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THE DAEVABAD TRILOGY, BOOK TWO

S. A. CHAKRABORTY

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Cast of Characters

THE ROYAL FAMILY

Daevabad is currently ruled by the Qahtani family, descendants of Zaydi al Qahtani, the Geziri warrior who led a rebellion to overthrow the Nahid Council and establish equality for the shafit centuries ago.

GHASSAN AL QAHTANI, king of the magical realm, defender of the faith

MUNTADHIR, Ghassan's eldest son from his Geziri first wife, the king's designated successor

HATSET, Ghassan's Ayaanle second wife and queen, hailing from a powerful family in Ta Ntry

ZAYNAB, Ghassan and Hatset's daughter, princess of Daevabad

ALIZAYD, the king's youngest son, banished to Am Gezira for treason

Their Court and Royal Guard

WAJED, Qaid and leader of the djinn army

ABU NUWAS, a Geziri officer

KAVEH E-PRAMUKH, the Daeva grand wazir

JAMSHID, his son and close confidant of Emir Muntadhir

ABUL DAWANIK, a trade envoy from Ta Ntry

ABU SAYF, an old soldier and scout in the Royal Guard

AQISA and LUBAYD, warriors and trackers from Bir Nabat, a village in Am Gezira

THE MOST HIGH AND BLESSED NAHIDS

The original rulers of Daevabad and descendants of Anahid, the Nahids were a family of extraordinary magical healers hailing from the Daeva tribe.

ANAHID, Suleiman's chosen and the original founder of Daevabad

RUSTAM, one of the last Nahid healers and a skilled botanist, murdered by the ifrit

MANIZHEH, Rustam's sister and one of the most powerful Nahid healers in centuries, murdered by the ifrit

NAHRI, her daughter of uncertain parentage, left abandoned as a young child in the human land of Egypt

Their Supporters

DARAYAVAHUSH, the last descendent of the Afshins, a Daeva military caste family that served at the right hand of the Nahid Council, and known as the Scourge of Qui-zi for his violent acts during the war and later revolt against Zaydi al Qahtani

KARTIR, a Daeva high priest

NISREEN, Manizheh and Rustam's former assistant and Nahri's current mentor

IRTEMIZ, MARDONIYE, and BAHRAM, soldiers

THE SHAFIT

People of mixed human and djinn heritage forced to live in Daevabad, their rights sharply curtailed.

SHEIKH ANAS, former leader of the Tanzeem and Ali's mentor,
executed by the king for treason

SISTER FATUMAI, Tanzeem leader who oversaw the group's
orphanage and charitable services

SUBHASHINI and PARIMAL SEN, shafit physicians

THE IFRIT

Daevas who refused to submit to Suleiman thousands of years ago
and were subsequently cursed; the mortal enemies of the Nahids.

AESHMA, their leader

VIZARESH, the ifrit who first came for Nahri in Cairo

QANDISHA, the ifrit who enslaved and murdered Dara

THE FREED SLAVES OF THE IFRIT

Reviled and persecuted after Dara's rampage and death at Prince
Alizayd's hand, only three formerly enslaved djinn remain in
Daevabad, freed and resurrected by Nahid healers years ago.

RAZU, a gambler from Tukharistan

ELASHIA, an artist from Qart Sahar

ISSA, a scholar and historian from Ta Ntry

Maps

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Prologue

ALI

Alizayd al Qahtani didn't make it a month with his caravan.

“Run, my prince, run!” the sole Ayaanle member of his traveling party cried as he staggered into Ali's tent one night when they were camped along a southern bend of the Euphrates. Before the man could say more, a blood-dark blade burst from his chest.

Ali flew to his feet. His weapons already at hand, he slashed the back of the tent open with a strike of his zulfiqar and fled into the darkness.

They pursued him on horseback, but the Euphrates glistened close ahead, black as the star-drenched night reflected in the river's coursing surface. Praying his weapons were secure, Ali plunged into the water as the first arrows flew, one whistling past his ear.

The cold water was a shock, but Ali swam fast, the motion as instinctual as walking, faster than he ever had, with a grace that would have taken him aback had he not been preoccupied with saving his life. Arrows struck the water around him, following his path, and so he dived deep, the water growing murky. The Euphrates was wide, and it took him time to cross, to push through waterweeds and fight the fierce current trying to drag him downstream.

It was only when he was staggering up the opposite bank that the sick realization swept over him: he had not needed to emerge

for air the entire time.

Ali gulped, shivering as a cold breeze stole through his wet dishdasha. Nausea rose in his chest, but there was little time to contemplate what had happened in the river—not when mounted archers were pacing on the other side. His tent was aflame, but the rest of the camp looked untouched and eerily still, as though a quiet command had been passed among the other travelers in his party to ignore the screams they might hear tonight.

Ali had been betrayed. And he was not waiting around to find out if either the assassins or his traitorous companions could cross the river. He stumbled to his feet and ran for his life, racing headlong toward the opposite horizon.

Dawn had broken by the time his legs finally gave out. He collapsed, landing hard on the golden sand. The river was long gone. In every direction was desert, the sky a bright, hot bowl turned upside down.

Ali's gaze darted across the still landscape as he fought for breath, but he was alone. Relief and fear warred through him. He was *alone*—with a vast desert before him and enemies at his back, his only possessions his zulfiqar and khanjar. He had no food, no water, no shelter. He hadn't even had time to grab the turban and sandals that might have protected him from the heat.

He was doomed.

You were already doomed, you fool. Your father made that clear. Ali's exile from Daevabad was a death sentence, one obvious to anyone with knowledge of the politics of his tribe. Did he really think he could fight it? That his death would be easy? If his father had wanted to be merciful, he would have had his youngest son strangled in his sleep within the city's walls.

For the first time, a twinge of hate clawed up in Ali's heart. He didn't deserve this. He had tried to help his city and his family, and Ghassan wasn't even generous enough to give him a clean death.

Angry tears pricked his eyes. Ali wiped them away roughly, feeling disgusted. No, this wouldn't be how things ended for him,

weeping tears of self-pity and cursing his family as he wasted away in some unknown patch of sand. He was Geziri. When the time came, Ali would die dry-eyed, with the declaration of faith on his lips and a blade in his hand.

He fixed his eyes southwest, in the direction of his homeland, the direction he'd prayed his entire life, and dug his hands in the golden sand. Ali went through the motions to cleanse himself for prayer, the motions he'd made multiple times a day since his mother had first shown him how.

When he finished, he raised his palms, closing his eyes and catching the sharp scent of the sand and salt clinging to his skin. *Guide me, he begged. Protect those I was forced to leave behind and when my time comes—his throat thickened—when my time comes, please have more mercy on me than my father did.*

Ali touched his fingers to his brow. And then he rose to his feet.

Having nothing but the sun to guide him through the unbroken expanse of sand, Ali followed its relentless path across the sky, ignoring and then growing accustomed to its merciless heat upon his shoulders. The hot sand scorched his bare feet—and then it didn't. He was a djinn, and though he couldn't drift and dance as smoke among the dunes the way his ancestors had done before Suleiman's blessing, the desert would not kill him. He walked each day until exhaustion overtook him, only stopping to pray and sleep. He let his mind—his despair at how completely he'd ruined his life—drift away under the white, bright sun.

Hunger gnawed at him. Water was no problem—Ali had not thirsted since the marid took him. He tried hard not to think about the implication of that, to ignore the newly restless part of his mind that delighted in the dampness—he refused to call it sweat—beading on his skin and dripping down his limbs.

He could not say how long he'd been walking when the landscape finally changed, rocky cliffs emerging from the sandy dunes like massive, grasping fingers. Ali scoured the craggy bluffs for any sign of food. He'd heard rural Geziris were able to conjure

entire feasts from human scraps, but Ali had never been taught such magic. He was a prince raised to be a Qaid, surrounded by servants his entire privileged life. He had no idea how to survive on his own.

Desperate and starving, he ate any bit of greenery he could find down to the roots. It was a mistake. The following morning, he awoke violently ill. Ash crumbled from his skin, and he vomited until all that came up was a fiery black substance that burned the ground.

Hoping to find a bit of shade in which to recover, Ali tried to climb down from the cliffs, but he was so dizzy that his vision blurred and the path danced before him. He lost his footing on the loose gravel almost immediately and slipped, tumbling down a sharp incline.

He landed hard in a stony crevasse, smashing his left shoulder into a protruding rock. There was a wet pop, and a searing heat burst down his arm.

Ali gasped. He tried to shift and then yelped, a sharp pain shooting through his shoulder. He sucked for air through his teeth, biting back a curse as the muscles in his arm spasmed.

Get up. You will die here if you do not get up. But Ali's weakened limbs refused to obey. Blood trickled from his nose, filling his mouth as he stared helplessly at the stark cliffs outlined against the bright sky. A glance at the crevasse revealed nothing but sand and stones. It was—rather fittingly—a dead place.

He choked back a sob. There were worse ways to die, he knew. He could have been caught and tortured by his family's enemies or hacked apart by assassins eager to claim bloody "proof" of their victory. But God forgive him, Ali was not ready to die.

You are Geziri. A believer in the Most Merciful. Do not dishonor yourself now. Shaking, Ali squeezed his eyes against the pain, trying to find some peace in the holy passages he'd memorized so long ago. But it was difficult. The faces of those he'd left behind in Daevabad—the brother whose trust he'd finally lost, the friend

whose love he'd killed, the father who'd sentenced him to death for a crime he hadn't committed—kept breaking through the encroaching darkness, their voices taunting him as he slowly slipped away.

He woke to an impossibly foul substance being forced down his throat.

Ali's eyes shot open and he gagged, his mouth full of something crunchy and metallic and *wrong*. His vision swam, slowly focusing on the silhouette of a broad-shouldered man squatting beside him. The man's face came to him in patches: a nose that had been broken more than once, a matted black beard, hooded gray eyes.

Geziri eyes.

The man laid a heavy hand on Ali's brow and spooned another thick helping of the disgusting gruel into his mouth. "Eat up, little prince."

Ali choked. "W-what is that?" His voice was barely a whisper in his parched throat.

The other djinn beamed. "Oryx blood and ground locusts."

Ali's stomach immediately rebelled. He turned his head to throw up, but the man clamped his hand over Ali's mouth and massaged his throat, forcing the revolting mixture back down.

"Aye, do not be doing that. What kind of man turns down food that his host has so thoughtfully prepared?"

"Daevabadis." A second voice spoke up, and Ali glanced down at his feet, catching sight of a woman with thick black braids and a face that might have been carved from stone. "No manners." She held up Ali's *zulfiqar* and *khanjar*. "Lovely blades."

The man held up a gnarled black root. "Did you eat something like this?" When Ali nodded, he snorted. "Fool. You're lucky not to be a pile of ash right now." He shoved another spoonful of the bloody gristle at Ali. "Eat. You'll need your strength for the journey home."

Ali pushed it weakly away, still dazed and now thoroughly confused. A breeze swept through the crevasse, drying the

dampness that clung to his skin, and he shivered. “Home?” he repeated.

“Bir Nabat,” the man said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Home. It is but a week’s travel west.”

Ali tried to shake his head, but his neck and shoulders had gone stiff. “I can’t,” he rasped out. “I . . . I’m going south.” South was the only direction he could think to go; the Qahtani family originally hailed from the forbidding mountain chain along Am Gezira’s humid southern coast, and it was the only place he could think to find allies.

“*South?*” The man laughed. “You are mostly dead and you think to cross Am Gezira?” He thrust another spoonful into Ali’s mouth. “There are assassins looking for you in every shadow of this land. Word is the fire worshippers will make rich the man who kills Alizayd al Qahtani.”

“Which is what *we* should be doing, Lubayd,” the other raider cut in. She nodded rudely at the gruel. “Not wasting our provisions on a southern brat.”

Ali swallowed back the vile concoction with difficulty, narrowing his eyes at her. “You’d kill a fellow Geziri for foreign coins?”

“I’d kill a Qahtani for free.”

Ali started at the hostility in her voice. The man—Lubayd—sighed and shot her an annoyed look before turning back to Ali. “You’ll forgive Aqisa here, prince, but it’s not a good time to be visiting our land.” He put down the clay cup. “We haven’t seen a drop of rain in years. Our spring is drying up, we’re running out of food, our babies and old folk are dying . . . So we send messages to Daevabad pleading for help. And do you know what our king says, our fellow Geziri king?”

“*Nothing.*” Aqisa spat at the ground. “Your father doesn’t even respond. So do not speak of tribal ties to me, al Qahtani.”

Ali was too tired to be frightened by the hatred in her face. He eyed the zulfiqar in her hands again. He kept his blade sharp; at

least this ordeal would finally end quickly should they choose to execute him with it.

He choked back another wave of bile, the oryx blood thick in his throat. “Well . . . ,” he started weakly. “In that case I agree. You needn’t waste that on me.” He nodded at Lubayd’s gruel.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Lubayd burst into laughter, the sound ringing out across the crevasse.

He was still laughing when he grabbed Ali’s injured arm without warning and pulled it firmly straight.

Ali cried out, black spots blossoming across his vision. But as his shoulder slid back into place, the searing pain immediately lessened. His fingers tingled, sensation returning to his numb hand in excruciating waves.

Lubayd grinned. He removed his ghutra, the cloth headdress worn by northern Geziri djinn, and quickly fashioned it into a sling. Then he hauled Ali to his feet by his good arm. “Keep your sense of humor, boy. You’re going to need it.”

A massive white oryx waited patiently at the mouth of the crevasse; a line of dried blood crossed one flank. Ignoring Ali’s protests, Lubayd shoved him up onto the animal’s back. Ali clutched its long horns, watching as Lubayd wrestled his zulfiqar away from Aqisa.

He dropped it in Ali’s lap. “Let that shoulder heal and perhaps you’ll swing this again.”

Ali gave the blade an incredulous look. “But I thought”

“We’d be killing you?” Lubayd shook his head. “No. Not yet, anyway. Not while you are doing *that*.” He motioned back to the crevasse.

Ali followed his gaze. His mouth fell open.

It wasn’t sweat that had soaked his robe. A miniature oasis had sprung up around him while he lay dying. A spring gurgled through the rocks where his head had been, trickling down a path shrouded with new moss. A second spring bubbled up through the sand, filling the depression his body had left. Bright green shoots

covered a bloody patch of gravel, their unfurling leaves wet with dew.

Ali took a sharp breath, scenting the fresh moisture on the desert air. The potential.

“I have no idea how you did that, Alizayd al Qahtani,” Lubayd said. “But if you can draw water into a barren patch of sand in Am Gezira, well . . .” He winked. “I’d say you’re worth far more than a few foreign coins.”

NAHRI

It was very quiet inside Emir Muntadhir al Qahtani’s apartment.

Banu Nahri e-Nahid paced the room, her bare toes sinking into the sumptuous carpet. Upon a mirrored table, a bottle of wine rested beside a jade cup carved in the shape of a shedu. The wine had been brought in by the calm-eyed servants who’d helped Nahri out of her heavy wedding clothes; perhaps they’d noticed the Banu Nahida’s trembling and thought it would help.

She stared at the bottle now. It looked delicate. It would be easy to break it, easier still to conceal a glass shard under the pillows of the large bed she was trying not to look at and end this evening in a far more permanent way.

And then you will die. Ghassan would put a thousand of her tribesmen to the sword, make Nahri watch each one, and then throw her to his karkadann.

She tore her gaze from the bottle. A breeze came from the open windows, and she shivered. She’d been dressed in a delicate blue silk shift and soft hooded robe, neither of which did much to ward off the chill. All that was left of the overly elaborate outfit in which she’d been wed was her marriage mask. Made of finely carved ebony and secured by copper clasps and chains, the mask was engraved with her and Muntadhir’s names. It was to be burned upon consummation, the ash marking their bodies the next morning proof of the marriage’s validity. It was—according to the

excited Geziri noblewomen teasing her earlier at the wedding dinner—a beloved tradition of their tribe.

Nahri didn't share their excitement. She'd been sweating since she entered the room, and the mask kept sticking to her damp skin. She pulled it slightly loose, trying to let the breeze cool her flushed cheeks. She caught the reflection of her movement in the massive bronze-edged mirror across the room and averted her eyes. However fine the clothes and mask, they were Geziri, and Nahri had no desire to see herself in the garb of her enemy.

They're not your enemy, she reminded herself. "Enemy" was Dara's word, and she was not going to think about Dara. Not tonight. She couldn't. It would break her—and the last Banu Nahida of Daevabad was not going to break. She'd signed her wedding contract with a steady hand and toasted Ghassan without trembling, smiling warmly at the king who'd threatened her with the murder of Daeva children and forced her to disown her Afshin with the crudest of charges. If she could handle all of that, she could handle whatever happened in this room.

Nahri turned to cross the bedroom again. Muntadhir's vast apartment was located on one of the upper levels of the enormous ziggurat at the heart of Daevabad's palace complex. It was filled with art: paintings on silk screens, delicate tapestries, and finely wrought vases, all of which had been carefully displayed and all of which seemed to carry an aura of magic. She could easily envision Muntadhir in this wondrous room, lounging with a cup of expensive wine and some cosmopolitan courtesan, quoting poetry and bantering about the useless pleasures of life that Nahri had neither the time nor inclination to pursue. There was not a book in sight. Not in this room, nor in the rest of the apartment she'd been guided through.

She stopped to stare at the closest painting, a miniature of two dancers conjuring flamelike flowers that sparked and flashed like hearts of ruby as they twirled.

I have nothing in common with this man. Nahri couldn't imagine

the splendor in which Muntadhir had been raised, couldn't imagine being surrounded by the accumulated knowledge of millennia and not bothering to learn how to read. The only thing she shared with her new husband was one awful night upon a burning ship.

The bedroom door opened.

Nahri instinctively stepped back from the painting, pulling her hood low. There was a soft crash from outside, followed by a curse, and then Muntadhir entered.

He wasn't alone; indeed, she suspected he might not have made it alone, for he was leaning heavily on a steward, and she could practically smell the wine on his breath from across the room. A pair of female servants followed, and Nahri swallowed as they helped him out of his robe, unwinding his turban with a number of what sounded like teasing jests in Geziriyya, before leading him to the bed.

He sat heavily on the edge, looking drunk and somewhat stunned to find himself there. Heaped with cloudlike linens, the bed was big enough to fit a family of ten—and given the rumors she'd heard whispered about her husband, she suspected he'd filled it on many an occasion. Frankincense smoldered in a corner burner beside a chalice of sweetened milk mixed with apple leaves—a traditional Daeva drink brewed for new brides hoping to conceive. That, at least, would *not* be happening—Nisreen had assured her. One did not assist Nahid healers for two centuries without learning a number of nearly foolproof methods to prevent pregnancy.

Even so, Nahri's heart beat faster as the servants left, closing the door softly behind them. Tension filled the air, thick and heavy and at awkward odds with the sounds of celebration in the garden below.

Muntadhir finally glanced up, meeting her eyes. Candlelight played on his face. He might not have had Dara's literally magical beauty, but he was a strikingly handsome man, a charismatic man,

she'd heard, one who laughed easily and smiled often . . . at least with people who weren't her. His thick black hair was cut short, his beard stylishly trimmed. He'd worn his royal regalia for the wedding, the gold-trimmed ebony robe and patterned blue, purple, and gold silk turban that were the hallmarks of the ruling al Qahtani family, but he was dressed now in a crisp white dishdasha edged with tiny pearls. The only thing detracting from his careful appearance was a thin scar dividing his left eyebrow—a remnant from Dara's scourge.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither one moving. She saw that beneath the edge of drunken exhaustion, he too looked nervous.

Finally he spoke. "You're not going to give me plague sores, are you?"

Nahri narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Plague sores." Muntadhir swallowed, kneading the embroidered covering on the bed. "That's what your mother used to do to men who looked at her too long."

Nahri hated that the words stung. She wasn't a romantic—on the contrary, she prided herself on her pragmatism and her ability to set aside her emotions—that's what had led her to this room, after all. But it was still her *wedding night*, and she might have hoped for a word of kindness from her new husband; for a man eager to touch her, rather than one worried she would curse him with some sort of magical disease.

She let her robe drop to the floor without ceremony. "Let's get this over with." She approached the bed, fumbling with the delicate copper fixtures holding her marriage mask in place.

"Be careful!" Muntadhir's hand shot out, but he jerked it back when he brushed her fingers. "Forgive me," he said quickly. "It's just—the mask clips were my mother's."

Nahri's hands stilled. No one in the palace ever spoke of Muntadhir's mother, Ghassan's long-dead first wife. "They were?"

He nodded, taking the marriage mask from her hands and

deftly unhooking the clips. In comparison to the opulent room and the glittering jewelry they were both wearing, the clips were rather plain, but Muntadhir held them as if he'd just been handed Suleiman's seal ring.

"They've been in her family for centuries," he explained, running his thumb over the fine filigree work. "She always made me promise to have my own wife and daughter wear them." His lips quirked into a sad smile. "She said they brought good fortune and the best of sons."

Nahri hesitated and then decided to press forward; long-lost mothers might be the only topic they had in common. "How old were you—"

"Young," Muntadhir cut in, his voice a little raw, as if the question caused him pain. "She'd been bitten by a nasnas out in Am Gezira when she was a child, and the poison stayed with her. She'd have the occasional reaction, but Manizheh could always treat it." His expression darkened. "Until one summer Manizheh decided dawdling in Zariaspa was more important than saving her queen."

Nahri tensed at the bitterness lingering in his words. So much for a connection between them. "I see," she said stiffly.

Muntadhir seemed to notice. A flush came to his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that to you."

"It's fine," Nahri replied, though in truth she was regretting this marriage more with each passing moment. "You've never hid how you feel about my family. What was it you called me to your father? The *'lying Nahid whore'*? The one who seduced your brother and ordered my Afshin to attack your men."

Muntadhir's gray eyes flashed with regret before he dropped his gaze. "That was a mistake," he said, defending himself weakly. "My best friend and my little brother were at death's door." He rose to his feet, moving toward the wine. "I wasn't thinking straight."

Nahri dropped to sit on the bed, crossing her legs under the

silk shift. It was a pretty thing, the fabric so thin it was nearly sheer, chased through with impossibly fine gold embroidery and adorned with delicate ivory beads. At another time—with another person—she might have delighted in the teasing way it brushed her bare skin.

She was decidedly not feeling that way now. She glared at Muntadhir, incredulous that he believed such an excuse sufficient justification for his actions.

He choked on his wine. “That’s not helping me forget about plague sores,” he said between coughs.

Nahri rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake, I’m not going to hurt you. I can’t. Your father would murder a hundred Daevas if I so much as put a scratch on you.” She rubbed her head and then held out a hand for the wine. Maybe a drink *would* make this more bearable. “Pass that over.”

He poured her a cup, and Nahri drank it down, her lips puckering at the sour taste. “That’s awful.”

Muntadhir looked wounded. “That’s an antique ice wine from Zariaspa. It’s priceless, one of the rarest vintages in the world.”

“It tastes like grape juice that’s been passed through a rotting fish.”

“A rotting fish . . . ,” he repeated faintly. He rubbed his forehead. “Well . . . what do you like to drink then, if not wine?”

Nahri paused but then answered honestly, seeing little harm in it. “Karkade. It’s a tea made from hibiscus flowers.” The lump grew in her throat. “It reminds me of home.”

“Calicut?”

She frowned. “What?”

“Isn’t that where you’re from?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m from Cairo.”

“Oh.” He looked a bit nonplussed. “Are they close?”

Not at all. Nahri tried not to cringe. He was supposed to be her husband, and he didn’t even know where she was from, the land whose essence still flowed in her blood and beat in her heart.

Cairo, the city she missed so fiercely it took her breath away at times.

I don't want this. The realization, swift and urgent, swept through her. Nahri had learned the hard way not to trust a soul in Daevabad. How could she share a bed with this self-centered man who knew nothing of her?

Muntadhir was watching her. His gray eyes softened. "You look like you're about to be sick."

She did flinch now. Maybe he wasn't completely blind. "I'm fine," she lied.

"You don't look fine," he countered, reaching for her shoulder. "You're trembling." His fingers brushed her skin, and Nahri tensed, fighting the urge to jerk away.

Muntadhir dropped his hand as though he'd been burned. "Are you afraid of *me*?" he asked, sounding shocked.

"No." Nahri's cheeks burned with embarrassment, even as she bristled. "It's just . . . I haven't done this before."

"What, slept with someone you hate?" His wry smile vanished when she bit her lip. "Oh. *Oh*," he added. "I had assumed that you and Darayavahoush—"

"No," Nahri said quickly. She couldn't hear that sentence completed. "Things weren't like that between us. And I don't want to talk about him. Not with you."

Muntadhir's mouth tightened. "Fine."

Silence grew between them again, punctuated by the shouts of laughter that drifted in from the open window.

"Glad to know everyone's so happy we're uniting our tribes," Nahri muttered darkly.

Muntadhir glanced at her. "Is that why you agreed to this?"

"I *agreed*"—her voice turned sarcastic on the word—"because I knew I would otherwise be forced to marry you. I figured I might as well go willingly and take your father for every coin of dowry I could. And maybe one day convince you to overthrow him." It probably wasn't the wisest response, but Nahri was finding it

harder and harder to care what her new husband thought.

The color abruptly left Muntadhir's face. He swallowed and then tossed back the rest of his wine before turning to cross the room. He opened the door, speaking in Geziriyya to whoever was on the other side. Nahri inwardly cursed the slip of her tongue. Her feelings toward Muntadhir aside, Ghassan had been hell-bent on marrying them, and if Nahri ruined this, the king would no doubt find some ghastly way to punish her.

"What are you doing?" she asked when he returned, anxiety rising in her voice.

"Getting you a glass of your strange flower tea."

Nahri blinked in surprise. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to." He met her gaze. "Because, quite frankly, you terrify me, wife, and I wouldn't mind staying on your good side." He retrieved the marriage mask from the bed. "But you can stop shaking. I'm not going to hurt you, Nahri. I'm not that kind of man. I'm not going to lay another finger on you tonight."

She eyed the mask. It was starting to smolder. She cleared her throat. "But people will be expecting . . ."

The mask burst into cinders in his hands, and she jumped. "Hold out your hand," he said, dumping a fistful of ash into her palm when she did so. He then ran his ash-covered fingers through his hair and around the collar of his tunic, wiping them on his white dishdasha.

"There," he deadpanned. "The marriage has been consummated." He jerked his head at the bed. "I've been told I toss and turn terribly in my sleep. It will look like we've been doing our part for peace between our tribes all night long."

Heat filled her face at that, and Muntadhir grinned. "Believe it or not, it's nice to know *something* makes you anxious. Manizheh never showed any emotion, and it was terrifying." His voice grew gentler. "We'll need to do this eventually. There will be people watching us, waiting for an heir. But we'll take it slow. It doesn't have to be a horrible ordeal." His eyes twinkled in amusement.

“For all the handwringing that surrounds it, the bedroom *can* be a rather enjoyable place.”

A knock interrupted them, which was a blessing, for despite growing up on the streets of Cairo, Nahri didn't have a retort for that.

Muntadhir crossed back to the door and returned with a silver platter upon which a rose quartz pitcher rested. He placed it on the table next to the bed. “Your karkade.” He pulled back the sheets, collapsing into the small mountain of pillows. “Now if I'm not needed, I'm going to sleep. I'd forgotten how much dancing Daeva men did at weddings.”

The worry inside her unknotted slightly. Nahri poured herself a glass of karkade, and, ignoring her instinct to retreat to one of the low couches arranged near the fireplace, carefully slipped into the bed as well. She took a sip of her tea, savoring the cool tang.

The familiar tang. But the first memory that came to Nahri wasn't of a café in Egypt, it was of Daevabad's Royal Library, sitting across from a smiling prince who'd known the difference between Calicut and Cairo quite well. The prince whose knowledge of the human world had drawn Nahri to him in a way she hadn't realized was dangerous until it was too late.

“Muntadhir, can I ask you something?” The words burst from her before she could think better of them.

His voice came back to her, already husky from sleep. “Yes?”

“Why wasn't Ali at the wedding?”

Muntadhir's body instantly tensed. “He's busy with his garrison in Am Gezira.”

His garrison. Yes, that's what every Geziri said, almost down to the word, when asked about Alizayd al Qahtani.

But secrets were difficult to keep in Daevabad's royal harem. Which is why Nahri had heard rumors that Zaynab, Ali and Muntadhir's sister, had cried herself to sleep every night for weeks after her little brother was sent away. Zaynab, who had looked haunted ever since, even at the wedding festivities this evening.

The real question slipped from her. “Is he dead?” she whispered.

Muntadhir didn’t respond right away, and in the silence Nahri felt a tangle of conflicting emotions settle into her chest. But then her husband cleared his throat. “No.” The word sounded careful. Deliberate. “Though if you don’t mind, I would rather not discuss him. And, Nahri, about what you said before . . .” He looked at her, his eyes heavy with an emotion she couldn’t quite decipher. “You should know that when it comes down to it, I’m a Qahtani. My father is my king. I will always be loyal to that first.”

The warning was clear in his words, uttered in a voice that had lost all hint of intimacy. This was the emir of Daevabad speaking now, and he turned his back to her without waiting for a response.

Nahri set her glass down with a thud, feeling the slight warmth that had risen between them turn to ice. Annoyance sparked in her chest.

One of the tapestries across the room shuddered in response. The shadows falling across Muntadhir’s form, outlining the palace window, suddenly lengthened. Sharpened.

Neither surprised Nahri. Such things had been happening lately, the ancient palace seeming to awaken to the fact that a Nahid dwelled within its walls again.

DARA

In the crimson light of a sun that never set, Darayavahoush e-Afshin slumbered.

It was not true sleep, of course, but something deeper. Quieter. There were no dreams of missed opportunities and unrequited love, nor nightmares of blood-drenched cities and merciless human masters. He lay on the felt blanket his mother had woven for him as a boy, in the shade of a cedar glen. Through the trees, he caught glimpses of a dazzling garden, one that occasionally tugged at his attention.

But not now. Dara did not entirely know where he was, nor did it seem to matter. The air smelled of his home, of meals with his family and the sacred smoke of fire altars. His eyes fluttered open briefly now and then before the sounds of birdsong and a distant lute lulled him back toward sleep. It was all Dara wanted to do. To rest until the weariness finally slipped from his bones. Until the scent of blood left his memory.

A small hand nudged his shoulder.

Dara smiled. “Coming to check on me again, sister?”

He opened his eyes. Tamima knelt at his side, grinning a gap-toothed smile. A shroud draped his little sister’s small form, her black hair neatly plaited. Tamima looked far different than she had when Dara had first set eyes on her. When he had arrived in the glen, her shroud had been drenched in blood, her skin carved and scored with names written in Tukharistani script. It was a sight that had made him wild; he’d torn the glen apart with his bare hands again and again until he finally collapsed in her small arms.

But her marks had been fading ever since, along with the black tattoo on his own body, the one that looked like rungs on a twisting ladder.

Tamima dug her bare toes into the grass. “They are waiting to talk to you in the garden.”

Apprehension stole through him. Dara suspected he knew all too well the judgment that awaited him in that place. “I am not ready,” he replied.

“It is not a fate to fear, brother.”

Dara squeezed his eyes shut. “You do not know the things I have done.”

“Then confess them and free yourself of their weight.”

“I cannot,” he whispered. “If I start, Tamima . . . they will drown me. They—”

A burst of heat suddenly seared his left hand, and Dara gasped, the pain taking him by surprise. It was a sensation he’d started to forget, but the burn vanished as quickly as it had come. He raised

his hand.

A battered iron and emerald ring was on his finger.

Dara stared at it, baffled. He pushed to a sitting position, the heavy mantle of drowsiness falling from his body like a cloak.

The glen's stillness ebbed away, a cold breeze sweeping aside the smells of home and sending the cedar leaves dancing. Dara shivered. The wind seemed like a thing alive, pulling at his limbs and tousling his hair.

He was on his feet before he realized it.

Tamima grabbed his hand. "No, Daru," she pleaded. "Don't go. Not again. You're finally so close."

Startled, he glanced at his sister. "What?"

As if in response, the shadows in the cedar grove deepened, emerald and black writhing and twisting together. Whatever magic this was . . . it was intoxicating, tugging hard at his soul, the ring pulsing against his finger like a beating heart.

It was suddenly obvious. Of course, Dara would go. It was his duty, and he was a good Afshin.

He obeyed.

He pulled free of his sister's hand. "I will come back," he said. "I promise."

Tamima was weeping. "You always say that."

But his sister's sobs grew distant as Dara walked deeper into the grove. The sound of birdsong vanished, replaced by a low humming buzz that set his nerves on edge. The air seemed to close in around him, uncomfortably hot. The tug came again from his hand, the ring smoldering.

And then he was seized. *Stolen*, an unseen force snatching him like a rukh and dragging him into its maw.

The cedar glen vanished, replaced by utter blackness. Nothingness. A blazing, tearing pain ripped through him, worse than any sensation he could imagine, a thousand knives seeming to shred every fiber of his body as he was pulled, *dragged* through a substance thicker than mud. Disassembled and reformed from

pieces as sharp as broken glass.

A presence thundered to life in his breast, pounding like a drum. Rushing liquid swirled through new veins, lubricating the growing muscles, and a smothering heaviness settled upon his chest. He choked, his mouth reforming to draw air into his lungs. His hearing returned, bringing with it screams.

His screams.

Memories slammed into him. A woman shouting his name, whispering his name. Black eyes and a sly smile, her mouth on his as their bodies pressed together in a darkened cave. Those same eyes filled with shock, with betrayal, in a ruined infirmary. A drowned man covered in scales and tentacles looming over him, a rusting blade in his dripping hand.

Dara's eyes shot open, but he saw only blackness. The pain was fading but everything felt wrong, his body both too light and yet too real, pulsing in a way he hadn't experienced in decades. Centuries. He choked again, gasping as he tried to remember how to breathe.

A hand clamped down on his shoulder, and a wave of warmth and calm surged into his body. The pain vanished, his heart slowing to a steady beat.

Relief flooded through him. Dara would know the healing touch of a Nahid anywhere. "Nahri," he breathed. Tears burned his eyes. "Oh, Nahri, I am sorry. I am so sorry. I never meant—"

The words died in his mouth. He'd caught sight of his hand.

It was fire-bright, tipped in deadly sharp claws.

Before he could scream, a woman's face swam into view. *Nahri*. No, not Nahri, though Dara could see the ghost of her in the woman's expression. This Daeva was older, her face slightly lined. Silver stole through the black hair roughly shorn at her shoulders.

She looked almost as shocked as Dara felt. Delighted—but shocked. She reached up to stroke his cheek. "It worked," she whispered. "It finally worked."

Dara stared down in horror at his burning hands. The hated

emerald slave ring glittered back. “Why do I look like this?” His voice broke in panic. “Have the ifrit—”

“No,” the woman assured him quickly. “You’re free of the ifrit, Darayavahoush. You’re free of *everything*.”

That answered nothing. Dara gaped at the incomprehensible sight of his fiery skin, dread rising in his heart. In no world he knew did djinn and daevas look as he did now, even when brought back from slavery.

In a distant corner of his mind, Dara could still hear his sister begging him to return to the garden of his ancestors. *Tamima*. Grief rushed through him, and tears streamed down his cheeks, sizzling against his hot skin.

He shuddered. The magic coursing through his blood felt raw: new and ragged and uncontrollable. He drew a sharp breath, and the walls of the tent they were in undulated wildly.

The woman grabbed his hand. “Calm yourself, Afshin,” she said. “You are safe. You are free.”

“*What am I?*” He glanced again at his claws, sick at the sight. “What have you done to me?”

She blinked, looking taken aback by the despair in his voice. “I’ve made you a marvel. A miracle. The first daeva to be freed of Suleiman’s curse in three thousand years.”

Suleiman’s curse. He stared at her in disbelief, the words echoing in his head. That wasn’t possible. That . . . that was *abominable*. His people honored Suleiman. They obeyed his code.

Dara had killed for that code.

He shot to his feet. The ground shook beneath him, the tent walls flapping madly in a gust of hot wind. He staggered outside.

“Afshin!”

He gasped. He had been expecting the darkly lush mountains of his island city, but instead, Dara faced a desert, vast and empty. And then with horror, he recognized it. Recognized the line of salt cliffs and the single rocky tower that stood sentinel in the distance.

The Dasht-e Loot. The desert in southern Daevastana so hot and inhospitable that birds dropped dead from the sky while flying over it. At the height of the Daeva rebellion, Dara had lured Zaydi al Qahtani to the Dasht-e Loot. He'd caught and killed Zaydi's son in a battle that should have finally turned the war in the Daevas' favor.

But that was not how things had ended for Dara in the Dasht-e Loot.

A cackling laugh brought him sharply to the present.

"Well, there is a wager I have lost . . ." The voice behind him was smoothly clever, pulled from the worst of Dara's memories. "The Nahid actually did it."

Dara whirled around, blinking in the sudden brightness. Three ifrit were before him, waiting in the crumbling ruins of what might have once been a human palace, now lost to time and the elements. The same ifrit who'd hunted him and Nahri across the Gozan River, a desperate encounter they'd barely survived.

Their leader—Aeshma, Dara remembered—dropped from a broken wall, sauntering forward with a grin. "He even looks like us," he teased. "I suspect that's a shock."

"It's a pity." The ifrit who spoke next was a woman. "I liked the look of him before." She gave him a sly smile, holding up a battered metal helmet. "What do you think, Darayavahoush? Want to see if it still fits?"

Dara's eyes locked on the helmet. It had gone bluish-green with rust, but he instantly recognized the ragged edge of the brass shedu wings that sprouted from its sides. Shedu feathers, passed down from father to son, had once lined the helmet's crest. Dara could still remember shivering the first time he had touched them.

With rising horror, he looked again at the crumbling bricks. At the dark hole they enclosed, a black void upon the moonlit sand. It was the well down which he'd been callously thrown centuries ago to be drowned and remade, his soul enslaved by the ifrit now casually spinning his helmet on one finger.

Dara jerked back, clutching his head. None of this made any sense, but it all suggested something unfathomable. Unconscionable.

Desperate, he reached for the first person on his mind. “N-nahri,” he stammered. He’d left her screaming his name upon the burning boat, surrounded by their enemies.

Aeshma rolled his eyes. “I did tell you he would ask for her first. The Afshins are like dogs for their Nahids, loyal no matter how many times they’re whipped.” He turned his attention back to Dara. “Your little healer is in Daevabad.”

Daevabad. His city. His Banu Nahida. The betrayal in her dark eyes, her hands on his face as she begged him to run away.

A choked cry came from his throat, and heat consumed him. He whirled around, not certain where he was going. Only knowing that he needed to get back to Daevabad.

And then in a crack of thunder and flash of scalding fire, the desert was gone.

Dara blinked. Then he reeled. He stood upon a rocky shore, a swiftly coursing river gleaming darkly beside it. On the opposite bank, limestone cliffs rose against the night sky, glowing faintly.

The Gozan River. How he had gotten here from the Dasht-e Loot in the blink of an eye was not a thing Dara could begin to comprehend—but it didn’t matter. Not now. The only thing that mattered was returning to Daevabad and saving Nahri from the destruction he’d wrought.

Dara rushed forward. The invisible threshold that hid Daevabad away from the rest of the world was mere moments from the riverbank. He had crossed it countless times in his mortal life, returning from hunting trips with his father and his assignments as a young soldier. It was a curtain that fell instantly for anyone with even a drop of daeva blood, revealing the misty green mountains that surrounded the city’s cursed lake.

But as he stood there now, nothing happened.

Panic swept him. This couldn’t be. Dara tried again,

crisscrossing the plain and running the length of the river, struggling to find the veil.

On what must have been the hundredth attempt, Dara crashed to his knees. He wailed, flames bursting from his hands.

There was a crack of thunder and then the sound of running feet and Aeshma's annoyed sigh.

A woman knelt quietly at his side. The Daeva woman whose face he'd awoken to, the one who resembled Nahri. A long moment of silence stretched between them, broken only by Dara's ragged breaths.

He finally spoke. "Am I in hell?" he whispered, giving voice to the fear that gnawed at his heart, the uncertainty that had kept him from taking his sister's hand to enter the garden. "Is this punishment for the things I've done?"

"No, Darayavahoush, you are not in hell."

The soft assurance in her calm voice encouraged him to continue, and so he did. "I cannot cross the threshold," he choked out. "I cannot even find it. I have been damned. I have been turned away from my home and—"

The woman gripped his shoulder, the powerful magic in her touch stealing his words. "You have not been damned," she said firmly. "You cannot cross the threshold because you don't carry Suleiman's curse. Because you are free."

Dara shook his head. "I do not understand."

"You will." She took his chin in her hands, and Dara found himself turning to look at her, feeling strangely compelled by the urgency in her dark eyes. "You've been granted more power than any daeva in millennia. We will find a way to return you to Daevabad, I promise." Her grip tightened on his chin. "And when we do, Darayavahoush . . . we are going to *take* it. We're going to save our people. We're going to save Nahri."

Dara stared at her, desperate for the chance her words offered. "Who are you?" he whispered.

Her mouth curved in a smile familiar enough to break his

heart. “My name is Banu Manizheh.”

Nahri

Nahri closed her eyes, lifting her face to the sun and enjoying its heat on her skin. She inhaled, savoring the earthy smell of the distant mountains and the fresh breeze off the lake.

“They’re late,” Muntadhir complained. “They’re always late. I think they like the sight of us waiting in the sun.”

Zaynab snorted. “Dhiru, you haven’t been on time for a single event in your life. Is this truly a fight you wish to pick?”

Nahri ignored their bickering, taking another deep breath of the crisp air and reveling in the stillness. It was rare she was allowed such freedom, and she intended to savor what she could of it. She’d learned the hard way that she had no other choice.

The first time Nahri had attempted sneaking out of the palace had been shortly after the night on the boat. She had been desperate for a distraction, aching to wander parts of the city she’d yet to visit, places where thoughts of Dara wouldn’t haunt her.

In response, Ghassan had her maid Dunoor brought out before her. He hexed the girl’s tongue for not reporting the Banu Nahida’s absence, stealing her ability to ever speak again.

The second time, Nahri had been moved by a surge of defiance. She and Muntadhir were soon to be wed. She was the Banu Nahida. Who was Ghassan to lock her away in her ancestor’s city? She had taken better care, making sure her companions had alibis and using the palace itself to cloak her in shadows and guide her

through the most unused of corridors.

Still, Ghassan had found out. He dragged in the sleeping gate guard she'd tiptoed past and had the man scourged before her until there was not a strip of unbloodied skin on his back.

The third time, Nahri hadn't even been sneaking around. Newly married to Muntadhir, she had merely decided to walk back to the palace from the Grand Temple on a sunny day, instead of taking her guarded litter. She'd never imagined Ghassan—now her father-in-law—would care. On the way, she'd stopped inside a small café in the Daeva Quarter, passing a lovely few moments chatting with its surprised and delighted proprietors.

The following day Ghassan had the couple brought to the palace. This time, he didn't have to harm anyone. Nahri had no sooner seen their frightened faces than she dropped to her knees and swore never to go anywhere without permission again.

Which meant she now never turned away a chance to escape the palace walls. Aside from the royal siblings' squabbling and the cry of a hawk, the lake was entirely silent, the air wrapping her in a blessed, heavy peace.

Her relief didn't go unnoticed.

"Your wife looks like someone just released her from a century in prison," Zaynab muttered from a few paces away. She kept her voice low, but Nahri had a talent for listening to whispers. "Even I'm starting to feel bad for her, and one of the vines in her garden ripped my cup from my hand the last time we had tea."

Muntadhir shushed his sister. "I'm certain she didn't mean it. Sometimes that just . . . happens when she's around."

"I heard one of the shedu statues bit a soldier who slapped her assistant."

"Maybe he shouldn't have slapped her assistant." Muntadhir's whisper turned sharper. "But enough of such gossip. I don't want Abba hearing things like that."

Nahri smiled beneath her veil, pleasantly surprised by his defense. Despite being married now for nearly five years,

Muntadhir rarely defended her against his family.

She opened her eyes, admiring the view before her. It was a beautiful day, one of the few in which not a single cloud marred the bright, fathomless blue of Daevabad's sky. The three of them were waiting at the front of the city's once grand port. Though the docks were still serviceable, the rest of the port was in ruins and apparently had been for centuries. Weeds grew through the cracked paving stones and the decorative granite columns lay smashed. The only hint of the port's ancient grandeur was behind her, in the gleaming brass facades of her ancestors on the city's mighty walls.

Ahead was the lake, the misty-green mountains of the opposite shore melting into a thin, pebbly beach. The lake itself was still, its murky water cursed long ago by the marid during some forgotten feud with the Nahid Council. It was a curse Nahri tried very hard not to think about. Nor did she let her gaze drift southward to where the high cliffs beneath the palace met the dark water. What had happened on that stretch of the lake five years ago was a thing she didn't dwell on.

The air shimmered and sparked, pulling Nahri's attention to the center of the lake.

The Ayaanle had arrived.

The ship that emerged from the veil looked like something out of a fairy tale, slipping through the mists with a grace that belied its size. Nahri had grown up along the Nile and was used to boats, to the thicket of sleek feluccas, fishing canoes, and loaded trade transports that glided over the wide river in a ceaseless flow. But this ship was nothing like any of those. It looked large enough to fit hundreds, its dark teak dazzling in the sunlight as it floated lightly upon the lake. Teal banners adorned with the icons of studded golden pyramids and starry silver salt tablets flew from the masts. Its many amber-colored sails—and Nahri counted at least a dozen—dwarfed the glimmering decks. Segmented and ribbed, the sails looked more like wings than anything that

belonged on a boat, and they shivered and undulated in the wind like living things.

Awed, Nahri drew closer to the Qahtani siblings. “How did they get a *ship* here?” The only land beyond the magical threshold that embraced Daevabad’s vast lake and misty mountains was composed of immense stretches of rocky desert.

“Because it’s not just any ship.” Zaynab grinned. “It’s a sandship. The Sahrayn invented them. They’re careful to keep the magic behind them a secret, but a skilled captain can fly across the world with one of those.” She sighed, her gaze admiring and rueful. “The Sahrayn charge the Ayaanle a *fortune* to use them, but they do make a statement.”

Muntadhir didn’t look as impressed by the lovely ship. “Interesting that the Ayaanle can afford such a thing when Ta Ntry’s taxes have been chronically short.”

Nahri’s gaze flickered to her husband’s face. Though Muntadhir had never directly spoken to her of Daevabad’s economic problems, they were obvious to everyone—especially the Banu Nahida who healed the training injuries of soldiers as they griped about reduced rations and undid the hexes the increasingly frazzled Treasury secretaries had begun hurling at one another. Fortunately, the downturn had yet to largely affect her Daevas—mostly because they’d cut themselves off from trading with the other tribes after Ghassan had tacitly allowed the Daeva stalls to be destroyed and their merchants harassed in the Grand Bazaar after Dara’s death. Why take the risk of trading with djinn if none would stand up to protect them?

The Ayaanle ship drifted nearer, its sails fanning out as deckhands in brightly striped linen and thick gold ornaments dashed about the boat. On the top deck, a chimeralike creature with a feline body covered in ruby scales strained at a golden harness, flashing horns that shone like diamonds and whipping a serpentine tail.

The ship had no sooner docked than a knot of passengers made

their way toward the royal party. Among them was a man dressed in voluminous teal robes and a silver turban that wrapped his head and neck.

“Emir Muntadhir.” He smiled and bowed low. “Peace be upon you.”

“And upon you peace,” Muntadhir returned politely. “Rise.”

The Ayaanle man did so, aiming what seemed to be a far sincerer grin at Zaynab. “Little princess, how you’ve grown!” He laughed. “You do this old coin-changer a great honor, coming to greet me yourself.”

“The honor is mine,” Zaynab assured him with a grace Nahri would never have the patience to emulate. “I pray your journey went well?”

“God be praised.” The man turned to Nahri, his gold eyes lighting in surprise. “Is this the Nahid girl?” He blinked, and Nahri didn’t miss the way he stepped back ever so slightly.

“This is my wife,” Muntadhir corrected, his voice considerably cooler.

Nahri met the man’s eyes, drawing up as she pulled her chador close. “I am the Banu Nahida,” she said through her veil. “I hear you are called Abul Dawanik.”

He bowed. “You hear correctly.” His gaze didn’t leave her, the examination making her skin crawl. He shook his head. “Astonishing. I never imagined I’d meet a real Nahid.”

Nahri gritted her teeth. “Occasionally we’re allowed out to terrify the populace.”

Muntadhir cleared his throat. “I have made room for your men and your cargo at the royal caravanserai. I would be happy to escort you there myself.”

Abul Dawanik sighed. “Alas, there’s little cargo. My people needed more time to prepare the tax caravan.”

Muntadhir’s civil mask didn’t waver, but Nahri sensed his heartbeat pick up. “That was not the arrangement we agreed on.” The warning in his voice was so reminiscent of Ghassan, her skin

prickled. “You are aware of how close Navasatem is, yes? It is a bit difficult to plan a once-in-a-century celebration when tax payments are consistently late.”

Abul Dawanik threw him a wounded look. “Straight to all this talk of money, Emir? The Geziri hospitality I’m used to typically involves chattering about polite nonsense for at least another ten minutes.”

Muntadhir’s response was direct. “Perhaps you would prefer my father’s company to mine.”

Abul Dawanik didn’t look cowed; if anything, Nahri saw a hint of slyness in his expression before he responded. “No need for threats, Your Highness. The caravan is but a few weeks behind me.” His eyes twinkled. “No doubt you will enjoy what it brings you.”

From behind the city walls, the adhan sounded, calling the faithful to noon prayer. It rose and fell in distant waves as new muezzins picked it up, and Nahri fought a familiar twinge of homesickness. The adhan always made her think of Cairo.

“Dhiru, surely this can wait,” Zaynab said, clearly trying to alleviate the tension between the two men. “Abul Dawanik is our guest. He has had a long journey. Why don’t the two of you go pray together and then visit the caravanserai? I can take Nahri back to the palace.”

Muntadhir didn’t look pleased, but he didn’t protest. “Do you mind?” he asked Nahri courteously.

Do I have a choice? Zaynab’s bearers were already bringing their litter over, the pretty cage that would return Nahri to her gilded prison. “Of course not,” she muttered, turning away from the lake to follow her sister-in-law.

They didn’t talk much on the way back. Zaynab appeared absorbed in her thoughts, and Nahri was happy to rest her eyes before returning to the bustling infirmary.

But the litter shuddered to a stop too soon. Nahri jolted from her half doze and rubbed her eyes, frowning as she caught sight of

Zaynab hastily pulling off some of her jewelry. Nahri watched as she piled it on the cushion beside her, and then from beneath the brocade-covered seat, retrieved two plain cotton abayas, pulling one over her silk gown.

“Are we being robbed?” Nahri asked, half-hoping it might be true. Being robbed would mean a delay in returning to the palace and Ghassan’s constant, watchful presence.

Zaynab neatly wrapped a dark shawl around her hair. “Of course not. I’m going for a walk.”

“A walk?”

“You’re not the only one who wants to escape sometimes, and I take my opportunities when they arise.” Zaynab tossed the second abaya at Nahri. “Quick, put this on. And keep your face veiled.”

Nahri stared at her in surprise. “You want me to come?”

Zaynab eyed her. “I’ve known you for five years. I am not leaving you alone with my jewelry.”

Nahri hesitated, tempted. But the terrified faces of the people Ghassan had punished in her place immediately flooded her mind, and her heart seized in fear. “I can’t. Your father—”

Zaynab’s expression softened. “He hasn’t caught me yet. And I’ll take the responsibility if he does today, I swear.” She beckoned Nahri forward. “Come. You look like you need this even more than I do.”

Nahri quickly considered her options. Ghassan did have a soft spot for his only daughter, so after another moment of indecision, temptation won out. She pulled free her most visibly royal jewels, slipped into the garment Zaynab had offered her, and followed her out of the litter.

With a quiet word and a knowing wink between the princess and one of her guards—Nahri sensed this was a well-honed routine—the two women were pulled into the crush of pedestrians. Nahri had been to the Geziri Quarter plenty of times with Muntadhir to visit his relatives, but she hadn’t seen anything beyond the curtains of the litters in which they traveled and the sumptuous

interiors of mansions. Palace women were not expected to mix with commoners, let alone wander the city streets.

At first glance, the Quarter looked small—despite a Geziri family ruling the city, most of their tribesmen were said to prefer the rugged terrain of their homeland. But it was a pleasant glance, nonetheless. Windtowers loomed far above, sending lake-fresh breezes past neat rows of tall brick buildings, their pale facades adorned with copper shutters and white stucco filigree. Ahead was the market, protected from the hot sun by woven reed mats and a glistening water channel cut into the main street, filled with enchanted ice. Across from the market was the quarter's main mosque, and next to the mosque was a large floating pavilion, shaded by date and citrus trees, where families feasted on dark halwa, coffee, and other treats from the market.

And over it all loomed the stark tower of the Citadel. The home of the Royal Guard, the Citadel threw shadows over the Geziri Quarter and the neighboring Grand Bazaar, jutting up against the brass walls that separated Daevabad from its deadly lake. Nisreen had once told her—in one of her many dark warnings about the Geziris—that the Citadel had been the first structure Zaydi al Qahtani built upon seizing Daevabad from the Nahid Council. He'd ruled from there for years, leaving the palace a deserted ruin stained with the blood of her ancestors.

Zaynab chose that moment to take her arm, pulling her toward the market, and Nahri happily let herself be towed. Almost unconsciously, she palmed a ripe orange from a fruit stand as they passed. Stealing it was probably reckless, but there was something so freeing about strolling crowded city streets. It might not be Cairo, but the rustle of impatient passersby, the aroma of street food, and knots of men emerging from the mosque were familiar enough to briefly ease her homesickness. She was anonymous again for the first time in years, and it was delightful.

They slowed to a stroll once they entered the shadowed depths of the market. Nahri looked around, dazzled. A glassworker was

turning hot sand into a speckled bottle with her fiery hands while across the lane a wooden loom worked by itself, bright woolen threads wrapping and twisting to pattern a half-completed prayer mat. From a stall packed with flowers came a rich aroma, a perfumer sprinkling rosewater and musk over a glittering tray of molten ambergris. Next door, a pair of hunting cheetahs in jeweled collars lounged on elevated cushions, sharing a storefront with squawking firebirds.

Zaynab stopped to stroke the large cats while Nahri wandered ahead. Down an adjacent lane was a row of booksellers, and she immediately headed for them, captivated by the volumes laid out in rows on rugs and tables. While a few books had an aura of magic, their covers bound in scales and pages shimmering gently, the majority looked human-made. Nahri wasn't surprised; of all the djinn tribes, the Geziris were said to be closest to the humans with whom they silently shared their land.

She browsed the nearest stall. Most of the books were in Arabic, and the sight sent an odd pang through her. It was the first language she'd learned to read, and a skill she could never entirely divorce in her mind from the young prince who'd taught her. Not wanting to think of Ali, she glanced idly at the next table. A book with a sketch of a trio of pyramids rested in its center.

Nahri was there the next moment, reaching for the book like she might have grabbed a long-lost friend in an embrace. They were Giza's famed Pyramids, all right, and as she flipped through the pages, she recognized more of Cairo's distinctive landmarks: the twin minarets of the Bab Zuweila gate and the vast interior of the Ibn Tulun mosque. There were women in the black dresses Nahri had once worn gathering water from the Nile, and men sorting piles of sugarcane.

"You have a good eye, miss." An older Geziri man ambled forth. "That's one of my newest human acquisitions, and I've never seen anything like it. A Sahrayn trader picked it up crossing the Nile."

Nahri ran her hands over the first page. The book was written

in a script she'd never seen. "What language is this?"

The man shrugged. "I'm not certain. The lettering appears similar to some of the old Latin texts I have. The trader who picked it up didn't stay in Egypt long; he said it looked as though the humans were engaged in some sort of war."

Some sort of war. Her fingers pressed harder on the book. Egypt had been freshly subjugated by the French when Nahri left, ruled by the Ottomans before that—it was seemingly Nahri's destiny to belong to an occupied people wherever she went. "How much do you want for this?"

"Three dinars."

Nahri narrowed her eyes at him. "Three *dinars*? Do I look as though I'm made of gold?"

The man seemed shocked. "That . . . that is the price, miss."

"Maybe for someone else," she said scornfully, masking her glee while feigning insult. "I won't give you a coin over ten dirhams."

He gaped. "But that's not how we—"

Zaynab was suddenly there, seizing Nahri's arm in a tight grip. "What are you *doing*?"

Nahri rolled her eyes. "It's called bargaining, sister dear. I'm sure you've never had to do such a thing but—"

"Geziris do not *bargain* in our community markets." Zaynab's words dripped with revulsion. "It breeds discord."

Nahri was scandalized. "So you just pay whatever they ask?" She couldn't believe she'd married into such a naive people. "What if they're cheating you?"

Zaynab was already handing three gold coins to the bookseller. "Perhaps it would be better to stop thinking that everyone is cheating you, no?" She pulled Nahri away and pushed the book into her hands. "And stop making a scene. The point is to *not* get caught."

Nahri clutched the book to her chest, a little abashed. "I'll pay you back."