's hand shatter from across the room.

The Geziri soldier screamed, dropping the girl. Pran watched as he clutched his ruined hand, the fingers pointing in a constellation of directions.

The older woman hadn't moved. She glanced at the girl. "Are you alright?" she asked in Divasti.

The girl nodded, still shaking. "They-they said they were from the Royal Guard."

The older woman nodded and then moved, approaching Jahal like a panther might an injured hare; her movements achingly graceful; her face a mix of mild curiosity and cool hunger. "A Geziri man trying to take what's not his," she said coolly. "How very like his king."

Jahal clutched his injured hand, his eyes wild with pain. "You fucking witch!" he shrieked. "What did you do to me?"

Pran didn't move, rooted to his spot and frozen in shock. Jahal couldn't really think the woman had done that to him. That was impossible.

Still gasping, Jahal reached for his zulfiqar as the woman drew nearer, but he was clearly too distracted by pain. She kicked it away and then seized his wrist. There was the sudden scent

of smoke on the air, sharp and acrid. And then the sound that came from Jahal's mouth made his shrieks seem like whispers.

He *howled*, a sound that grew wet and choked as black blood streamed from his mouth, joining the blood dripping from his eyes, his ears and his nose. His body convulsed, seizing with enough violence to shatter bones, as ash beaded off his skin like human sweat. And yet he didn't collapse, didn't stop screaming, still held in thrall by one of the woman's delicate hands. The girl stood watching, her face a mask of cold vengeance.

"An interesting sensation, is it not?" the Daeva woman mused. "To have one's blood abruptly reverse direction? It should kill you, of course, obliterate your heart. A trick to keep it beating throughout: one that took me quite a bit of practice to master."

Pran's mouth fell open, his mind and eyes unable to reconcile what was before him. Appearances be damned, the woman could be no djinn. His race didn't have that kind of power.

Except... there were ones who did.

"What arrogance you have..." the woman marveled. "To go raiding across a land that is not yours, to look upon, to *touch* a woman who does not want you..."

Her crisp voice was clipped, the accent almost familiar... no, it was familiar, Pran realized. It was Daevabadi, high-class.

Really high-class.

The books covering the shelves, the twisted glasswork and metal instruments covering the table. The *scalpel*.

A Daeva woman who could break a man's ones from across the room, who could make his blood flow the opposite direction. In dawning horror, Pran's eyes again fell on the terrible bow, a thing fallen from myth.

He shot to his feet. He should have helped Jahal, but the bloody scene before him, his mind shouting impossible conclusions, half-remembered tales of his family's ancestral home in ruined Qui-zi banished any sense of duty he might have had – along with most of his other senses. He fled, tearing out the door with neither his coat nor boots.

He raced headlong into the snowy dark, thinking of nothing but putting distance between himself and Jahal's screams, now fading to gurgled shrieks. Besides Jahal's cries, the breaking of sticks beneath Pran's bare feet and the pant of his breath were the only sounds, the falling snow dampening the rest of the world. The frozen trees were black, stark skeletons against the white snow and gray sky; dead things suddenly welcoming: for with each one he passed, he was further away from the impossible thing he'd just witnessed. He'd run all the way to Sugdam, all the way back to Daevabad if it would save him from the woman with the cold voice and deadly touch. He scrambled up a snowy bank, his heart racing.

There was a whistle on the icy air.

Something sharp punched through his back, sending him tumbling back down the snowy incline. He lay twisted on his side. He gasped for air, pain ripping through him, a pressure like someone had dropped the damn cottage on his chest.

A bloody arrow protruded from the left side of his chest.

God have mercy. Black spots blossomed before his eyes as Pran sucked for breath. The arrow must have gone through one of his lungs. Foamy hot blood gushed from the wound, melting the snow beneath him. He swooned.

He was vaguely aware of the glen was growing brighter, the flicker of approaching firelight. Some Daeva mob, no doubt, coming after him with torches.

But it was no mob that emerged from the black tree with their torches held high. It was a single man, and he carried no fire.

He *was* fire.

Skin of pressed light, so bright it nearly hurt to look upon. Hands and bare feet the color of coal. Golden eyes and a sharp black mouth. The man moved forward with deadly grace, with a darting speed like a snake. The enormous bow he'd seen back in the cottage was held half-drawn in his clawed hands.

Ifrit. Pran would have screamed could he have drawn a single breath. The worst nightmare of his people, their mortal enemy. A choked whimper escaped his bloody lips. The glen was darkening again, shadows growing at the corners of his vision as his life's blood spread across the snow. He was dying, he knew, the things he was seeing making no sense.

They couldn't make sense, couldn't be possible. For as the ifrit drew nearer, raising his bow once again, Pran spotted a black tattoo on his golden temple that had no business being there. An arrow crossed over a stylized wing.

An Afshin mark.

Pran didn't have much time to contemplate it. There was a glimmer of silver, and then the next arrow ripped through his throat. He was aware of falling backward, of blood filling his mouth, of the icy pricks still falling down from the sky and the skeletal black trees looming over him. His death was quick.

Indeed, it was so quick that Pran died before he could even fathom the implications of what he and Jahal had just run into out here in the wilds of Daevastana. What it would mean for the elderly parents he'd left behind in Daevabad, rising now to make an early cup of tea; their home in the shadow of the Qui-zi memorial. For the soldiers he'd trained alongside in the

Citadel, grumbling as they strapped on weapons long overdue for replacement. For an already stressed kingdom and crumbling magical city.

For a certain young woman from Cairo.

NAHRI

I took these two Nahri chapters from an old (and very different!) version of The Kingdom of Copper. I've reworked them so they feel like something that could have happened shortly before that book, looking at aspects of Nahri's marriage to Muntadhir and her role as the Banu Nahida. There is one rather glaring difference when it comes to the way we're introduced to a side character, but otherwise I think it still holds up to canon. Spoilers for the first book.

“Banu Nahida, *stop!*”

Nahri sprinted down the corridor to her infirmary. Her heart racing, she didn't waste time glancing back to see how many guards from the Treasury were pursuing her but judging from the pounding of feet, it was at least half a dozen.

You fool, she chided herself as she ran. *You never should have let your skills get that rusty.*

Two chattering scribes ambled out from the direction of the library; their arms heavy with scrolls. Nahri nearly crashed into the first and then intentionally tripped the second, sending him and his scrolls sprawling across the floor. The documents bounced and rolled down the corridor. She could only hope they tripped up a couple of her pursuers.

“Nahri, damn it, stop!” It was her husband this time. He sounded out of breath, and she wasn't surprised; Emir Muntadhir wasn't the type to physically exert himself—at least not in this way. That she'd roused him from his circle of drunk poets to play unintentional partner to her heist had been miracle enough.

The guards sounded closer. Nahri could see the half-open doors to her infirmary just ahead. She put on a burst of extra speed. “Nisreen!” she shouted. “Help me!”

Nisreen must have been close – in seconds, she was at the doorway; a wickedly sharp scalpel in one hand and her black eyes bright with alarm as she noticed the running guards.

“Banu Nahida!” she gasped. “What in the Creator's name...?”

Nahri grabbed the edge of the door and shoved Nisreen out as she flew over the threshold. “Forgive me,” she rushed before slamming the door in the older woman’s bewildered face. She whirled around, pressed her palms against the intricate metalwork on the closed door and then dragged them down, hissing in pain as the studs tore into her skin, her blood slippery on the decorative panels.

“Protect me,” she commanded confidently in Divasti – she’d already practiced the enchantment in preparation.

Nothing happened.

Nahri panicked, holding the door closed against Nisreen’s shoving on the other side. She kicked it hard and cursed loudly in Egyptian Arabic. “Damn it, I said ‘protect me’, you intransigent piece of...”

The blood smoked – her blood, the blood and magic of the people who’d built this place so many centuries ago. She backed away as the metal grating twisted together, firmly locking the doors just as something heavy smashed into them from the other side.

She heard several muffled voices arguing on the other side of the door, including Muntadhir’s distinctly irritated tone. She’d never heard him so angry and considering the number of fights they’d gotten into in the three years they’d been married, that was saying a lot.

There was more pounding on the door. “Banu Nahri!” she heard Nisreen yell. Judging from the alarm in her voice, she’d learned what Nahri had stolen and worked out the rest in her mind. “Please, don’t do this! You’re not ready!”

Behind her, a tray clattered to the floor. She turned around to meet the astonished eyes of her patients and aides. The infirmary was on the quiet side this afternoon – and by quiet, she meant not so full that people were literally pushed into the garden. The hundred beds were all

occupied – they always were nowadays – but only a few of her patients had visitors. The small receiving area where she held her morning clinic was half empty; only a few djinn with more stubborn conditions waited on the plump floor cushions.

Even so, at least a hundred and fifty people in all, she guessed, with all six tribes represented. Over a hundred witnesses to either her greatest triumph so far in Daevabad...or her imminent arrest.

This was not how this was supposed to go.

Sucking up as much courage as she could muster, Nahri gave them all a severe look and then jerked her head at the door. “Any of you go near that and you’ll have plague sores in some very uncomfortable places, understand?”

No one spoke, but enough people went pale and drew back to convince her of their fear. Nilofer, one of the young Daeva noblewoman she’d been training as an aide, tentatively raised a shaky hand as if Nahri were admonishing a class of school children. She pointed out the doors leading to the pavilion. “Banu Nahida,” she piped up, her voice squeaky with fright. “There are soldiers in the garden.”

Nahri peered out. “So, there are.” Fighting to maintain her composure, she glanced at the two guards who stood at the pavilion entrance. Like Nilofer, they were Daeva. Nahri only allowed people of her tribe to serve in her infirmary. They were mercenaries, part of the small group Grand Wazir Kaveh e-Pramukh had quietly trained to protect their tribal quarter in the face of the city’s rising crime. “Keep them close,” he’d warned her before adding far more softly. “And know that they are loyal to you first.”

Nahri hadn't yet tested that loyalty – she hadn't wanted to risk getting any of them thrown in jail – but it seemed today she'd find out if Kaveh had been telling the truth. “Barricade those doors,” she said firmly. “You can say I forced you.”

The youngest man—the new one Kaveh had sent her before he left for Zariaspa, whose name she couldn't recalled—straightened up with a salute. But his fellow, Soroush, who'd been with Nahri for years – hesitated.

“We won't be able to hold them off for long,” Soroush warned her.

“I know.” The words were barely out of her mouth before she dashed across the infirmary to her private workspace. She yanked the curtain closed behind her, trying to ignore the pounding on her door and the angry – and unusually detailed – threats from Muntadhir.

She ran her hands along the underside of her desk. Wedged firmly in the joint between the desktop and one leg, was an ancient iron ring. She plucked it free.

It warmed in her hand as she raised it to the light. The battered emerald set in its center gleamed. Though it was a treasure, a jewel that might have adorned the hand of human royals, there was otherwise little that marked it as unusual.

Little that indicated the enslaved djinn soul trapped inside.

A hundred warnings ran through Nahri's mind. Only the most skilled Nahids were said to be able to free slaves. Nisreen had discouraged Nahri's interest in learning the complicated magic, and Ghassan had outright banned any attempt; though considering that the last freed slave had kidnapped his son, murdered a score of soldiers, and left a wide swath of destruction in his wake, she couldn't quite blame the king.

The curse is already broken, she reminded herself. That's supposed to be the complicated part. That's why Nahri had chosen this ring. She'd learned of it in her mother's notes.

Her last notes. *Elashia from Qart Sahar. Curse broken. Rustam will awaken. Treasury preparing archive and relics for when we return.*

Except they'd never returned. The note was dated a week before Manizheh and Rustam would be brutally murdered by the ifrit while traveling to Zariaspa.

Something settled in Nahri's heart even as the banging on the outer door grew louder. If the Qahtanis stopped her, it might be decades before she had this opportunity again. Though the vessels themselves resided in the Daeva's Grand Temple, the relics were kept locked away in the Treasury, far from her reach. She'd had to bait Muntadhir into a fight regarding her dowry to even gain access. He was an idiot, true, but she doubted he'd fall for it a second time.

Her resolve strengthened, Nahri plucked free the Nahid notes she kept nestled between two Arabic books—she kept her workspace as messy as possible to discourage would-be snoopers. She ran her fingers down the ancient paper, tracing the inkblots and whirled script her ancestors had long ago laid down. She'd read them so often, they were mesmerized, but the feel of something her legendary relatives had touched assured her.

She approached her fire pit. In her absence, it had died down to smoldering ash. She raised a hand. "Naar," she commanded.

The flames answered back, cracking and snapping as they raced to reach her fingers. In seconds, the blaze was roaring, large enough to encompass a body. The heat scorched her face but did not hurt. Nahri knelt, pulling a prepared basket from underneath the nearest couch.

Her hands trembled. "Earth from your homeland," she whispered, taking up a handful of dusty Saharan sand from a tin in the basket and tossing it into the fire. "Water purified in the name of the Creator." She poured in a vial of water taken earlier from her own fire altar. There was a hiss of steam as it hit the fire, the drops too few to affect the blaze.

“Nahri, enough! Open the damned door!”

Oh, go jump in the lake, Muntadhir. She could only imagine how embarrassed he was to have been locked out by his wife in front of all those snickering soldiers. The thought gave her an almost distracting amount of pleasure

Nahri exhaled, adding the air from her own lungs to the fire’s smoke and then dropped in the ring. She pulled out the relic she’d stolen from the Treasury. Like Daevas, the Sahrayn wore their relics in amulets around the neck though they preferred a drop of blood encased in glass and verses from the Holy Book over the lock of baby hair her people used. She undid the miniscule clasp, plucking free the tiny pearl of smoky glass.

Holding the relic in one hand, she reached for a scalpel with the other and then drew a sharp line across her palm, blood immediately swelling to drown the glass bead. Nahid blood: deadly to the ifrit, capable of undoing all manner of magic, and one of the most powerful substances in the world.

The glass bead burst into flames in her fingers. It twisted, surging and dancing as it shimmered white and then bright cobalt blue of the hottest fires. She tipped her hand and it jumped to join the blaze.

Something smashed into the doors so hard the entire infirmary shook. Bits of plaster rained down from the ceiling. “BANU NAHIDA!” Ghassan thundered and the sound of the king’s rage was enough to send a shiver of fear down her back. A few of her patients let out startled cries and from the corner of her eyes, she saw Nilofer duck behind a curtain. “Stop what you’re doing right now!”

Without waiting for her response, whatever hit the door did so again. The metalwork keeping it closed began to groan and snap.

Nahri dropped to her knees. She thrust her hands into fire, closing her eyes and bringing the flames to her brow as if cleansing herself for prayer.

“Elashia,” she named. “Daughter of Qart Sahar... *wake.*”

The flames rushed from her face. No...they moved as if a thing alive.

The doors smashed open and Nilofer screamed as the royal guard burst into the room. Ghassan was already swearing as he stormed in. “Damn it, girl, how many times must I tell you,” he started. “You’re forbidden from playing around with those God-forsaken...”

The room fell silent.

The fire was gone, nothing but hot ash upon which the vague imprint of a body could be seen. Nahri removed her chador, wrapping it around the trembling new shoulders of the short, compact woman now standing beside her. A final flush of fire vanished, revealing dark brown skin and reddish black hair. She clutched at Nahri, her emerald eyes darting about to take in the room.

Nisreen’s mouth fell open and Ghassan shut up in mid-rant. Several of her patients gasped, a few dropping to their knees.

Soroush pulled his cap from his head. “The Creator be praised!”

Nahri lifted her chin, squaring her shoulders. She caught sight of Muntadhir’s shocked face and gave him a triumphant grin as she wrapped an arm around the woman’s shoulders.

“Meet Elashia.”

#

Nahri fell to her knees before the ancient altar and pressed her fingertips together, closing her eyes. She bowed her head and then rose to her feet, carefully plucking a long stick of cedar incense from the silver tray of consecrated tools at her side. She stood up on her toes, holding the

incense to the flames burning merrily in the altar's cupola until it started to smolder. Once it was burning, she began relighting the glass oil lamps floating in the giant silver fountain below.

She paused as she lit the last, taking a moment to appreciate the beauty of the fire altar before her. Central to the Daeva faith, the striking design of the altars had persisted through the centuries. A basin – usually silver – of purified water with a brazier-like structure rising in its middle in which burned a fire of cedar wood; a fire which was extinguished only upon a devotee's death. The brazier was to be carefully swept of ash at dawn each day, marking the sun's return. The flaming glass oil lamps in the basin below kept the water at a constant simmer.

Nahri stayed silent a few moments longer. Although not often one for prayer, she was conscious of her weighty role in the Daeva faith and had learned how to play her part accordingly. Besides which, she knew well the importance of this day – the day she finally freed a slave – and what it meant to both the multitude of silent Daevas behind her as well as to her own reputation.

She turned around. The lower part of her face was veiled in Nahid white silk, but her eyes free to take in the people massed below her. She raised her right hand, her palm outward in blessing.

Four thousand Daevas—worshippers packed to the walls—pressed their hands together and bowed their heads in respect.

Five years of leading ceremonies at the Grand Temple had yet to reduce the awe Nahri felt upon such a thing. The Temple itself still routinely took her breath away. Constructed nearly three millennia ago, the massive stone ziggurat was a work on par with the Great Pyramids outside Cairo. The main prayer hall mimicked the design of the palace's throne room though styled in a far more ancient fashion. Two rows of columns, studded with sandstone discs in a

variety of colors, held up the distant ceiling and shrines lined the walls, dedicated to the most lionized figures in their tribe's long history.

Nahri stepped away from the altar. On the platform below her, a line of scarlet-robed priests divided her from the rest of the worshippers. They'd already given at least a half dozen sermons praising her and her extended family and calling upon the Creator to favor her work. Nahri had never been asked to give a sermon; traditionally Nahids weren't expected to interact with worshippers in the Grand Temple or even deign to notice them. They were supposed to float above all, lofty and cool, figures worthy of distant veneration.

But Nahri had never been one for lofty veneration. She stepped onto to the lower platform, heading for the crowd.

The priests parted to let her through. A young novate, his shaven head covered in ash, dashed out from the shadows with a wooden stool while a few of his fellows urged the crowd into the semblance of queue. None resisted, the worshippers eager to comply in hopes of addressing her.

She studied the crowd. The worshippers were nearly all Daeva save a scattering of Tukharistanis—Nahri had been surprised to learn there were a number of ancient families among the trading cities of Tukharistan who'd quietly kept their original faith despite the djinn war. Even so, it was a diverse group. Aesthetics in torn traveling robes shared space next to bejeweled nobles while wide-eyed northern pilgrims jostled weary Daevabadi sophisticates. Near the front, Nahri spotted a little girl fidgeting next to her father. She wore a plain dress of yellow felt; her black hair styled in four braids intertwined with sweet basil.

Nahri caught her eye and then winked, beckoning her forward.

Clearly too young to worry about protocol, the little girl gave Nahri a gap-toothed grin and darted from her father's grip to rush forward. She threw her small arms around Nahri's knees in a tight embrace.

Nahri noticed a few of the priests wince. When her ancestors ruled, anyone who dared lay a hand on a Nahid outside of being healed would have had such a limb lopped off, a tradition – one of many – that Nahri had decided needed revisiting.

“Banu Nahida!” The little girl beamed as she stepped back; her black eyes crinkling in awe. “Did you really free a slave?”

Her father hurried to join them, bowing in respect. He nudged his daughter's shoulder. “May the fires...”

“Oh!” The girl pressed her hands together. “May the fires burn brightly for you!”

“And for you, child,” Nahri replied with a smile as she blessed them, marking the girl's forehead with ash. Their accent was unfamiliar. Pilgrims, Nahri assumed. A lot of her tribesmen came from outer Daevastana to pray at the Grand Temple. “Where are you from?”

“Panchekant, my lady,” her father answered. At Nahri's visible confusion, he continued. “A ruined human city at the edge of Daevastana. It is a wild, unsettled place. I would not expect you to know it.”

Nahri touched her heart. “I'm honored you made the journey. I pray the Creator rewards your pilgrimage and devotion.”

He bowed deeply, looking close to tears. “Thank you, my Lady.” The little girl gave Nahri another hug, waving as they weaved their way through the crowd.

Nahri smiled beneath her veil. She'd come to live for moments like this; encounters that gave her the confidence to stand before the Daevas as their leader and the courage to ignore

Ghassan's dark insinuations of her "holding court." She told herself it was pragmatism. And if they also left a warm glow in her heart?

Well, Nahri was not going to deny the rare bit of happiness she could steal in Daevabad.

The little girl and her father finally disappeared, swallowed by the crowd, and Nahri beckoned to another. About half the people who came to her did so with various ailments. She healed the easiest cases immediately, sending the more complicated ones onto the infirmary. She tried to see as many petitioners as she could, but as the sun climbed high behind the marble screens looking out at the landscaped courtyard, she began itching to return to the infirmary. Not only did things have a tendency to go catastrophically wrong when she wasn't there, she was also eager to check on Elashia who'd fallen into a deep sleep only minutes after being freed. Nahri had read in the Nahid texts that it often took weeks for former ifrit slaves to acclimate to their new bodies.

Nahri blessed the pilgrims in front of her and then stood, motioning for the priests. The crowds had grown far too large for her to personally bless them all. Nahri knew many would return tomorrow. Some came day after day, hoping for a glimpse of her smile. She kept out on eye for familiar faces, never failing to be warmed by their obvious delight when they finally came to her.

Kartir appeared at her shoulder. Though the Grand Priest was nearly his third century, he often proved surprisingly spry. He beamed, his smile wrinkling his face, his black eyes bright under his prodigious brows.

"I knew you could do it," he whispered with a wink.

"Of course, I could," she retorted. She lowered her voice, flashing him a conspiratorial smile. "You should have seen Ghassan's face."

Kartir chuckled. “Your mother would have been proud of you.” He escorted her down the steps. “I hope you didn’t get yourself into too much trouble.”

Nahri shook her head. “He’s angry, but I don’t think there’s much he can do. Freeing slaves is a sacred duty – one no one with any sense would oppose.”

“And your husband? Did you really trick him into taking you to the Treasury?”

Nahri grinned. “He almost made it too easy.”

Some concern creased his face. “I do pray you’re careful with them.”

“I’m careful,” she assured. Her spirits fell slightly. “Ghassan’s not one to let me forget the risks.”

She fell silent as they stopped at one of the shrines near the altar platform. Unlike most, this one’s heavy felt curtain had been let loose, obscuring the entrance.

“I’ve cleared the shrine,” Kartir said softly. “I suspected you might want a bit of privacy today.”

She nodded. “Thank you.” Nahri stepped inside.

Kartir released the curtain behind her, and the shrine grew dark; the only illumination from the oil lamps and fat wax candles inside. They threw jagged light on a brass statue set upon a heavy marble base: a Daeva warrior on horseback, standing proudly upright in his stirrups to aim an arrow at his pursuers.

Dara.

Nahri knelt, her movements careful. Dara’s shrine was among the most popular, and dozens of offerings were scattered about the base of the statue. No blades were allowed in the temple, so small ceramic tokens depicting a variety of ceremonial weapons – mostly arrows – had been brought instead.

A tiny burned skeleton drew her eyes and she pressed her mouth in a thin line, recognizing its reptilian features. A crocodile. She'd been seeing more of them here lately and suspected some enterprising soul had started hawking them outside the temple. She had to admire the business acumen of whoever had thought of such a macabre idea.

She also hoped they stopped. She knew who those crocodiles were meant to stand in for, and she couldn't bear to think of him. Not here.

She glanced up. An enormous silver bow hung on the wall behind the statue, and Nahri stared at it, longing to take it down. To lay her fingers on the grip she imagined Dara had once held tight. She closed her eyes, the sight of the bow stirring her memory. How easily she could still see him polishing a similar one across a shared campfire, mock horror on his beautiful face as she told him some unsavory detail of her human past.

How easily she could see that same beautiful face covered in the blood of his victims.

A year or two ago, those warring images would have brought tears to her eyes, her heart torn between love and revulsion, loyalty and bitter guilt. But they no longer did. After five years, Nahri sensed she was finally beginning to come to terms with Dara's death. With the violent history Ghassan had coldly revealed in an effort to break her loyalty to him. She could accept or justify none of it, but she could move past it. She had to.

"I did it," she said softly. "I freed a slave. They all said I couldn't, but I did. Her name is Elashia. She's from Qart Sahar. She's a lot younger than you, of course," she added with a small smile. "But then again, I suppose everyone was. You were older than rocks."

She grew silent, listening to the crackle of flames and the murmurs of the crowd outside. The small chamber was uncomfortably hot. "I miss you," she whispered. She might have learned to check her tears, but a lump rose in her throat as her voice thickened with emotion. "I wish you

could have been here today.” She picked up one of the arrowheads, rolling it between her fingers. “You would have been really proud of me.”

#

It was difficult to stay awake as she was carried back to the palace in a covered sedan. The private enclosure was thick with soft pillows and Nahri was exhausted. Between her usual nightmares and the final preparations to free Elashia, she’d barely slept in the past week.

She’d just started to doze off when the sudden lurch of her sedan drew her attention. And then she heard him. A man crying – begging – for mercy in Arabic.

In Egyptian Arabic.

Nahri straightened up like a shot, unnerved to hear the language of her first home screamed in such desperation. She clutched one of the support poles of her sedan as her litter was jostled around. She could see the silhouettes of a crowd just past the curtains and suddenly sensed the litter being raised higher in the air her bearers presumably tried to pass through Daevabad’s traffic.

“You’re not my uncle!” the man screamed again. “You’re a God-damned demon, and I’m not going back with you!”

Nahri drew back the curtain.

They were in the midan; the large plaza that fronted the seven gates leading off to Daevabad’s various tribal districts and the Grand Bazaar. Like much of the city lately, the midan was in poor repair. The marble fountain in its center was cracked and mostly empty save a few puddles of stagnant water. The plaza’s copper walls had gone green and slick with grime. Though the midan was crowded with hawkers – a large number looking quite unsavory – there were no royal guards in sight. Nahri wasn’t surprised. She’d been hearing rumors for a while of

the increasingly rocky relationship between Ghassan and his army. A quietly loyal Agnivanshi officer whose wife she'd healed told her that not only had their salaries been reduced, but that there was a lot of sympathy among the mostly Geziri troops for the seemingly exiled Alizayd. The great Afshin-slayer, a fellow warrior out killing monsters in Am Gezira and turning its sandy dunes green with food was becoming a rather romantic figure about his tribe.

Across the midan, a small crowd had gathered around two arguing men. One was clearly a Sahrayn pure-blood; she could tell from his brightly striped hooded robe, peaked ears, and fiery red-black hair. Two other men were behind him, and all three were armed. Not surprising, considering the city's growing crime.

A skinny shafit youth stood before them. His brown skin lacked the glow of a pure-blood and as he raised his voice again, her heart rose to her throat. He was definitely Egyptian; she would swear she even heard a hint of Cairo's distinctive flavor in his voice. An Egyptian mixed blood like her, probably dragged from his home when he happened upon a pure-blood who realized his djinn heritage.

You're not Egyptian, she reminded herself, *not really. Nor shafit*. Nahri's humanlike appearance was blamed on a marid curse no one could understand nor possibly reverse. It was a lie – Ghassan had even admitted it, but it allowed her to hold a place of prominence in their world and unify their tribes. As far as she was aware, only Ghassan knew the truth. Suleiman's seal, of which he was the sole possessor, allowed him to see her true appearance.

"What's going on?" she asked Soroush as he warily eyed the arguing men.

"A runaway shafit got caught, it would seem." His hand rested on the sword at his waist.

One of the Sahrayn man grabbed for the shafit man. She couldn't hear what he said, but it looked like he was trying to reason with the other man.

The shafit jerked away. “You’re not my family!” he spat. “You lying demons. You have no such blood rights to me. You work me to the bone, you make me live in filth. I’m not going back!”

There were a few grumbles of assent in the crowd, but most people seemed more interested in ignoring the brewing confrontation.

Soroush narrowed his eyes. “The hypocrites,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?”

He waved an agitated hand. “The djinn’s whole guardian system. That shafit boy is likely someone they snatched off the streets and forced into servitude. If a pureblood claims a blood relation, then they’re legally responsible for the shafit.” He scoffed. “It means they can keep them locked up as well. All they have to do is pretend to be a concerned family member.”

She swallowed, trying to ignore the rising dread in her stomach. What Soroush said wasn’t new information, but Nahri tried hard not to think about the plight of Daevabad’s shafit, keeping her focus firmly on her work and her own tribe. But it was impossible to ignore the implications of the scene playing out before her.

That could be me, she realized. A fellow mixed blood from Egypt; she probably had more in common with that young man than anyone in the palace, her Daeva guards included.

“Let’s get out of here, Banu Nahida,” Soroush urged in Divasti. “These people like to blame us for all their problems and I don’t like the size of this...”

There was a gasp in the crowd. The Sahrayn man had made another grab for the shafit and in response, the Egyptian struck him hard across the face.

Even Nahri knew shafit were forbidden from raising a hand to a pure-blood, no matter the offence. The Sahrayn man reeled back in shock as his fellows finally seized the Egyptian. They shoved him to his knees as the Sahrayn man freed his sword.

And then he noticed her.

The Egyptian's brown eyes locked on hers from across the midan. Hope, desperate and stupid, stole past their fear. "Sister," he begged in the Cairene-accented Arabic in which she still dreamed. "Please! Hel—"

Soroush yanked the curtain shut.

"Go," he ordered curtly to her bearers who immediately startled jostling past the crowd to hurry away.

Nahri was frozen. *Do something.* But what? She had two guards, and there were perhaps a dozen other Daevas in the midan. The djinn could just as easily turn on them, accusing the fire-worshippers of interfering in business that wasn't there. Her tribesmen had always proved easy targets in Daevabad.

She swallowed, grabbing one of the inner support poles as the litter pushed through the crowd. She caught a glimpse of the Daeva Gate through the curtains. They were nearly there, far too late to do anything.

The curtains might have blocked her sight, but it couldn't shut out the noise. Which is why she heard the young man's screaming, his pleading in the language she'd grown up with, finally ended by a wet thump.

NAHRI

The reeds tore at Nahri's legs as they hurried through the flooded marsh. She burst into fresh tears, burying her face in the warm neck of the woman carrying her.

"Shush, little love," the woman whispered. "Not so loud."

They climbed down into the narrow canal that watered the fields. Nahri peeked up as they passed the shadoof, the wooden beams of the irrigation tool jutting up against the night sky like massive claws. The air was thick with the smoke and screams of the burning village behind them, the curtain of papyrus doing nothing to conceal the horror they'd narrowly escaped. All she could see of their village now was the shattered top of the mosque's minaret above a sea of sugarcane.

She dug her small fingers into the woman's robe, clutching her closer. The smoke burned Nahri's lungs, nothing like the pleasantly clean scent of the tiny flames she liked to sing into creation. "I'm scared," she whimpered.

"I know." A hand rubbed her back. "But we just need to get to the river. El Nil. Do you see it?"

Nahri saw it. The Nile, coursing fast and dark ahead. But they'd only just crashed into its shallows when she heard the voice again—the stranger who'd arrived speaking the musical language Nahri was never permitted to use outside their small home, the words that whispered and burned in her mind when her scraped knees healed and when she breathed life anew into the tiny kitten crushed by a reckless trader's cart.

"Don't!" the stranger yelled.

The woman wasn't listening. Transferring Nahri to her hip with one arm, she bit deep into her other hand until it bled and then thrust it into the water.

“I CALL YOU!” she cried. “Sobek, you promised!”

A heavy stillness stole across the air, silencing the dying cries of Nahri’s blazing village and freezing the tears rolling down her cheeks. Her skin pricked, the hair on the back of her neck standing up as though in the presence of a predator.

On the opposite bank, a dark form slipped into the water.

Nahri tried to jerk back but the arms around her were strong, pushing her into the river.

There was arguing. “I will get you your blood!” A brow pressed hers, a pair of warm brown eyes, flecked with gold, locking on Nahri’s eyes, the eyes neighbors whispered were too dark. A kiss upon her nose.

“God will protect you,” the woman whispered. “You are brave, you are strong, you will survive this, my darling, I swear. I love you. I always will.” The next words came in a blur, the woman weeping as her gaze turned to the water. “Take this night from her. Let her start anew.”

Teeth clamped around Nahri’s ankle and then, before she could scream, she was dragged under the water.

#

“Nahri! Nahri, wake up!”

Nahri woke with a start. She gasped, a cold sweat breaking across her skin.

Muntadhir’s hand was still on her shoulder. “Are you okay?” he asked. “You were crying in your sleep. Screaming that human language of yours.”

I was? Nahri blinked, the details of the nightmare already receding. A pair of brown eyes, the smell of the silt-rich waters of the Nile. Terror. Raw and wrenching and unlike anything she’d ever felt before. She shivered.

“I’m fine,” she insisted. She shook off his hand, peeling away the silk sheets to slip from her bed. She crossed the room, the marble floor past the rug a cold shock on her bare feet and poured herself a glass of water from a pitcher resting on a small enameled table. A cool breeze played with the linen curtains, smelling of wet earth and jasmine. Beyond the open door leading to the balcony, the gardens were entirely black; she doubted it was even close to dawn.

Muntadhir spoke again, his voice oddly soft. “I get them too. Nightmares, I mean. Of that night on the boat.” He bit his lip. “If I had just moved faster—”

“Why are you here?” It came out colder than she meant, but Nahri was not discussing that night with him.

Muntadhir visibly startled at her tone and then raised a dark eyebrow. “Now that’s just insulting.”

Nahri cleared her throat, a little heat creeping into her cheeks. “I mean why are you *still* here?”

“I fell asleep.” Muntadhir shrugged. He lay back on their rumpled sheets, the picture of royal indolence as he crossed his wrists behind his head. “I didn’t know I was to hurry from my wife’s bed like a wide-eyed concubine.”

“An image you must have a degree of familiarity with.”

He gave her an even look, nodding at her messy hair and disheveled shift. “I speak Divasti, Nahri. You were definitely *not* objecting to my presence earlier.”

There was no fighting the blush now, but Nahri held her ground. “Do you want some sort of praise? You’ve slept with half of Daevabad. I’d hope you’d have *some* skill.”

“Only you could make that sound like an insult.” But Muntadhir finally rolled out of her bed, reaching for his waist cloth as he stood. “Maybe it would be better not to fall asleep beside you. I’m sure your mother’s notes are full of suggestions for Qahtani blood.”

“So, stop coming,” she snapped, still on edge from the nightmare. “Surely you have beds aplenty to occupy you.”

He looked taken aback. “God, Nahri, it was a *joke*. Why must you always be so prickly about everything?” He lazily tied the bindings on his waist wrap. “And I do believe you were there when my father pointed out that if I wasn’t using certain parts to give him a grandchild, I must not need them at all.” He shuddered. “I’ll keep visiting.”

She said nothing. The nightmare was still on her mind, a memory, a meaning trying to connect.

Muntadhir picked up his robe. He seemed to hesitate and then spoke again. “Actually, on that note...there was something else.” He picked up the black bag he’d brought with him; one that Nahri had ignored, assuming it wine or God only knew what intended for whatever evening amusements he had planned after visiting her. “I brought you something.” He motioned towards the cold embers in her fireplace; Daevabad’s nights were warm enough for her and the soft light of her flickering fire altar all she needed to sleep. “Do you mind?”

A little intrigued, Nahri shrugged. “I’ll let you stay if a gift is involved.”

“You know if you were a wazir, you’d be investigated for corruption talking like that.” Muntadhir squatted at the hearth, relighting the fire with a snap of his fingers.

“How fortunate that my position is hereditary.”

He sat in one of the cushioned chairs in front of the fire. Nahri took the opposite one, propping her feet on a plump ottoman, watching as he pulled what appeared to be a thin book from the bag.

She frowned. "I didn't think you could read."

"Yes, I'm aware how I measure up against your royal pen pal."

Nahri just barely kept herself from stiffening. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Muntadhir gave her a measured gaze. "I'm the Emir of Daevabad, Nahri. Give me some credit: do you really think I wouldn't find out another man had been writing to my wife?"

Everything about his response made Nahri's temper rise. "What a lovely way to remind me that you keep spies in my quarters. Surely they are talented enough to have informed you that those letters get immediately burned in my fire altar?"

"Not immediately they don't," Muntadhir countered quietly.

Now it was Nahri's cheeks that burned. Ali and his stupid letters. He'd taken to writing her after he was dispatched to his garrison in Am Gezira. Not often, and perhaps suspecting they'd be intercepted, he didn't dare touch on that night on the boat. Instead his notes had been almost impersonal ramblings that just like their reluctant friendship, had drawn her in with equal amounts endearing naivete and wit. Sketchings of ancient ruins, descriptions of local healing plants, any bits of news he'd learned of neighboring Egypt, stories about the nearby humans.

They always ended the same way. Written in a rough transcription of the Egyptian dialect she'd taught him: "I'm so sorry. I pray God grants you some happiness."

Even if she hadn't been worried about getting caught, Nahri wouldn't have written back. She didn't trust the tug on her heart that Ali—her enemy in every way—seemed to have. Had it

not been for that affection, she might have noticed the quiet way he was waiting for soldiers that terrible night instead of imploring him to escape alongside she and Dara.

She cleared her throat. “You mentioned a gift, not an interrogation. Can we move onto that part?”

Her husband rolled his eyes but held out the cloth-covered book. Nahri carefully unwrapped it. A stylized painting of a winged lion – the shedu that was the emblem of her family – roaring at a rising sun was centered on the book’s cover. The next page was a garden scene rendering in painstakingly miniature details and the next a handsome young soldier on horseback.

“They’re your uncle’s,” Muntadhir explained. “He used to paint and sketch on the side. Not many have an appreciation for Daeva art in the palace, but I always thought Rustam was talented.”

He was. Nahri was among those with little understanding of art, but even she could see the spark her uncle had managed to catch in his subjects: the gleam of ornaments in a dancer’s bright costume, the wearied slump of an old scholar surrounded by simmering glass vials.

“Where did you find these?”

Muntadhir shrugged. “Various collectors.”

Nahri turned the next page. A painting of the infirmary’s garden and a shafit servant with a slightly mischievous smile tending what looked like jute plant in its center. She traced the bumpy edge of a brushstroke. Nahri had nothing so personal, so precious of the uncle she’d never met. Beyond the pavilion outside, there was a small grove where Rustam had tended oranges and rare herbs, and she was tempted to take the book there now. To sit and linger with it in a place he might have. To feel some connection with her vanished family.

Instead, she closed it, unwilling to let her husband see such weakness. Muntadhir was not a thoughtful man: he wasn't unkind, rather she suspected a lifetime in the palace, wined and dined as the heir to the powerful Qahtani throne had simply shaped him to be a man who didn't think of others. She couldn't imagine him thinking of such gift, let alone taking the time to track down a bunch of scattered artwork.

She could; however, think of someone else who would have done such a thing...someone who would have been all too happy to let Muntadhir take the credit. "I'll be sure to thank Jamshid the next time I see him."

Muntadhir sighed. He glanced at the low table between them and his fingers twitched, as if wishing for a glass of wine to ease his discomfort. "You don't always have to make this so hard, Nahri."

"What?"

"This." He beckoned between them. "*Us*. The stunt at the Treasury. You completely humiliated me." He threw up his hands. "And for what? I might have helped you of my own accord."

"I doubt that very much." She scoffed. "You snap to your father's order as quickly as the rest of us."

He flinched, taking a controlled breath. "I'm just trying to say this doesn't have to be a miserable as you seem determined to make it." He raised his hands. "We're not getting out of this, Nahri. Divorce would be political suicide for both of us."

"So, this is what? A peace offering?"

"Yes. Navasatem is coming up. The start of a new generation. I'd like to see if there's not a way for you and I to have a fresh start." When Nahri raised a skeptical brow, he pressed on. "I

don't expect some great love story, Nahri, but we could attempt not to hate each other. We could attempt...to fulfill the actual reason we were married to each other in the first place.”

She shifted, the meaning of his deliberate words clearer. She gestured to the crumpled sheets on her bed. “We just did.”

Muntadhir shook his head, meeting her gaze. “Our people don't conceive as easily as your humans,” he said, his words both blunt and gentle. “Once every few months is not going to produce the heir everyone is expecting.”

Nahri flinched. “I'm the Banu Nahida of Daevabad, not some brood—”

“I know,” he cut in. “Nahri, I know. Believe it or not, I feel rather similarly. Which is why I'm trying to have a conversation with you, to build a better understanding between us...” He sighed. “Can I speak frankly?”

“I cannot imagine there's a way to get more candid.”

That brought a small, half-smile to his face. “Fair. Alright.” Muntadhir glanced down at his hands. “I cannot help but feel like every time we...*fulfill* the actual reason we were married, you pull away more. And I don't understand. When we were first married, we used to talk. We used to *try*. Now I can't get a word out of you that isn't barbed.”

His words took her aback—as did the fact that, well, he was right. When they were first married, Muntadhir had determinedly courted her. They might not have slept *together*, but he insisted they share a bed more nights than not, as well as conversation, even if it was just him passing on court gossip over a cup of wine. And oddly enough, Nahri had started to somewhat enjoy the bizarre ending to her day with her ancestral enemy. Their night together got her out of the infirmary, for one, and his gossip was often useful, filling in the gaps of her political knowledge. Muntadhir was nothing if not a charmer and a storyteller, and Nahri could not help

but laugh at some of the ridiculous scandals he told her of poets who hexed their competitors and merchant nobles tricked into buying invisibility cloaks that failed when they got caught in bed with djinn who weren't their spouses. She found herself occasionally doing the same, sharing tales of the wild magical mayhem the Daevabadis in her infirmary got themselves caught in.

It was a courtship with an obvious goal, and Muntadhir had never hid his intentions. He proceeded slowly: massaging her hands after a long surgery and then eventually her neck and her calves. He took to wearing less and less to bed, and perhaps not-so-accidentally stoking the fire so that it was too uncomfortable for *her* to sleep fully clothed. And a year into their marriage, after her own generous cup of wine, a mix of curiosity and weariness had finally gotten the better of her. Nahri had doused the lights, closed her eyes and told him rather gruffly to get on with it.

He had complied, and she had enjoyed it. It would be pointless to feign otherwise—it was, as even she admitted, his only skill. But finally consummating their marriage had—in a way she hadn't grasped until this moment when he called her out—destroyed any budding warmth between them. For it had been an intimacy whose depth Nahri didn't realize until it was too late, one she didn't want to share with him. Muntadhir didn't want her; he wanted to obey his father and do right by their people and the alliance their marriage implied.

“See?” he prodded, pulling her from her thoughts. “I can see you doing it right now. Retreating into your head rather than talking to me.”

Nahri scowled. She didn't like being read so easily, especially by him. She also didn't know what to say.

Muntadhir pressed on, his tone gentler. “What I said back there about my father and refusing to visit your bed: I was joking. If you need a break...”

“We can’t take a break,” Nahri cut in, her voice returning. “People will talk, and your father will find a way to punish us.” And that? That something so private was reported to the man she hated most in the world, the man who held her life and the lives of everyone she cared about in his hand?

That was why Nahri could not warm to Muntadhir. Because despite everything she told herself: that she had consented to this marriage and taken the Qahtanis for every coin she could, that to be married off for political gain was the fate of every woman of noble blood, that her husband at least was decent and handsome and cared for her satisfaction...it all faded before one undeniable truth. Neither she nor Muntadhir wanted this. Nahri was a prize to the Qahtanis; she had given herself, her very body, in marriage to save her life and stop Ghassan’s bloodletting of her people. Were she to deny him now, there would be a cost.

Muntadhir reached for her hand even as she rose to her feet. “Then *tell* me. Have a conversation instead of just spitting something bitter. What do you want? What will make this easier for you?”

Nahri stared down at him and answered honestly. “Nothing you can give me.”

Her response seemed to genuinely take him aback, his gray eyes going wide. But before he could stammer a reply, there was an impatient knock at the door. Muntadhir jumped, but Nahri was far too accustomed to being awoken in the middle of the night, and indeed, a second later, Nisreen was there, outlined in the light of the open doorway.

Her assistant was flushed. “Emir Muntadhir, Banu Nahri...forgive the interruption, but there’s an emergency in the infirmary.”

Nahri dropped Muntadhir’s hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Elashia is awake and destroying your workspace.”

Nahri swore. The freed djinn had fallen back asleep shortly after being resurrected, her eyes squeezed shut as if to close out the world. The Nahid texts said it was common as they adjusted to their new bodies. “She was supposed to be under constant supervision. Why did someone not alert me earlier?”

Nisreen crossed her arms. “Because most of your aides are incompetent fools chosen for political connections instead of skill.”

Lovely. Nahri swiftly pulled on a long robe she kept at the side of her bed for such nocturnal emergencies. She touched Muntadhir’s wrist again as she passed. “Let’s...” She sighed begrudgingly. “Let’s talk another night, alright? I have to deal with this. And thank you for the gift.”

Relief lit his face. “I’d like that. And you’re welcome.”

Nahri turned away, following Nisreen through the door leading to the infirmary. Her infirmary was located just across from her bed chamber; a closeness she was grateful for on nights like this one. It had been entirely rebuilt and expanded after Dara and Ali destroyed it though Nahri had kept the style, liking the plain white-washed walls and blue stone floor. Had it not been night, sunlight would have streamed in through the glass ceiling tiles; all she saw now was a few bright stars and sliver of moon.

They quickly cut through the tightly packed patient beds; the flickering wall torches and bedside candles revealing that most of her patients were awake and casting frightened glances at the smaller half of the room where she kept her workspace. The felt curtain that cordoned it off was drawn back, revealing the chaos unfolding. The tables containing her pharmacy work had been tipped over and smashed glass littered the floor. Her bookshelves and desk were ransacked, at least Nahri thought so, as their natural state also tended towards that appearance.

And before it all was Elashia. She darted away from two guards and Nahri heard one of them let out a pained yelp. “She bit me!”

“Suleiman’s eye,” Nahri swore, racing towards the scene. “Close the damn curtain!” she shouted at one of her assistants, a slip of a noblewoman half-hiding in the shadows. “She’s scaring my patients!”

Elashia froze at the sound of Nahri’s voice, jerking to a halt in front of the blazing fire pit. She was a horror to look upon; barely clothed and drenched in black blood. And as Nahri drew nearer, she found out why.

She’d been *painting*. Or at least doing some sort of creating. Blood and shredded clothing, along with plenty of Nahri’s ruined glassware and crumpled notes had been carefully arranged in a series of patterns on the stone floor. No... not patterns, Nahri realized, recognizing the shape of a bloody elephant with a torn and twisted sleeve for a trunk. Animals. A menagerie of animals from some hellish zoo.

“She was trying to get into the apothecary when we noticed her, Banu Nahida,” one of the guards warned as Elashia bared her teeth at them. Her green eyes blazed, so like Dara’s that Nahri could not help but flinch. The dark lines of her slave mark were dull and black in the firelight. The tattoo ended shortly before her shoulder. She might have shared Dara’s eyes, but she’d left a somewhat less bloody swath of former masters.

“Do not let her near the apothecary,” Nahri warned under her breath in Divasti. “No matter what.” Notes could be salvaged and broken glass swept but there were things behind the sandblasted shelves of her apothecary that could kill everyone here.

Elashia’s wild eyes were still locked on hers. Nahri raised her hands. “Relax,” she said softly in Sahrayn. “You’re free and safe in Daevabad. There are no ifrit or humans anywhere

near here.” She stretched out her hand. “My name is Banu Nahri e-Nahid. Why don’t you come sit with me?”

Elashia didn’t move; didn’t even blink. God, there was barely anything recognizably djinn in her face. She might as well have been one of the animals painted on the floor.

And just for a moment, Nahri started to wonder if she’d made the right decision.

Something thumped from inside her apothecary shelves, a muted explosion of stars –her store of phoenix feathers. Elashia startled and whirled on it while one guards chose that ill-opportune moment to slightly raise his sword and take a step in her direction.

It was a mistake. With a hiss, Elashia gouged out another gash in her abdomen so quickly Nahri’s eyes could barely track the movement and painted a shape in her palm. In seconds, a black knife glistening with blood grew from it.

Nahri jerked back. By the Most High... that was new. And did that mean...

Elashia snapped her fingers.

The guard cried out as a painted serpent rose up off the floor and struck his calf, trying to sink paper fangs into his skin. Trumpeting filled the air as a pair of elephants charged the second guard, smashing the last of her tables in the process.

“Stop!” Nahri rushed at Elashia only to find something lunge in her direction. She got a glimpse of a bloody black hide marked with paper stripes before finding herself on her back. She landed hard; the wind knocked straight from her lungs.

The tiger that had been painted on the floor.

The conjured creature was only about the size of a large dog, but there’d been power behind that blow. The tiger pawed her with one clawed hand and snarled in her ear. Frozen, Nahri stared at the horrifying mask of its face. There were no paper fangs here; the tiger’s teeth

were bloody sharp mess of broken glass and stolen scalpel blades. It roared, its hot breath smelling of burning glass.

And then it was gone, rolling away with the young guard clutching its back. He grabbed a clump of the papers making up its scruffy hide and flames burst between his fingers. The beast screamed, clawing at his throat. Elashia spun on Soroush, raising her knife.

Nahri ran at her. Ducking a screeching monkey made from what looked like vapors and bird bones – remnants of a potion she'd been working on for days – Nahri was at the woman's side in seconds. Elashia whirled to face her, but stumbled, clearly still unaccustomed to her new body.

Nahri grabbed her, pressing her face between her hands. "Sleep," she commanded in Arabic, praying it worked.

Elashia collapsed in her arms. Nahri took a shaky breath and then stilled.

She smelled blood on the air, and sensed a slowing heart across the room.

She dropped Elashia and dashed towards the pavilion. The young guard who saved her life lay slumped under the burning tiger, his throat torn open by its jagged glass claws. Black blood puddled beneath him, a glaze brewing in his dazed, dark eyes.

Nahri dashed to his side. She pressed a palm hard against his ruined throat and then hissed, icy pricks stinging her palm. Whatever glass fragments Elashia had used to make the claws must have been contaminated, probably a mix of the random ingredients she kept littered about. Something glittered, a green-hued silver sparking from the guard's ruined throat. Nahri kept her hand on his wound, focusing on slowing the blood and commanding his heart to continue beating. "Nisreen, get me tweezers and a burning stick of cedar from my altar!"

A bit of life stole back into the young guard's face. Half was badly scarred, the skin mottled as if he'd been burned. His eyes found hers, now more frightened than dazed. He opened his mouth, a small incomprehensible syllable escaping.

"Don't," she warned. "You'll make the bleeding worse."

Soroush dropped to her side. "Mardoniye," he breathed. "Oh, no."

"Get me some clean bandages," Nahri commanded. He dashed off.

Nisreen returned with the fiery incense, tweezers, and a tin tray. "Alright, Mardoniye," Nahri started, keeping her voice calm. She pushed away the small flicker of guilt for not already knowing the name of a man willing to die for her. "Just stay calm and take small breaths. You're going to be fine."

She brought the fire in close, passing it just over the skin, purifying the wound as she deadened the nerves and burned out the potion. It sizzled and bubbled, evaporating in a shimmery agate haze. Mardoniye's gaze locked on the sacred flame, blinking back tears. She handed it back to Nisreen and beckoned for her assistant to sit at his side.

She edged closer, motioning for Nisreen to hold the flame higher so she could see. There were only a few pieces of glass, and she quickly removed them before pressing her palm to the wound again.

Heal. The skin stitched back together beneath her hand, albeit slower than it usually did. The wound was still angry and red when she removed her hand.

But not life-threatening. She took the bandages from Soroush, wiping her hands on one to get a sample of whatever was on his skin. She handed it off to Nisreen. "Test this. I want to make sure whatever was on those claws won't come back to haunt us."

"Yes, Banu Nahida."

Nahri returned her attention to the young guard, carefully bandaging his throat. “I’m going to keep you here until it’s properly healed. We’ll keep it wrapped for now and I’ll check later to make sure there’s no lingering effect from the poison.”

He blinked back tears. “Tha—” he started to croak.

“No need.” She smiled and touched his hand. “You saved my life. Now go rest that voice.” She glanced at Soroush. “Help him into one of the beds.”

“Yes, my Lady.”

Nahri took a deep breath and sat back on her heels, taking in the sight of her destroyed workspace, a bloodied Elashia, and an incredibly annoyed Nisreen.

She offered her assistant a weak smile. “Well... I did need to clean.”

#

Nahri pressed a hand on Elashia’s fevered brow. The freed woman’s eyes twitched under her closed lids. She spooned a bit more liquid into her mouth and then sat back. “That should keep her out until tomorrow.” She glanced through the scroll she’d recovered from her ruined desk, the record kept with Elashia’s relic that she’d been given after freeing her. “Apparently she’s artisan caste. Maybe she was some sort of painter.”

“An astonishing deduction,” Nisreen said sarcastically. Her assistant sat on the unconscious woman’s side, filing down her sharp nails and binding her hands. “Perhaps next time you should learn more about a enslaved djinn’s background before you steal their relic and perform banned magic to bring them back to life.”

Nahri shot her a glare. “Should I have kept her in slavery? I’m a Nahid. This is my responsibility.”

“Then be responsible.” Nisreen eyed her. “Freeing her in the first place was incredibly risky magic to undertake, Nahri. If even the slightest thing had gone wrong... you might have lost her soul forever, her bondage might have been made eternal...”

“I knew what I was doing,” Nahri replied heatedly. “Which is why she’s free instead of trapped in a damn ring for another century.”

“Free to paint weapons and beasts into existence?”

Nahri had little argument for that. “I didn’t know that was possible,” she admitted.

“Slave magic is unpredictable. It’s probably something the ifrit taught her.” Nisreen sighed. “You were not ready for this. Freeing a soul goes beyond calling them into a new body...and beyond enjoying the prestige associated with doing so,” she added, giving Nahri a knowing look. “They endure a suffering the rest of us can’t imagine.”

Nahri winced, Nisreen’s words finding their mark as usual. “I’m sorry,” she said softly. “The Nahid texts I read mentioned nothing like this. I figured she was a good one to pick. Manizheh had left a note saying she’d already broken the curse. Rustam was just waiting for the Treasury to send over the relic before freeing her.” She bit the inside of her cheek. “It was dated the day they left for Zariaspa for the last time.”

It was Nisreen’s turn to flinch. “I see,” she said softly. “That’s not however, the most encouraging sign. Banu Manizheh was the more skilled at magic, but Baga Rustam had a softer touch with their patients. It means they were likely concerned about something like this.”

“Why would it matter who freed her?”

“You’re bringing a soul back to life. It’s powerful magic, one that creates a bond between the newly awakened slave and the Nahid who does so. Depending on the degree of trauma they

suffered, some cling to this, very nearly treating the Nahid as their new master. Rustam was better at managing it. Manizheh could be...impatient.”

Nahri frowned. “But how would they even know what happened to the djinn during their time in slavery? It’s not like they could ask her while she was still trapped in the ring.”

“They would have seen some of her memories,” Nisreen explained. “A skilled Nahid can call upon the memories of an enslaved djinn while in contact with their vessel. That’s how they identify them.”

Did I do that with Dara? Twice Nahri had glimpsed Dara’s memories and seen terrible things: his murder at the hands of the ifrit and his forced destruction of a city at the hands of a human master.

She hadn’t known at the time that it wasn’t the first city he’d destroyed.

Nahri pushed that away. It was no time to contemplate the murderous past of the man who’d shattered her heart. She had a patient who needed help. “So how do I fix things then?” she asked “How do I help Elashia like my uncle would have?”

Nisreen gave her a sympathetic look. “I can’t tell you that, Nahri. It’s not a thing to be studied. It’s a thing to be learned by watching your elders, by serving at the bedside of the dying, by years of giving grieving relatives the worst news of their lives, and helping people find a way past situations that upend everything they dreamed for their future.” She nodded at the scroll. “That can’t replace experience. There’s nothing in there—” she pointed at the apothecary “—that will replace the years this woman lost with her family or erase the trauma and assault done upon her body and soul by a mob of humans.”

“So, what *do* I do then?”

Nisreen sighed, picking up Elashia's other hand. "There's a...place in the city for freed djinn. For those driven mad by the experience, those the Nahids couldn't help. It might be best for her."

Nahri was surprised. "You never told me anything about that."

"I didn't want to," Nisreen confessed. "It's not a pleasant place, Nahri, and you were so close to Dara...I didn't think it would be a good thing for you to see."

Nisreen's words sent unease flooding into her stomach. "I don't want to send her to a place like that."

"You might not have a choice." Nisreen gestured at the ruined workspace. "She could have killed someone, Banu Nahida. The infirmary isn't safe for her. When the king learns about this... I wouldn't be surprised if he forces you." Nisreen finished with Elashia's nails.

"Hopefully that will make it at least a little harder for her to tear at her own skin." She shook her head. "She should never have gotten as far as she did. That damned Nilofer. She was probably gossiping about jewels rather than attending her duties. You'll need to fire her."

"I can't fire her. Her father is one of the richest men in the city. He paid for most of the reconstruction the last time the infirmary was destroyed."

"Then assign her to staring at her own reflection in one of the fountains and find someone more competent to take her place."

Nisreen picked up a broom and began to sweep away the glass. A table and pair of chairs had been smashed to bits, the floor a carpet of razor sharp debris. Soroush had slain most of the animals but a bloody paper elephant and the vaporous monkey has escaped into the wild depths of the garden. Nahri pitied the unknowing servants likely to come across them. She hesitated,

considering her next words, the notion brewing in her mind since the murder of the Egyptian man in the midan.

“What if we hired a few shafit? Some of the servants have been working here for years. They’re familiar enough with…”

“You think to replace a Daeva aide with a dirt-blood?” Nisreen sounded aghast. “It’s against the law to treat them in the first place… and you’d consider teaching them some of your own magic? You’d alienate half the priests at the Grand Temple.”

Nahri shook her head. “You know I’ve never believed in that blood-purity nonsense. I healed humans all the time in Cairo. Or maybe I could do something else, like open up a clinic in the bazaar. The shafit must have midwives or some sort of doctors to treat them when they get sick. I could train them, make sure they have access to basic medications.”

“Because you’re not busy enough?”

She had a point there, but Nahri pressed on. “It…it doesn’t seem right, Nisreen. What’s going on with the shafit. I hear the rumors, I see what’s happening in the midan. People treat them like slaves, like vermin.”

“Do you not remember what they did to the Daevas they caught in the Grand Bazaar after Dara’s death?”

“So, their entire population should suffer?” Nahri gave her an imploring look. “Is that who we are?”

“Of course not.” Nisreen put down her broom. “But what you’re suggesting is impossible, Nahri, and you know it. The shafit are forbidden from Nahid care. From anything that… *increases* their population,” she added carefully. “Not even the most compassionate of your ancestors would have dared lay hands on a mixed blood.”

Nahri bristled. “They’re not that different from us, Nisreen.”

“They’re not your concern.” Nisreen met her gaze, her dark eyes thick with worry. “Your heart might be in the right place, but I assure you...they see you as their enemy. They see all of us that way.”

But I’m not their enemy. I’m one of them. “Don’t you ever wish that was different?”

Nahri asked instead. “Don’t you wonder what life might be like here were we not at each other’s throats?”

“You can’t change the past, Banu Nahida.” Nisreen nodded to the towering stack of patients notes. “Keep your head down and focus on your work. The Creator knows you have plenty of it.”

Keep your head down. The phrase left a sour taste in her mouth. That’s what Nahri had been doing for years. Compromise after compromise to keep her people safe. To keep herself safe.

While Daevabad went to hell around her. “Of course,” she said, biting back the bitterness rising in her voice.

ALI

The scene takes place during The Kingdom of Copper, a few days after Nahri, Ali, and Zaynab visit the Daeva Temple. There are spoilers for the first two books.

Ali glanced between the sketch in his lap and the hospital garden, tapping his pencil against his bottom lip.

“Perhaps another shade tree,” he muttered. He was alone in the garden’s half-collapsed gazebo, or as Subha referred to it: Nahri’s rotting death-trap. The two healers had been bickering for weeks about whether to fix the gazebo or tear it down, an argument that could be applied to most of the hospital’s restoration. Nahri had become deeply attached to anything that reminded her of her Nahid ancestors while Subha had the soul of a government safety inspector. Ali, on his part, religiously avoided picking a side in their fights. And people said he had no instinct for self-preservation.

Even so, there was no arguing that the rotting gazebo wasn’t something of a death trap. Its once finally carved wooden columns were peppered through with termite holes; the roof instead supported by a gnarled, sprawling fig tree. But hidden by tangled vine and avoided by everyone with sense, the gazebo was also one of the only places Ali could get paperwork done without being bothered. An entire stack of finished contracts sat on the remains of a stone bench, the very sight filling him with satisfaction. He looked up at them now with a smile.

Just in time to see a black-swathed figure stomp into the gazebo. They pulled back a tree bough thick with purple flowers to slip through and then released it in the direction of his scroll.

Ali had a split second to decide between saving his paperwork or protecting himself from a sudden intruder—a decision that several years of being hunted by assassins should have made intuitive—so of course he dove for his papers, skidding across the rocky ground on his shins and

lunging for the scrolls before they flew in the rain-soaked bushes. Only when his contracts were clasped safely to his chest, did Ali whirl around to see Nahri.

She clutched her heart in a similar manner. “My God, al Qahtani. Are you trying to give me a heart attack, jumping out of the bush like that?”

Ali climbed back to his feet, ducking to avoid hitting the gazebo’s low ceiling. He let out a hiss of pain; his shins burned terribly. “Says the woman running in here as though a magical beast were after her.” Then he frowned, taking in Nahri’s flushed cheeks and the leaves sticking to her disheveled headscarf. “Wait...*is* a magical beast on your heels?”

Nahri’s expression darkened. “Worse. Kaveh was here.”

Ali shuddered; happy he’d been hiding in the gazebo. “I didn’t know he was visiting the hospital today.”

“Neither did I. I think he was hoping to catch me doing something scandalous with the shafit, like treating them as equals or exchanging a kind word.” Nahri sighed. “Can I sit?” she asked, gesturing to the bench. “I need somewhere where I can just breathe and not see people for a few minutes.”

“Er...yes, of course.” Ali started gathering his things.

Nahri waved him off. “You can stay. You don’t count.” She narrowed her eyes at his legs. “But you are bleeding.”

Ali glanced down at his legs. Blood was blossoming through his pants and dishdasha, a lot. Ah, so that’s why his shins burned so badly. “It’s fine,” he lied. “Just a scrape.”

But Nahri was already taking his paperwork out of his hands. She pushed him onto the bench. “Sit. Just a scrape...save me from the pride of idiot men. Roll up your pants.”

Mortified, Ali nonetheless obeyed, blanching when he realized he no longer *had* skin between his ankles and knees and was bleeding so profusely that his sandals were turning black. “Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.” Nahri rolled her eyes and then with the ease of a professional who did this every day, clasped the back of his calves. Ali jumped at her touch, and she glanced up. “Did that hurt? It doesn’t feel like anything’s broken.”

“No,” Ali managed as the rain began striking the gazebo roof faster in pace with his racing heart. He could feel the press of each one of her fingers.

Nahri took a deep breath and then a wave of coolness swept through Ali like he’d submerged his legs into a cold pond. He shivered, watching in fascination as the wounds stopped bleeding and scabbed over. In minutes, there was nothing but healthy skin covering his shin, as though he’d never been injured.

“God be praised,” he breathed. “You must never tire of seeing that.”

“The ancestral duty has its occasional perks. Better?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “Thank you.”

“Add it to the debt you already owe me.” Nahri let go of his legs. “I hope the papers were worth it.”

Ali was already unwinding his turban. He shook out the cloth and then used it to carefully wrap up the scrolls. “Not having to read and annotate all these contracts again is very much worth it. Did you know people sneak in actual curses against competitors in construction contracts here?”

Nahri shuddered. “No. No, I did not.”

“Neither did I. Now everything is getting read twice.”

“Sounds monotonous.”

Ali shrugged. “I don’t mind a bit of monotony now and then. Balances out the brushes with death.”

Nahri had closed her eyes and reclined against the trunk of the fig tree. A brief smile crossed her face. “I suppose it does.”

She said nothing else, looking content to rest. Despite her assurances that he could stay in the gazebo, Ali hesitated. It was probably best he leave. Five years ago, he would have insisted on doing so. The optics were even worse now for Ali could only imagine how tongues would wag if Emir Muntadhir’s ambitious younger brother was spotted hidden with his wife in a remote garden. Daevabad lived for such gossip.

But Nahri had asked him to stay. And this was the warmest—well, least barbed conversation they’d had since that awful night on the lake. It felt fleeting and precious.

So Ali stayed. He returned to his spot on the opposite bench and retrieved his sketch. Thankfully it hadn’t gotten wet when he dropped it. Glancing again at the garden, he returned to his work trying to envision which plants and trees might best fit the space. The rain was still coming down heavy, the sound of the water droplets patting the leaves like music. The humid air was thick with moisture and smelled of wet earth and flowers. It was enormously, almost hypnotizingly peaceful. And oddly enough, it was actually rather nice to have Nahri there. The silence between them strangely comfortable.

Comfortable enough that he wasn’t sure how much time had passed when Nahri spoke again.

“What is that you’re drawing?”

Ali glanced up to see her watching him. “Just planning what to plant in the garden.”

Nahri seemed skeptical. “Did you learn much about gardening in the Citadel?”

“The most I learned about plants in the Citadel was to avoid thorned bushes if you needed to jump out of a window.” Ali tapped his drawing. “Gardening, farming... that I learned in Bir Nabat.”

She frowned. “I thought you were in charge of a garrison.”

Ah, yes, his father’s old lie. “Not quite,” Ali replied, not wanting to delve into violent family secrets right now. “Bir Nabat is built in the ruins of a human oasis town. I’ve been trying to restore their irrigation systems. Trust me...I’ve spent *way* more time thinking about plants and crop yields than I have about Citadel techniques in the past few years.”

“Alizayd al Qahtani the farmer.” Nahri smiled again and shook her head. “I have a hard time picturing it.”

“More like Alizayd al Qahtani the canal-digger. The glamorous life every prince dreams of.”

She was still studying him. “But you liked it there.”

Ali felt his smile fade. “Yes.”

“Do you want to go back?”

I don’t know. Ali looked away, her dark gaze too assessing. Nahri might think him a good liar, but he knew he wasn’t, especially not with her.

But the question stayed with him. And truth be told...Ali didn’t know. The idea of even having the choice was an alien concept. People like Ali didn’t get to decide things like that for themselves.

“Whatever is best for my family,” he finally said.

There was a long moment of silence, the only sound the dripping leaves. Ali would swear he could feel the weight of Nahri's gaze.

But she didn't call him out on his evasive answer or respond with something sarcastic. "I suppose this can be a dangerous place to want things," she said instead, her voice quiet.

If that wasn't the truth. Dreaming of a better Daevabad had cost Ali and those around him dearly. Dreaming about his own life, about futures and paths that had been denied the moment he was born was more than dangerous. It made him feel...raw. Wounded and ugly and bitter.

It was not a direction he'd let his thoughts drift. "Yes," he said simply.

Nahri rose to her feet. "Let me see." She snatched the sketch from Ali's hands and elbowed him aside to make room for her to sit.

Embarrassed heat rose in his cheeks. "I'm not a very good artist."

"No, you're not. But I can figure it out." She tilted the drawing. "Healing herbs?" she asked, reading the Arabic note aloud.

"I know the garden is mainly meant for recreation, well for your patients to relax anyway." Ali pointed to the drawing he'd done of a weeping cypress. "So we'll put in plenty of shade trees and flowers...a new fountain. But if we have the room, we might as well grow something useful as well, and there's space here for a herb bed."

"There's that Geziri practicality."

Nahri bent over the paper. She was so close now that Ali could see the sheen of moisture on her face. A few locks of hair had slipped out of her scarf and were plastered to her damp skin. He took a breath and caught the scent of the cedar ash marking her brow and the jasmine blossoms braided into her hair.

Her nearness was extremely distracting, so much so that Ali didn't realize she'd asked him a question until she nudged his shoulder.

"Is this an orange tree?"

"An orange what...uh, yes," Ali stammered. "I figured we could transplant a sapling from your uncle's grove back at the palace. Or we could do something else," he said quickly when she blinked in surprise. "Lemon or lime—whatever you want, really."

"No. The orange is perfect." Nahri's eyes darted from the drawing to meet his gaze. "It's very thoughtful of you."

Still flustered, Ali rubbed the back of his neck. "You seemed fond of it."

"Of course I'm fond of it." She gave him a knowing, mischievous smile that sent his belly into flutters. "I wouldn't have thought you had equally happy memories."

The allusion to their ill-fated reunion didn't miss him. "I shouldn't have been where I wasn't invited," he said with as much diplomacy as he could.

"Well, listen to you learning." Nahri handed him back the sketch and then sighed. "Maybe I can trick Kaveh into coming by the grove and getting swallowed by a root."

"Was his visit that bad?"

Nahri scowled. "I hate the way he talks to me...the way so many of them do. Like I'm this half-feral child they need to clean up and protect. People like Kaveh would rather me be a silent icon they can worship instead of a leader who actually challenges them. It's infuriating."

"I don't think it's just about protecting you," Ali said, remembering their visit to the Temple and the horrified shock of the priests and Kaveh when Nahri announced her plan. "I think they're afraid. I think you do more than challenge them. You shame them."

Nahri gave him an annoyed look. “How do I *shame* them? I’ve behaved diplomatically at every damn turn!”

“You diplomatically went to the Daeva temple and turned over centuries worth of ignorant beliefs about the shafit. The kind of things people make themselves believe so they can look upon another as inferior and still call themselves a good person. That’s a hard thing for people to hear.” Ali gazed in the direction of the Nahid’s ancient apothecary, the place that they’d just weeks ago found the bones of innocent healers his own ancestors had slain in their war for equality. “Trust me.”

His words hung heavy for a minute. And then Nahri, in the most deadpan sarcastic tone he’d ever heard, said, “You really did go full hearing voices and wandering the desert religious back in Am Gezira, didn’t you?”

“I’m trying to help you. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She sighed and settled closer to him as she brought her knees to her chest. She shook out the end of her chador, scattering water droplets. “Is this rain your doing by the way?”

The unexpected question sent a punch of fear through him. “Of course not.”

“A shame.” Nahri glanced at him and in the darkness of her eyes, there was no accusation or jest. She just looked very, very tired. “I was hoping you might keep it up a few days more.”

Ali desperately wished he was better with his words. He couldn’t think of anything he might say that would ease the sorrow in her expression. “Any more rain and this roof is going to collapse,” he said, trying for a joke instead. “It might drown Daevabad. It might trap you in here with me.”

She gave him a small smile. “You’re not always so bad. Even when you’re talking like an overwrought Friday preacher.”

“May I speak like that again for a moment?” When Nahri nodded, Ali continued. “You should be proud. This hospital, bringing in Subha and facing down your priests...it’s all incredibly brave. You’re doing great things. Don’t let others make you feel small because they’re struggling to measure up.”

Nahri stared at him. He couldn’t read the emotion churning in her eyes, but then she swallowed loudly before dropping her gaze. “Thanks, al Qahtani,” she murmured.

They sat together in silence again. Her shoulder brushed his and it was all Ali could do to stay still.

Nahri tapped one of the fig branches with her foot. “Do you think this will bear fruit?”

Ali didn’t know if that was a metaphor or an attempt to change the subject. “I’m not sure.”

“I thought you were a farmer now.”

“Ditch-digger. Different specialty.”

“Ah, of course. Forgive the grave error.”

“What about you?” Ali asked. “I’ve confessed my secret desire to give up the royal life for crop rotation. What would you do if you weren’t the Banu Nahida? And don’t say doctor or pharmacist. That’s cheating.”

“I like cheating.” Nahri shrugged. “I don’t know...I’ve never really thought about it.”

“You’ve never fantasized about a different life?”

“I told you I don’t believe in dreaming. It sets you up for disappointment.”

“That is the most depressing thing I’ve ever heard, and I had a sheikh when I was six who spent an entire year detailing Judgement Day. Come on,” he encouraged, turning to face her. “Besides it’s not dreaming. It’s a fantasy that you know won’t come true. A distraction. Wine

poet,” Ali teased, thinking of the furthest thing from Nahri he could. “Simurgh trainer. My father’s most patient scribe.”

Nahri swatted his shoulder. “I would rather be poisoned. Hmm. If I couldn’t be a doctor...Bookseller, perhaps.”

“Bookseller?”

“Yes,” she replied, sounding surer. “I think I’d like having my own business. I like talking to people, I like books, and most of all, I enjoy convincing people to part with their money. Besides, could you imagine having all those books? Being able to read anything you want and fill your brain with new information all day?”

Ali grinned. “Yes, I remember how eager you were to get your hands on everything in the library.”

“Excuse me, I’m not the one who got blown out of a shelf and smashed against the wall for their curiosity.”

Ali flushed, remembering their trip to the library catacombs. “It hurt so much,” he confessed. “I was trying to act all fine and unfazed, but I was seeing stars the entire time.”

Nahri laughed. It was a genuine, deep laugh, not one of her mocking snickers. Ali couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard her laugh. He wanted to grab it, to memorize the way her smile lit her face and keep it there for as long as he could.

But her smile was already fading. “I really enjoyed those afternoons,” she confessed. “I was so overwhelmed when I first got to Daevabad. Everyone’s expectations, the politics I couldn’t understand—it was crushing. It was so nice to slip away for a few hours a day. To speak Arabic and get all my questions answered without you making me feel stupid.” She stared at her hands. “It was nice to feel like I had a friend.”

Any teasing jest Ali might have offered died on his lips. "Could we be friends again? Or not friends!" he amended quickly when Nahri's expression fell. "Just two people who occasionally meet in an extremely dangerous gazebo to fantasize about the different lives they'd rather be living."

She was already shaking her head. "I don't think that's a good idea, Ali."

Ali. It was the first she had called him that since he'd returned to Daevabad. "Is it because of that night on the boat?" he asked in a rush. "I'm sorry. I really didn't—"

"It's not because of that night on the boat." Nahri reached out and took one of his hands. Ali went entirely still as her fingers slipped between his. She squeezed his hand and then very carefully released it. "It's because I don't trust how very badly I'd like to be your friend again."

Ali was as confused as he was breathless. "I don't understand."

"I know you don't. *I* don't," she muttered, seemingly to herself as she rose to her feet. "It's just...it's like you said before: you'll do what's best for your family. I'll do what's best for the Daevas. If there ever came a time when either of us had to make a choice... I think it would be easier if we weren't friends."

Ali had no response to that. "Is there nothing I can do to help you?" he asked softly instead, aching as he watched Nahri carefully adjusted her chador upon her head and rise to her feet, reassuming her lonely mantle of duty. "I hate seeing you so sad."

Nahri gave him a broken grin that didn't touch the misery in her eyes. "Smuggle me out if your father lets you leave? Surely Bir Nabat could use a good bookseller."

Ali forced a smile, even as despair stole over him. "I'll keep an eye out for Banu Nahida-sized travelling bags."

“Thanks.” Nahri moved to leave, stepping back over the fallen columns. He lowered his gaze. “But Ali...one more thing?”

He glanced up. Nahri hadn't fully turned around and the profile of her face was only partially visible behind the chador she was holding under her chin.

“Yes?” he asked.

She paused and when she spoke again, her voice was more hesitant, embarrassed. “There are these little purple flowers that grow on the hills. I've never seen them up-close—your father doesn't let me leave the city walls. But do you know what I'm talking about?”

Ali was surprised to realize he did. “I think they're called iris.”

“Could we grow them here?” Nahri asked. “They're one of the first flowers to bloom in spring. The sight of them has always made me hopeful.”

“Then I will grow them everywhere,” Ali said automatically. Realizing it came out like some sort of solemn vow, he quickly added, “I'll try anyway.”

The ghost of what might have been a smile curved her lips before she turned away. “Thanks.”

Ali watched her go. He said nothing else though a hundred half-formed sentences rose to his tongue, sentiments and emotions he couldn't quite figure out.

Instead he quietly called upon the marid magic he'd denied having and very carefully stilled the rain before it could fall on her head.

ZAYNAB

This scene takes place directly after the events in The Kingdom of Copper. Spoilers for the first two books.

“Like this?” Ali asked, bending his head to let her examine his turban.

“No, not like that. Let me...” Zaynab quickly rewrapped the turban, the silk feather-light in her hands. “You want to make the folds crisper. Like this. And you’ll need jewelry...” She turned away, humming as she pulled some pieces from the pile of ornaments she’d had her servants bring out.

Ali made a face as she draped pearls around his neck. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were enjoying this.”

“I’m completely enjoying this. It’s like playing dolls again and you’ll owe me a favor.” Zaynab picked up the tray of incense, swinging it over Ali’s head to let the smoke scent his clothes.

“I have mentioned the whole ‘being in a hurry part,’ yes?”

“Royals don’t worry about punctuality.” She slipped a silver ring over his thumb. “A pink diamond for Ta Ntry. Were you wise, little brother, you’d start making sure at least one element of your daily dress is Ntaran. Remind people you come from two powerful families.”

“Zaynab, there has not been a day in my life someone hasn’t reminded me of the fact that I’m Ayaanle. Usually rudely.” Ali stepped back and straightened up. “How do I look?”

Zaynab blinked. She might have been the architect behind their plan to steal Muntadhir’s ceremonial clothes in a last-minute effort to save Nahri’s planned meeting with the priests at the Temple, but the sight of her brother still took her aback. There was very little of the chattering young boy who’d followed her around the harem garden in the tall, imposing man standing before her now. With the help of one her maids, they’d used some spellwork to lengthen the

ebony robe. It smoked around Ali's ankles, black as night. He looked striking in the Qahtani colors, the purple and gold pattern twisted together. He still wore his zulfiqar and khanjar, the deadly blades with their well-worn handles a contrast to his finery that set them off even more.

"You look like the emir," Zaynab said softly, her heart wrenching in the way it always did when she was torn between her brothers. It was just so hard. She loved Muntadhir and only wanted the best for him. But after a lifetime of being treated as an 'other' by Geziri and Ayaanle noblewomen, after watching Ali be dragged to the Citadel and made into a weapon...

Well, Zaynab could not deny the fierce pride that burned in her to see an Ayaanle man dressed like a king. "You need to make sure Amma never sees you looking like this," she warned. "It's going to give her ideas."

Ali shuddered. "Don't even joke like that. She hears everything" He bit his lip. "Do you really think this is going to work?"

"Do you have any other ideas?"

"I could promise Dhiru that I'll jump in the lake again if he goes to the Temple."

Zaynab swatted him. "Don't you joke like that." She nodded at the pile of scrolls he'd been carrying. Ali and paperwork were constant companions lately. "Do you need any of that?"

Ali started sorting through the pile. "Maybe some of the basic plans...though the priests already know most of this. It's the shafit part we need to convince them of." He stuck the scroll under his arm. "God, I hope this works. I can't let her down again."

Can't let her down again. Not the hospital. Nahri. Zaynab even wondered if Ali heard it. If her clueless brother had any idea the dangerous path he seemed determined to race down.

She took his other arm. "We'll figure it out," she promised. "Now come on. We still need to steal Muntadhir's horse."

#

A jolt of fresh pain brought Zaynab back to present. She flinched. “Are you almost done?” she rasped, squeezing her eyes against the pain.

“No,” the shafit physician—Subha, Zaynab remembered—answered. “Hold still.”

“Do you know how much longer—”

“You should stop talking.” Zaynab blinked, shocked to be so rudely interrupted, but the doctor didn’t even glance up from her work. “Your throat is injured and needs rest. Next time you plan to spend the night screaming at half the city, take some warm olive oil first.”

Zaynab thought “screaming at half the city” a very trite way to describe warning Daevabad’s Geziris that their relics were about to kill them, but she was too exhausted and grief-stricken to argue. Instead she just grimaced, trying to keep still as Subha splinted her wrist. Her entire body ached. Until last night, Zaynab had considered herself an experienced rider; Muntadhir had been putting her in saddles since she could walk. She’d learned the hard way that there was cantering about the private trails in the palace gardens and then there was galloping madly through Daevabad, dodging fleeing djinn and moaning ghouls to scream warnings to any Geziri within earshot.

But we did it. Aqisa and I together. By the time the deadly copper vapor engulfed the Geziri Quarter, moving like a hungry malevolent fog, her people were ready: their relics removed and buried. Zaynab might have destroyed her voice, and she wouldn’t be getting near a horse for days, but she and Aqisa had saved thousands of lives. They were heroes.

You’re no hero. Your brother would still be alive if it wasn’t for you interfering and dragging him back to Daevabad. Again, the memory of Ali in royal clothes, fretting as he

worried about disappointing Nahri played in Zaynab's mind. She squeezed her eyes shut against the hot tears threatening to spill over again. Zaynab had cried enough.

He could still be alive. Zaynab clung to the sliver of hope, but she knew too well the odds.

For Zaynab and Aqisa had only completed the first part of their mission. They were to warn the Geziri Quarter of the plague coming for them, yes. But then they were supposed to go to the Citadel. To alert Ali and the officers who'd joined his rebellion that a worse coup had already arrived, and the army—Daevabad's feared Royal Guard, its thousands of well-armed, well-trained warriors—was needed to save the day.

Except there had been no Citadel.

Zaynab and Aqisa had ridden up to a scene from hell: Zaydi al Qahtani's mighty fortress—the first thing her family had built in Daevabad, the last place her beloved brother was seen—was no more. Its massive tower had been ripped from its moorings, smashed, and dropped in the lake. The rest of it fared no better. Every structure had been reduced to rubble and its courtyard was a muddy pit, scarred by water-and-blood-filled trenches as though a gargantuan beast had raked its claws over the ground.

Worse was the bodies. More bodies than Zaynab could count, in horrific states that would haunt her for the rest of her life. Crushed and drowned and ripped apart—their bloody scraps of uniform often the only thing that identified them as people. They were half-buried by wreckage and littered across the wet sand of the beach, floating in the dark lake and pinned beneath the fallen tower. Scores had been eaten alive, the remains of ghouls entangled with their ruined limbs.

Her father's army, annihilated. Her brother, gone.

Zaynab had snapped. She'd slipped from her horse, screaming Ali's name as she raced toward the scant band of survivors. There were so few men upright that she knew with a glance none were him. But she'd only gotten to the edge of the pit when the entire island began to shake. The motion had been so jarring that Zaynab had gone flying, falling hard and breaking her wrist. However the earthquake was the least of it. For as Zaynab sheltered from the debris raining down around her, she'd glanced up to see the very sky shatter.

It was the veil that separated their kingdom from the human world. As it vanished, it took with it the conjured fires of the djinn digging for survivors. The enchanted flying rugs they'd been using to whisk the injured to help. And as every bit of magic in Daevabad was stripped away...the real screaming had started.

Not that Zaynab had had much time to listen to it. By then Aqisa had caught up and dragged her away, throwing Zaynab on her horse and galloping for the hospital. "I will chain you to a post if you try to leave," the warrior woman had warned as she left Zaynab under Subha's care. "I will look for your brother. You don't need to see that."

Zaynab had been too dazed by pain and shock to argue, and it was only after Aqisa left that Zaynab realized the meaning of her words. Aqisa didn't expect to find Ali alive—and thought whatever she did find was something his sister shouldn't see.

That had been hours ago. Zaynab opened her eyes. The square of sky she could see through the sole window was the pale blue of early morning, the crimson of dawn gone.

No one called the adhan for fajr. The realization made her sick. Though Zaynab wasn't sure herself if she could pray right now. If she tried to call upon God, she was going to start sobbing and not be able to stop.

Amma, I need you. I need Abba. I need my brothers. Zaynab inhaled, trying to steady herself. “Has there been any news from the palace?”

The doctor shook her head. “Everything I’ve heard is madness. People are shouting another Suleiman has come to take our magic away and bring the wrath of the Creator down upon us.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No.” Subha gave her a dark look. “I think the gods washed their hands of this place a long time ago.”

Movement from the doorway caught her eye.

“Aqisa,” Zaynab breathed. “Thank God. Are you...?”

The question died in Zaynab’s mouth. Aqisa was covered in blood, her face ashen. She all but staggered inside, her deadly grace gone, to lean heavily against the wall.

Zaynab moved to go to her before a jolt of sharp pain reminded her Subha was still finishing her splint. “Help her! She’s hurt.”

“I’m not. It isn’t my blood,” Aqisa said hoarsely. She looked haunted, more shaken than Zaynab imagined her proudly rude, seemingly fearless friend could ever be.

Zaynab’s heart crashed to the floor. “You found him.”

Aqisa managed a bare shake of her head. “Not Ali. I found Lubayd.” She pressed the back of her head into the stone wall. “An ifrit killed him,” she whispered. “Put an axe through his back.” Tears glistened in the other woman’s eyes. “The stupid fool. He had no business getting killed by an ifrit.”

Lubayd. Ali's cackling, great bear of a friend. Zaynab let out a low cry, covering her mouth. Another man who wouldn't have been in Daevabad if not for Zaynab's machinations. "Aqisa, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Aqisa waved her off. "This wasn't you, Zaynab. This...this isn't any of us."

Subha had finished with Zaynab's wrist splint, the smell of lime and plaster ripe in the air. She rose to her feet. "Lubayd was a kind man," she said softly. "I kept having to kick him out for smoking in the hospital, but he was always so sweet with the workers' children."

"I will kill the creature who did it. I swear before God." Aqisa wiped her eyes and then took a shaky breath before she straightened back up. "Zaynab, your brother...I spoke to survivors I could find. They all said the same thing." Aqisa hesitated, and in the pause, Zaynab felt her throat close. "The ifrit that killed Lubayd...it took Alizayd."

Zaynab felt the room spin. "What-what do you mean it took him? Where?"

"I don't know. They said it vanished. There was a bolt of lightning and they were both gone."

Gone. The word rang through her head. Zaynab opened her mouth, but she had no response. She would have rather found Ali's body herself. She could have burned him and prayed in the way of their people. He would have at least died a martyr, opening his eyes to Paradise.

Now he would awaken to a human master. To centuries of suffering at the hands of the people whose world he'd so admired. Zaynab choked.

"Zaynab." Aqisa was suddenly there, gripping her shoulders. "He could still be alive. We don't know what the ifrit wanted with him."

Tears burned in Zaynab's eyes. "They only ever want one thing."

“You don’t know that,” Aqisa said fiercely. “They could be working with the Daevas behind this. Why else would they be here now?”

Subha gasped. “*Daevas* are behind this?”

“It was that spineless grand wazir who killed the king and released the poison targeting my people.” Aqisa spat. “I will kill him too.”

Aqisa’s murderous declarations brought Zaynab briefly out of the numbing cloud of grief threatening to consume her. She didn’t have time for it. “I don’t think it’s all the Daevas. Nahri’s the one who warned us. She and Muntadhir stayed behind at the palace,” Zaynab explained, nausea rising in her chest. “We were supposed to warn Ali and have him lead the Royal Guard back to help them.”

Subha had started pacing. “This isn’t good. I have dozens of Daeva patients here: victims of the attack on the Navasatem parade. If word gets around that Daevas were behind what happened to the Citadel...” She looked at Zaynab. “Do you have any allies outside the palace who could help us? Any relatives?”

Zaynab shook her head. “My father and grandfather were only children. I have a few distant cousins and uncles serving in Daevabad, but...” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “They would have been in the palace or the Citadel.”

“And your mother’s side?” the doctor pressed. “The Queen funded half this place. She must have connections, kin--”

“Most went back to Ta Ntry with her.” Saying it aloud made Zaynab feel violently alone. Her father was dead, her mother a world away. Muntadhir and Nahri were across the city and Ali...

She took a sharp breath against the pain in her chest. No, Zaynab wouldn't think of Ali right now.

“So, you have no allies,” Subha said bluntly. “How are we to prevent what's left of the Royal Guard from coming here and taking vengeance on my Daeva patients?”

Aqisa's eyes flashed. “The Royal Guard will listen to the princess. Zaynab is as much Zaydi al Qahtani's descendent as her brothers. Our people are loyal. They'll rally behind her.”

“Your people are conservative,” Subha argued. “They're more likely to lock her up in a mansion for her own protection while they fight over the remains of her father's regime and the city falls apart.” When Aqisa let out a hiss, Subha scoffed. “Don't glare at me. I've seen my own people abandoned too many times to be frightened by a scowling bandit.”

“I will show you a scowling—”

“That's enough.” Zaynab turned to Aqisa “Who have you been speaking to out there?”

With one last pointed glare at the doctor, Aqisa answered, “Soldiers mostly. There's a few dozen who survived, but no one very senior. I've found a couple nobles that look ready to wet themselves, the chief gardener, and the minister of honored provisions.”

“Honored provisions?” Subha asked. “Does that mean weapons?”

“It means robes,” Zaynab said weakly. “Robes of honor for guests.”

“Ah.” The doctor pinched the bridge of her nose. “We're all going to die.”

“We're not going to die.” Clutching Aqisa, Zaynab climbed shakily to her feet. Her legs felt like they'd been turned to rubber where they didn't hurt, and a foul odor scented the air. Zaynab wrinkled her nose only to realize that *she* was the source of the odor. Her dress was filthy and mud, blood, and God only knew what else stained the dark cloak she'd hastily wrapped around her body.

Fortunately, her turban was still intact and she was able to pull enough of the tail free to veil her face. “Let me go talk to these people.”

Aqisa stared at her. “You look like a ghoul.”

“A royal one?”

The warrior woman tilted her head. “Maybe?”

“A great source of comfort you are.” Cradling her splinted arm, Zaynab followed Aqisa out of the small room and into the hospital’s main corridor.

She could hear raised voices from the courtyard, the Geziri cadence familiar but damnably incomprehensible. Despite at least a dozen discreet tutors, Zaynab had never mastered her father’s language. It was a rejection that had never stopped stinging.

Now she hoped it wasn’t a weakness that prevented her from taking whatever reins of power she could.

“Idiots!” Aqisa barked in Djinnistani as they entered the courtyard of arguing djinn. Zaynab silently blessed her for switching languages. “Stop weeping and gnashing your teeth. Your princess is here to speak with you.”

Zaynab had not known men could shut up so fast. She stepped out from behind Aqisa. About a dozen Geziri men stared back at her, dressed in a motley assortment of bloody uniforms and rumpled dishdashas. Not a single face was familiar. Zaynab fought the instinct to recoil.

“Your Highness,” a man with a *very* broken nose stammered. His eyes went wide over the swollen bruise that was his face and then he abruptly lowered his gaze, dropping to one knee so fast it had to hurt. He smacked the man next to him and then they were all kneeling and no one looking at her at all.

Which only succeeded in making Zaynab feel more out of place. She likely knew some of their women; the wives and daughters she'd have confidently ruled over in the harem. That was the kind of power Zaynab was familiar with; the strings of command that ran through the world of women and could bring down a throne. Money, marriage and trade alliances, a whisper of gossip...those were the tools Zaynab had mastered and she wielded them with the lovely smile her courtiers tried so hard to earn. She *liked* that power. She'd used it to save Ali's life and bring him home, she'd been trying to use it to settle the brewing war between her brothers. Zaynab often hated the physical constrictions of her role—which she knew stemmed more from her father's concerns about her safety—aching to see more of the city, more of the *world*, but it was, at least, familiar.

None of this was familiar. Zaynab had no business addressing soldiers. It should have been Muntadhir; it should have been Ali.

And every moment you waste endangers them further.

Zaynab squared her shoulders, trying to remember everything she'd ever seen her mother do. Hatset dealt with men all the time, not bothering to feign obedience to the royal custom of secluding noble women. "You forget I ruled my own court in Ta Ntry, dear daughter," she'd said more than once. "I do not care for the peculiar customs of this Daeva rock."

Oh, Amma, I could really use you right now. Summoning some courage, Zaynab spoke, letting command color her voice. "I'd like to know what's going on. Starting with what we know about the attack on the palace."

An elderly man in a wrinkled steward's coat stepped forward. "Not much, Princess, I apologize. You and the Lady Aqisa appear to be the only djinn who escaped. Prince Alizayd

barricaded the shafit district and Geziri Quarter earlier this evening; we would know if someone had tried to get in.”

A chill went down Zaynab’s spine. “Barricaded? What do you mean?”

A few of the men exchanged glances. “He closed off the gates to the midan,” the steward explained gently, in a tone that made Zaynab feel like a fool. “He had the walls fortified and guard posts set up. It means our neighborhoods—the Geziri and shafit ones—are fairly well protected and separated from the rest of the city. Which puts a strong wall and soldiers between us and whoever attacked the palace but...”

“But means anyone on the other side is trapped,” Zaynab finished.

“This is all the fault of the bloody fire-worshippers,” a soldier spat. “It was Daeva soldiers on the beach. We should get rid of the rest here before they turn on us.”

“If anyone lays a hand on the Daevas in this hospital, they’re going to lose it,” Zaynab snapped. She must have had a bit of her father in her voice because half the men immediately shrank back. “It was Banu Nahri herself who came to me so I could warn the rest of you about the poison. I won’t hear abuse against the Daevas.” She regarded the group of men again, remembering what Aqisa had said about how few soldiers had survived the attack on the Citadel. “We need help. Wajed left Daevabad before the attack, but he couldn’t have gone far. Are any of you scouts? We may not have magic, but surely we could get a few messengers out by boat and horse.”

An immediate disquiet seemed to come over the group. A few of the men shifted, but no one spoke.

Great, so now she’d gone full Ghassan and scared them into silence. “What?” she prompted, trying to sound less frightening. “What is it?”

“There...there are no boats, Princess,” one of the soldiers replied. “Two ifrit came last night and set fire to the docks. They spared nothing, not even small craft and killed several men trying to put out the flames. We have no way to get off the island.”

Aqisa swore. “Can we not build raft”

The soldier shook his head. “Sure. Build a raft. We shall take bets on whether it’s an ifrit or the marid in the lake that kills you first.”

Zaynab laid a hand on Aqisa’s wrist before the other woman could say something unwise. She could feel the awful weight of the men’s stares. They were frightened and unsure, and she was a Qahtani. She was supposed to be in charge.

But Zaynab had no idea how to be in charge of something like this.

“Has there been any word on my brothers?” She hated asking again; she could only imagine how weak it made her sound, but she couldn’t help it. She had an almost physical need to see her family, to clutch her brothers close and figure out what to do next together.

The steward’s expression fell. “No, your Highness.”

“Princess Zaynab?”

Zaynab glanced back. An enormous shafit man was standing in the archway, a bloody apron full of medical instruments tied around his waist and a nervous expression on his face.

“F-forgive me,” he stammered. “My wife—Doctor Sen said I should get you.”

Aqisa had edged closer to Zaynab, her sword half drawn. “Why?” she asked, sounding suspicious.

“We found a survivor from the palace.”

#

The child was small and with his knees pulled tight against his chest, rocking under a blanket, he looked even smaller. Zaynab could make out little else about him—his age, his dress, his background—for he was entirely covered in blood, his black eyes standing out wide and haunted in his dirty face.

The darkness of his eyes threw her. “Daeva?” she whispered to Subha.

The doctor shook her head. “Shafit, but he owes his life to one of them. Apparently, they’re rounding up all the djinn and shafit who survived the attack on the palace and herding them into the library. A Daeva scholar grabbed him and smuggled him out, claiming he was a nephew. Our soldiers found him in the midan trying to climb the wall.”

“Why did you bring him all the way up here?” They were in a well-appointed room on the top floor of the hospital that Subha’s husband said was Nahri’s office. With a fountain full of lotus flowers and an elegant window seat of plush embroidered cushions and intricate mother-of-pearl screens, it was a lovely place—but not the most natural one to examine and treat a traumatized child.

“Because of what else he’s saying.” Subha glanced at Zaynab. The doctor looked worried for the first time, which was alarming. Subha had been calmer discussing ghouls and magical plagues. “Who he’s claiming he saw at the palace.”

“Who’s he claiming he saw?”

Subha hesitated. “He’s very young. He could be confused. Let’s see if he tells you the same and then we’ll go from there.”

That wasn’t a comforting answer. Zaynab steeled herself as she approached the little boy.

“Peace be upon you,” she said gently as she took a seat beside him and pulled away her veil. “I’m Zaynab. What’s your name?”

He blinked at her, his eyes red-rimmed from crying. “Botros,” he whispered, clutching an empty copper cup.

“Why don’t we get you some more water, Botros?” she suggested, taking the cup and beckoning Aqisa. “Are you all right? Does anything hurt?”

He shivered but shook his head. “I hurt my fingers trying to climb the wall, but the doctor bandaged them.”

The little boy held up his hands. Zaynab blanched at the sight of the blood seeping through the linen at his fingertips. He must have literally tried to claw his way up the wall.

She cleared her throat. “Botros, can I ask what you saw at the palace?” She passed him the cup.

“Monsters,” he said haltingly. “Giant monsters made of smoke and fire.”

Giant monsters made of smoke and fire? Over Botros’ shoulder, Zaynab met Aqisa’s eyes as she returned with his cup of water. The warrior women merely shrugged. Zaynab couldn’t blame her. After tonight, giant monsters of smoke and fire certainly seemed in the realm of possibility.

She handed the cup to Botros. “Can you tell me about the attackers? Did you see any soldiers?”

He took a shaky sip of water. “Yes. Daeva ones.”

Daevas again. There was no denying it. It had been Kaveh who’d killed her father and unleashed the poison, and Daeva soldiers found accompanying the ifrit on the beach. Zaynab took a deep breath, trying to hide how panicked she was. This kind of tribal rebellion was her father’s worst fear; the catastrophe he always warned was the single largest threat to Daevabad’s peace, one that could lead to a bloodletting to rival what happened when the Nahid Council fell.

And now it was on Zaynab to prevent it.

Subha touched the boy's shoulder. "Can you tell her what you saw in the library?"

Botros' eyes immediately filled with fresh tears. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I know, little one, but it's important." The doctor adjusted his blanket. "Just try. You're safe here, I promise."

He took a shaky breath. "After the earthquake, the soldiers said we had to go to library. Everyone was screaming. They were killing anyone who tried to fight or run away. And then when they brought us up to the library..." He was trembling so hard now that some of the water sloshed onto his hands. "I saw him."

Zaynab steadied his hands. "Saw who?"

His eyes locked on hers, wide and terrified. "The Scourge."

She dropped his hands. "You must be mistaken." He shrank back. "The Afshin is dead," she said haltingly. "Prince Alizayd killed him, years ago."

The little boy clutched his blanket. "I'm sorry, my lady. I didn't mean to upset you."

Shame swept her. God, if Zaynab couldn't comfort a single child, how was she supposed to calm down and control an entire section of the city? "No, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. But what you're saying..."

Subha cut in. "Botros told me the other Daevas were calling him Afshin." There was quiet horror in her voice. "He said he had bright green eyes and an arrow tattooed on his face."

"He was yelling a lot," the little boy added, shivering again. "It was all in Divasti, but he sounded so angry. He was fighting with the emir—"

"The *emir*?" Zaynab gasped. "Emir Muntadhir?"

Botros nodded. “They were tying him up when we entered the library. He was yelling at the Scourge, and then the Scourge...he-he conjured some sort of flying beast out of smoke.” He dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry. I was so scared. I started to cry and that’s when one of the Daeva scholars grabbed me.”

The Afshin is here. The Afshin has Dhiru. The image of her grinning older brother warped viciously in Zaynab’s mind. Muntadhir begging for his life. Muntadhir being flayed alive by the Afshin’s infamous scourge...

“That cannot be,” she whispered. “It simply cannot be. Did you see the Banu Nahida?” she asked urgently. Muntadhir had been with his wife after all. Where the hell was Nahri, their supposed Daeva ally, during all of this?”

Botros shook his head.

“Zaynab.” Aqisa was standing at the window box, her voice sharp. “Come here.”

Feeling like she was about to throw up, Zaynab rose unsteadily to her feet and joined Aqisa at the window.

“Look at the palace.”

Zaynab peered through a diamond cut-out in the window’s screened panel. It was hard to get her bearings straight. She’d spent a lifetime on the other side of this view: looking down upon the city from the palace’s towering walls.

But eventually she found it. The palace. Her home. The ancient Daeva ziggurat standing proudly on a hill, surrounded by walls crowned with shedu statues and framed by a pair of delicate minarets and a golden dome.

She gasped. “Are the walls...*moving*?”

“They’re rising,” Aqisa replied. “I wasn’t sure at first because it’s slow, but they’re definitely getting taller.”

“But that’s not possible,” Zaynab sputtered. “There’s no magic.”

And then, as if yanked by a sea of invisible hands, every Qahtani banner adorning the palace fell.

They fluttered down in a rain of ebony cloth. Narrow standards that had flown from brass poles and wider banners that draped the wall. Her family’s flag had always been starkly plain: no heralds or words or family crests. Zaydi al Qahtani had been a commoner, after all, fighting for a more just, egalitarian world.

New banners were already unfurling amongst bursts of light and delicate wisps of golden smoke. They were not plain. They were beautiful, made to catch the eye. Bright blue silk and a brass-colored shedu snarling at a rising sun.

It was the flag of the Nahids.

Aqisa must have recognized the banner, too. “I’m going to kill her,” she swore. “I will put Lubayd’s khanjar through her lying, black heart, carve it out and present it to her Afshin on a plate.”

There was very little doubt who “she” referred to. But as Zaynab stared in shock at the Nahid banners, something seemed...wrong. “I’m not sure Nahri is behind this.”

Aqisa spun on her. “What *in the name of God* is wrong with your family when it comes to that girl? Of course, she’s behind this! That’s *her* flag flying over the palace! *Her* Afshin slaughtering people in your home!”

Everything Zaynab knew about her reluctant Daeva sister-in-law ran through her head. Nahri was a survivor, a brilliant one; one who’d outmatched Ghassan and fought to protect her

people with a fierce pragmatism Zaynab had always quietly admired. She was cunning, she was capable.

But she didn't strike Zaynab as a killer. "I don't think it was Nahri," she said, more stubbornly this time. "I don't think she planned this."

Aqisa had a look on her face like she was now considering putting her khanjar through Zaynab's heart instead. "Then who?"

"I don't know," Zaynab confessed. She returned her gaze to the Nahid banners fluttering in the pale dawn sky above the palace. The rest of Daevabad stretched between them, the shuttered homes and shops and schools and temples of the tens of thousands of people who called this misty, magical island with its dark history home. How many of them had seen the Qahtani banners come down? Would the sight strike fear in their hearts, uncertainty about who ruled them?

They're not going to care who rules them. What did "rule" even mean right now? Their magic was gone, thousands were dead, and their city was a bloody wreck. Her people were not likely to care which flag happened to be flying today. They'd be hiding with their children or rushing to grab food and supplies before the true chaos of being stranded on a conquered island landed. They'd be grieving their dead and plotting revenge.

Daevabad comes first. It was her father's constant mantra, his warning. For the first time in her life, Zaynab understood what it really meant. Its *people* came first. Zaynab didn't have time to worry about her brothers. To mourn her father and pray her mother or Wajed would come back to save them.

No one was coming to save them.

“All right,” she said, more to herself than anyone. “All right.” Zaynab stepped back from the window, her movements precise. “I want to speak to all the soldiers we have left and make sure this supposed wall protecting us from the rest of the city is secure. Any Geziris aching for revenge can funnel that energy into searching what’s left of the Citadel and the other buildings that came down for survivors. They could be hurt, and we don’t have much time. Anyone who has a problem with that can answer to us.”

“To *us*?” Subha repeated.

“To us,” Zaynab said firmly. “Come, doctor. I’d like to speak to your Daeva patients.”

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed! If you able, please consider pre-ordering The Empire of Gold or putting in a library request. If you can’t do that, leaving a review on retail sites, Goodreads, or simply recommending the series to a friend is always appreciated! - SA