

UNTOLD CHRONICLES



LEGACY

Untold Chronicles Book 1 – Legacy

ASR PUBLICATIONS

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قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ مَوْلَانَا
وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

“Say, “Nothing will ever befall us except what Allah has destined for us. He is our Protector.” So in Allah let the believers put their trust.”

– 9:51

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1

Prologue

“Take her!” The woman cried.

She hastily handed the wriggling bundle in her arms to the armour clad man at the door. With practiced ease, Maesum scooped it up, one arm sliding around the blanket. In his other hand, he clutched a dagger whose tip glowed an eerie red in the flickering torchlight.

The woman wore a brave face but there was no hiding the quivering of her lip or the unshed tears that pooled in her pleading eyes. She dropped a final kiss on the sleeping child’s head, a pained expression etched on her face as she withdrew from it. The child smiled in her sleep.

“Go,” she whispered, yearning and longing interwoven in every word. “You must not be seen here.”

He nodded and turned. As his foot crossed the doorway, he paused and turned.

“She will be cared for.” Maesum reassured her. “All of them will be.”

To stranger eyes her gaze was resolute but Maesum could see the hesitation on her face. Nevertheless, she nodded and backed away, closing the heavy oak door with a low creak. Not before he saw a tear trickle down her cheek.

Without further ado, he turned to the south entrance. They had barely moved a few steps when a loud clatter echoed from

the other end of the hall. Maesum grit his teeth. He could hear the boisterous calls of his pursuers. They weren't far behind.

"Come little one," he whispered. The baby was nestled quite comfortably in the crook of his elbow. She snuggled deeper into the blanket, blissfully unaware. "It is time for us to leave".

Maesum's feet made no noise. Like a panther, he slid with practiced ease. Shadow to shadow, arch to arch. The grip on his knife never weakened. Mercifully enough, the girl didn't stir. Though not a soul crossed their path, he dared not idle for even a moment despite the sound of clanging swords and cheering men having long faded into silence. A right turn brought them to the hall of tapestries. The cavernous corridor bellowed even the light scuffle of his shoes on the stone. He walked with gentle steps, moving from carpet to carpet.

He could just see the torchlight of the other hall when the faint echo of a thunderous roar reached him. That was the sound of boots. Many of them. And they were getting closer. He skidded to a halt and without wasting a moment, flung aside one of the heavy ornate tarps and squeezed into the small archway concealed behind it. It was enough space for a small person but not for someone of his size. He was hunched over, his shoulder pads scraping the stone edge. But that didn't concern him. The tarp had just settled in place when he heard the growing grumble of what sounded like a stampeding herd. How many men were looking for them right now? He looked down at his little package and found her awake.

It was a little strange. Large doe-like brown irises brimming with curiosity focusing on him. He looked down and was met with the an adorable toothless grin. Due to the confined space, the little girl reached up and patted the side of his face while unapologetically blowing spit bubbles. In spite of the situation, it brought a smile to his face, along with a wave of anger. How could anyone want to hurt something so innocent? As the stampede slowed down, which hopefully meant that they were safe, he froze. There was a very distinct clang against the stone floor. He felt the vibration through his boots.

'Cling! Cling!'

He watched in horror as the baby screwed up her nose in discomfort, on the verge of a wail. He hurriedly shuffled the blanket, as much as he could without disturbing the tarp, to muffle her ears. She gave him a frown but soon settled down. Maesum's breath was still hitched in his throat but prayers flew silently from his heart. He dare not even breath.

"Where are they, Commander?" the voice was soft and smooth but there was a cold steely edge to it.

He could hear someone shuffling. "T-The rooms were empty. They are nowhere to be found."

Maesum clutched the baby tighter as a horrible squelching sound followed by a sickening thud filled the the hall.

He could hear a few surprised gasps and whispers.

"Anyone else with bad news?" the mysterious voice asked in an eerily sweet tone. There was no response. "Good. Now find them!" it growled.

Maesum's arms and back ached in protest but he dared not move even as the clanging grew faint. Only once it had disappeared, did he reemerge.

Thankfully, there was nobody but a pool of blood only a few steps from where he had been hiding. The walls had a thin splatter and there was a small line of red that streaked out of view. He covered the child's eyes and peeked around the corner. Slowly, he slid out and continued dodging down the corridors. He saw and heard no one else, save the calls of the patrols on the castle walls.

The castle was a maze but served his purpose well. He ducked and dived through every shortcut and hidden route learnt over the many years he had served there.

He almost sighed in relief when they arrived at the destination. The wall on his left opened into a small and narrow alley. With his broad shoulders, padded by thick armour, it would be a tight squeeze. As he was pocketing his knife, he heard a small whimper. He could feel the hair stand on his neck as the whimpers were quickly followed by sobs. Without wasting a moment, he shoved the knife in a hidden sheath and darted into the alley. It was barely wide enough for his large shoulders, and he managed to squeeze through without jostling the child too much.

“ Sh...Sh...” he whispered in a comforting voice. When she had woken or why she was upset, he didn’t know. But he didn’t have time to take any more chances. He hadn’t even noticed that she had stopped crying at his strange noise. Maesum was more preoccupied with making sure they hadn’t been followed and kept throwing wary glances over his shoulder. The hall was dimly lit with a few torches perched on the wall, flickering ominously. He didn’t stop until he reached the very end of the hall. There was a door, the top of it barely reaching his chin. He had to bend over to rap the worn wood. His hasty knocking was soon answered. The door was opened just enough to reveal half a wrinkled face. After seeing who it was, the old man opened it wider to let the duo in.

“Maesum!” He rasped in surprise as Maesum squeezed through the narrow entry way. “By Allah(swt), I thought that was all of them!”.

Maesum shook his head. He held out the baby and placed her in the old man’s grasp. “Not quite, Agha.”

That caused the old man’s brow to crease into a frown. “There were only-”

“I know!” urged Maesum, keeping a wary eye on the door. “But I’ll explain later. She is the last one. Have the others gone through?”

His response was a hasty nod. “Now leave!” the Agha urged. He turned his back to Maesum, muttering furtively under his breath as his hand flitted across the table, grabbing various supplies.

Maesum almost made for the door but hesitated. The old man turned and raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I promised her mother that all of them will be cared for.” He probed.

The old man nodded. “And they will be. Now go! With the protection of Allah(swt)!”

Maesum nodded. He was half way out the door when he stopped and turned around. With a quick step forward he caressed the curly mop of hair on the child’s head. She babbled happily, her pudgy hands reaching for his retreating fingers.

“You’ll come home, little one. You’ll come home to your

mother. I promise, I'll look after her.”

The response was another enthusiastic spit bubble but it made him smile no less. With a final glance, he turned and left.

As the door shut, the old man moved with an agility belying his age and knocked his bony knuckles on the library shelf with all the urgency he could muster. It was a few seconds before the entire shelf creaked painfully and swung open to reveal a middle-aged man at the door.

“Luqman! Take her - she is the last one!”

Luqman obediently reached and plucked the young girl out of Agha's hands. She was getting agitated at being passed around. He rocked her in a gentle placating motion and watched with a bated breath as she settled in his arms. He turned and was about to leave when a wrinkled hand grabbed his forearm.

“Take care of them, Luqman, care for them as your own. With you and Khanum, they should never feel the loss of a mother's warmth or the pain of a father's absence.”

Luqman nodded and then hurried down the passage. As he disappeared into the dark, the old man pushed against the shelf with all his might. He grunted with effort as the heavy door creaked painfully and finally shut. Without pausing for breath, he hurried to the window. Every moment was painfully slow for him. Did they make it through? What if-

“No,” he scolded himself firmly. “They have left in the protection of Allah(swt). No harm can befall them against His will.” His breath came in short quick pants, steaming into the chilly night air in wisps. His heart slammed painfully against his ribs and he gripped the side of the window impatiently.

“Ya Allah(swt), let them be alright...”

As though on cue, there was a ripple in the darkness on his right. He sank in relief as a figure cloaked in black burst from the castle line, slipping into the trees and vanishing into the forest. He could see the lights from the torches of the patrolling guards yellowing the stirred up dust, but they had seen nothing.

Agha Soleimani sighed as he leaned heavily on the small sill, casting his eyes to the heavens. He began to mutter a prayer beneath his breath as a loud ringing sliced through the deafening

silence. It was the castle bell, only rung in times of great need. The world would not know until the sun had risen, but Agha Soleimani was more than well aware of why it had rung. And so, concealed in the folds of the darkest night, he whispered in a soft voice,

“Inna lilla wa inna ilaihi rajioon.” A lone tear rolled down his cheek.

2

Home

Home. Lush, beautiful foliage tossed tiny flecks of glittering sunlight onto gravel-covered ground. Rustling leaves of towering trees whispered reassuringly to their hidden occupants. Tiny green stalks stroked the healthy breeze. Of course, none could ignore the buzzing sounds of the bustling fauna, nestled deep in the twisted roots and behind the small cavernous grooves of rising and dipping soil.

The glorious and beautiful day begged the question of why thirteen-year-old Rafay was tucked away in a tangle of roots beneath the giant old oak. Unlike the breezy clearing, it was moist and humid. He was soaking in sweat, his hair and clothes sticking to his skin and droplets beaded on his forehead. But that didn't bother him. Instead, he was eagerly watching the moss covered forest floors from the slivers of space between the matted roots. His eyes were peeled in search of a certain little girl. He moved to take a closer look when a ball of brown and white almost plopped itself on his nose.

"Ch Ch Ch!" it angrily chided. Rafay let out the breath he had been holding. It was just a squirrel, an angry and noisy one. It tilted its furry head to the side comically, watching him through black beady eyes. He cringed as it broke to chatter in a pitched voice, its fuzzy striped tail flicking around.

"Shoo! Get out of here!" he hissed. "You're going to give me away!"

Clearly the squirrel did not appreciate the dismissal. It scampered out of reach, chattering back noisily. He watched it bound up the tree and out of view. Though, he could hear its annoying voice fading as it climbed higher.

“I’ll never get why Maya like those *things*, they’re so annoying.”

With a shake of his head, he resumed his position, watching the clearing. Thankfully, there was no one in sight.

“*They’ll never find me here!*” he whispered to himself, rubbing his palms in glee.

“And that, was your first mistake.”

Rafay turned so quickly that he didn’t see the low hanging root until it smacked him in the face.

“Blech!” He hastily swiped the damp soil from his eyes, clutching his stinging nose. In front of him was a spitting image of his own face that was currently snickering.

Rafay scowled. “Do you always have to sneak around? Ow...”

He touched his nose tenderly. It still stung.

“Get your own spot, Haroon. I was here first.”

The mirror image merely shrugged and looked around.

“It is actually quite comfortable. Small, but functional. Not very suitable for a workshop though, there’s too little light.”

Rafay rolled his eyes. “That’s good to know, but if you don’t mind, I have a game to win. Go away!”

This time it was Haroon who rolled his eyes. “No need to be rude. Besides, I don’t need a spot. And actually, neither do you.”

He pointed behind Rafay. The boy turned around and groaned. In between the roots was a small face peeping into his little hideaway. He threw Haroon a glare before climbing out, his brother behind him.

It felt good to be back outside and Rafay stretched his arms, relishing the breeze.

Young Maya was skipping joyfully in a circle. “Caught you! Caught you!” she declared in a sing song voice.

Rafay frowned at Haroon. “I can’t believe you gave me away.”

Before his twin could retort, Maya put herself between them, her small hands planted on her hips. “He didn’t tell me! I found you all by myself!”

“Maybe it’s because you smell,” Haroon quipped.

Rafay smirked and held out his hands. “Oh really? Why don’t you give your big brother a hug?”

“We’re twins!” Haroon retorted. Unlike Maya, who burst into a fit of giggles, he was less amused and narrowed his eyes.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Stop fighting,” Maya pouted. “We have to find the others.”

She grabbed one hand of each brother before they could protest and tugged them down a well-trodden path.

“We should check by the waterfall,” Rafay suggested. “You’ve already done the clearing and there is nowhere to hide in the field.”

Haroon stopped. “Actually...” he drawled, thinking hard. “That’s where we *should* check.”

Rafay raised an eyebrow. “It’s spring; the grass is barely knee high. Where would they hide?”

Haroon grinned. “Exactly! One of the older kids will definitely be there because everyone thinks there’s nowhere to go.”

Rafay crossed his arms. “Fine,” he huffed, blowing a hair out of his eye. “But then we’ll check the waterfall.”

So the three turned and headed down to the grassy plains.

In the beaming sunlight they looked even more scenic. Rolling carpets of green, velvety grass rippling like a calm green sea in the breeze. There were little glints of light winking at the young children from the droplets of morning dew clinging to the green stalks. A gentle swishing with the sweet smell of the grass made for a very peaceful scenery. However, the breathtaking sight only brought exasperation to the little party.

“This place is huge! How are we going to find anyone?” groaned Maya.

“I could climb up there” Rafay squinted at the sequoias. “But I’ll need a boost.”

He turned to Haroon who rolled his eyes.

“If you don’t stop rolling your eyes, they’ll roll right out of your head. Come on, give me a leg up!”

“I suppose please isn’t in your vocabulary,” Haroon muttered but nevertheless he squatted by the tree, his hand cupped together.

It took a bit of pushing, but Rafay finally managed to grab a branch. He clambered up, ignoring the queasy feeling in his stomach as it swayed under his weight.

“Maybe stay away from the potatoes at dinner.” Haroon huffed.

If it could, the look Rafay gave him would have set his hair on fire. “It’s not fat, it’s muscle!”

That earned him another Haroon eye-roll.

“Can you see anyone?” Maya called up the tree.

Balancing on the flaking wood, he gazed out onto the field. All he could see was green everywhere. Green trees, green grass, Rafay frowned. He actually thought Haroon’s guess would have been right. He was about to call back when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Right at the treeline, barely visible by the dirt was a thin patch of black in the grass. Someone was lying down there!

He slid himself off the side, dangling above the ground before landing with a resounding *thud* in the dirt.

“Did you see anyone?” Haroon asked earnestly.

Rafay nodded. “There is someone lying in the grass not far down the treeline. I say we give them a surprise.”

Maya nodded, jumping up and down in excitement.

They all slunk along the treeline, trying to use the thick bodies of foliage to conceal themselves as they got closer and closer to where they saw the mysterious person. Rafay led them in single file when he suddenly stopped. Maya, not expecting him to do so, bumped into his back and nearly tripped Haroon as she fell backwards.

Holding a finger to his lips, Rafay peeked over the dirt mound that hid the field from view. He could see the flattened blades of grass where someone had clearly been lying down not too long ago. But now it was empty. His brows knitted.

“They’re gone!” he whispered to the others.

“What do you mean?” asked Haroon.

“I mean that someone was here, the grass is flat, but now they’re gone!”

Maya’s face fell at that statement.

“Don’t worry, they were here a minute ago. They couldn’t have gone far. We’ll find them.” Rafay assured.

“Or they’ll find you.” came a voice from above.

All three of them looked up in surprise and a hint of awe. In one of the trees, standing on one of the branches was a teenage boy. In a singular smooth motion, he swung down and landed in front of them.

“Looking for me?” he asked in amusement.

Hisham at sixteen years, easily towered over the three children. He ran a hand through his ink black hair, a grin etched on his tanned face. His eyes were black pools sparkling with mirth as his younger siblings stared back in astonishment.

“Hashu Bhaiya!” squealed Maya. She pushed past Rafay, and jumped without any care, launching herself on the tall boy. He was prepared and caught her with practiced ease, spinning her around and eliciting more giggles.

“How did you know we were coming?” asked Haroon.

“I saw you,” Hashu replied simply as he put a breathless Maya down. “Up in the tree,” he clarified at their confused expressions. He knelt down until he was face to face with all of them. “Now I do believe there are still two people missing from our group. Any idea where they might be?”

Their expressions melted into eager contemplation.

“My constructure is that Nomi Bhaiya should be around here, he is always close to Hashu Bhaiya.” Maya declared confidently

The twins gave her a funny look.

“Constructure?” Haroon asked.

Hashu smiled. “I think she meant conjecture and it means an opinion.”

Maya shrugged her shoulders, “That’s what I said, constructure.”

“Well, I think she may be right.” quipped Rafay. He was more interested in finding their last two siblings.

Hashu nodded in mocked seriousness. “Well, then you better start looking.”

They grinned and he watched them run off to one of the more well known paths through the forest. Hashu rocked on his heels, waiting patiently. Once they were out of the earshot, he looked

up.

High up in the tree branches that stretched above his head, was a boy, only slightly younger than himself. Through the weave of twigs and leaves he could make out Noman, or Nomi as they liked to call him, with his smile and brown eyes that twinkled in amusement.

“Think they’ll figure it out Hashu Bhai?” he called, just loud enough for the boy below to hear.

He shrugged and smiled. “I wouldn’t underestimate them.”

“Hashu Bhaiya!” came three earnest yells.

“Coming!” he called back. Sharing a final grin with his hidden brother, Hashu set off after his enthusiastic siblings. He didn’t need to look up to know that Nomi was following right above him.



“It’s nearly sundown and we still haven’t found anyone else!” moaned Maya. She dramatically dragged her feet in the dirt, frustration pulsating from every word.

Rafay sighed, casting a weary eye on the dipping sun.

“She’s right. We’ve been at this for ages. We’ve searched everywhere! There isn’t any place left!”

Haroon’s head hung in defeat. “There’s no way we can find them. I can’t even think of where we should look.”

He dejectedly kicked a small stone. Hashu was just as calm as he had been when they had found him. When he saw the defeated look on their faces, he decided that it was time to grant his little siblings another victory.

Catching Rafay’s eye, he gestured silently to come closer. Rafay, though confused, complied and Hashu whispered something in his ear.

Haroon and Maya watched in curiosity as the the forlorn expression melted from Rafay’s face, replaced with excitement. With an encouraging nod from Hashu, Rafay silently and stealthily stalked over to a bush that was part of the foliage bordering their trodden path. It was tall, a little shorter than Hashu, and thick with leaves and stems protruding out. He paused right beside it and looked down at the ground, shuffling his toes in the dirt.

Hashu knelt down to meet Rafay's eye level.

'Three.... Two...!' he mouthed. He barely managed to reach one when Rafay pounced like a cat into the bush. Haroon and Maya continued to watch, eyebrows raised, as branches, leaves and a few irritated bugs flew away from the shaking hedge. They could hear Rafay's strained yells and someone else's grunts.

Before anyone could intervene, two bodies tumbled out head over heels onto the ground throwing up a cloud of dirt that had the younger children coughing terribly. Once it had settled, a very pleased Rafay was sitting triumphantly beside a larger and smiling Nomi. He didn't seem the slightest bit abashed and gave a short laugh before reaching to tickle Rafay. Anticipating the offense, the young boy skillfully sprang away and ducked behind Hashu, who was grinning broadly at the sight. Seeing their dishevelled brother, Haroon and Maya were barely able to stifle their chuckles.

Nomi had an assortment of twigs and leaves protruding from his thick sandy brown hair, his beige skin marred by streaks of dirt and mud. But despite that, his lips were pulled back in a large smile revealing pearly white teeth, below a pair of laughing light brown eyes.

Rafay hadn't fared much better and was violently shaking a forest worth of foliage out of his hair. Though it wasn't as bad as Nomi.

"I guess that means Fati Baji wins," Nomi said between deep breaths.

"Aww," Rafay moaned. "I really thought I'd win this time."

"And that was your first mistake," Haroon muttered.

"Let's head home," Hashu smiled. "Besides, I have a hunch about where she might be."

That phrase caught the attention of the other three boys. After all, Hashu would be the one to know his twin sister best.

So they set off. They had made it halfway when the sun began to skim the treetops. It stained the skies in brilliant shades of orange, pink and red. The colours ran rampant, bleeding across the skyline and washing them in a warm yet fiery glow.

"We'll have to light the firepit," Hashu told them. "It's almost Maghrib."

Somehow, a tired Maya found her way onto Nomi's back. Rafay rolled his eyes as she happily chatted off Nomi's ear, but the older boy didn't seem to mind. He held on tightly to her legs, nodding along, humouring her.

"How did you know I was there?" Nomi asked, lining up beside Rafay, turning slightly to address him. Well, as much as Maya's arms around his neck would allow.

"It was easy!" teased Rafay.

"No it wasn't!" retorted Maya. "We searched for ages and ages and Rafay Bhaiya had to climb a tree and-"

"And in short, it was easy because Hashu Bhaiya told us." interrupted Haroon, before Maya began her spiel.

She frowned. "I was going to say that."

"Eventually," mumbled Haroon.

He noticed his earlier comment had earned him a stink eye from Rafay. He just stuck out his tongue and his twin responded in kind.

"Rafay, Haroon." a voice warned from up front. Both boys stopped immediately at the sound of Hashu's voice.

"Hashu Bhaiya, how did you know Nomi Bhaiya was there?"

Nomi shook his head at Rafay's diversion but let it go for now.

Hashu turned and shot them a smile. "He's been following us since the grassland."

"You were there? But how? We had looked everywhere!" exclaimed Rafay in surprise.

Hashu and Nomi shared a knowing smile. "Sometimes what you're looking for is right in front of you," they replied in unison.

"It's a little weird when they do that," Haroon whispered in Rafay's ear, who nodded in agreement. The two boys had slowed a bit earlier, trailing at the back and started when they heard Hashu's voice from the front.

"I heard that."

"I'm tired" Maya drawled, her speech slightly slurred. Between having undergone a long tiring day and resting on Nomi's warm back, she was more than ready for bed.

"Nearly there little one. Why don't you hand her to me for a bit?" Hashu offered. He scooped her off and settled her on

his side. Her arms automatically wound around his neck and she buried her face into his shirt. Through the fabric, she could hear the loud drums of his heart.

“Hashu Bhaiya?”

He looked down at her. “Yes Maya?”

“Your heart is loud.”

He heard someone stifling their laugh behind him, probably Rafay.

“Really?” he replied in surprise. “I had no idea! Am I sick?”

Maya scrunched her nose as she looked over his features.

“I don’t think so. It isn’t like that kind of loud.”

“Then what kind of loud is it Maya?” Nomi leaned in awaiting an answer.

“I think...it sounds like a lion.”

Hashu leaned back to look at her, with confusion on his face. “A lion?”

Maya nodded resting her head back on his chest. “It’s like a big king lion is growling. Like it’s about to roar.”

“Well, how about that!” Rafay jogged his way to the front. “And so we see the Great Hisham Bhayya; protector of the weak, destroyer of evil, a man who fears none, for his heart beats with the growls of lions!”

Rafay danced away from Hashu’s swat. “Hey, Maya’s the one who said it!”

The five children walked in tandem, their feet familiar with the jungle path. It was also worn down, the flat surface standing out quite spectacularly amongst the hodgepodge of outstretched nature. By the time they reached their clearing, the sun had disappeared into the leaves, leaving the clouds alight in the dying embers of the day.

“I can see Khanum and Agha’s tent from here!” Rafay mentioned. True to his statement, a few steps later, the ornate tent materialized. It faced away, looking to the large fire pit that was already alight. In the fading daylight, the coloured patterns leapt and danced across the tent flaps. Sturdily supported by wide tree trunks in a complex design, courtesy of Haroon, and decorated with patchwork squares of embroidered work, there was a simple serenity

that washed over them as they got closer.

In front of the tent were several benches. Haroon and Rafay slumped onto one, leaning on each other. Hashu had a grip on Maya, who had long fallen asleep in his arms. Even then, she wore a content smile and one hand had a firm grip on Hashu's shirt, the cloth bundling under her fist. He could feel her soft breaths and smiled, refusing to relinquish his hold at Nomi's offer.

"I don't want to wake her," he whispered.

"I don't blame you." Nomi replied. "Now if only she was this quiet when awake."

Hashu shot him a disapproving look but couldn't help but smile. After all Nomi wasn't wrong. Maya was a tad talkative.

"Well you've certainly had a busy day..."

They all turned to see the sole remaining member of their ensemble stepping out of the trees. Without so much as rustling a leaf, Fatima strode out in front of them. She stood tall, though shorter than Hashu, but had the same black eyes and natural grace.

"Fati Baji! Where were you? We were looking everywhere for you! We checked the whole jungle!" rambled Haroon in a half-whisper, throwing up his arms in disbelief.

She laughed. "Are you sure, Haroon? You can't have checked the whole jungle. I've been right here the whole time!"

Hashu shook his head without jostling Maya. "She's been here the whole time."

Fati gave him an unapologetic shrug. "Your move. This was mine."

"Indeed." A tall middle-aged man came into view. Agha Luqman was as lean as a tree sapling but stood with a straight back and his smooth gait was hinting to more agility than he let on. Long flowing robes hung on his wiry frame, pooling over simple sandals. There was sternness to his gentle eyes but right now, he was smiling, his irises flickering like deep seas of hazel and brown in the firelight.

"An interesting idea and a lesson," he whispered, his voice barely audible above the crackle from the fire pit. He moved over to take a seat at one of the benches. Handing Maya over to Fati,

Hashu and Nomi took the bench closest to Agha's left, the girls taking the bench on his right, with Maya's head resting on Fati's lap. Rafay and Haroon each took a seat, watching Agha adeptly adjust his robes.

"Sometimes what you're looking for, is right in front of you."

Rafay groaned. "Again? This'll be the death of us!" he exclaimed.

"Let Agha finish!" Haroon hissed.

"Sometimes the truth is evident..." Agha began, his gaze turning to Rafay. "But more often, it is hidden. Sometimes it requires struggle and effort to find it." He looked at Hashu who nodded in acknowledgement.

"And sometimes, it is our own blindness that prevents us from seeing it." His gaze moved to Nomi and Fati.

"The biggest veil in front of our eyes, as you have learnt today, is our own ignorance. It is not a sin to not know; this world is an ocean of knowledge and the Quran and the teachings of our Prophets and Imams are a universe. There will always be more to learn, more to seek and more to discover. But to stop yourself, to end that journey, is ignorance. So, what have we learnt from this?" he turned expectantly to Fati.

As usual, her answer was ready. Gently stroking Maya's hair, she replied, "To always be ready to learn, whether it is new knowledge or a new perspective."

Haroon perked up. "That you can never learn enough, there will always be something to improve."

Rafay thought for a moment before responding, "That our greatest limit is how much we are willing to learn."

Nomi leaned forward, "That truth is worth struggling for."

Hashu smiled at Nomi's response. "To always be on a journey to improve our vision so that, with the help of Allah(swt), the truth will always be evident to us."

"Well, those were some lovely answers," a motherly voice praised them. From the entrance of the tent, a woman was peeking out. She was none other than Agha's wife and their maternal guardian.

"Khanum?" murmured a sleepy voice. Maya groggily raised her head from Fati's lap. Seeing Khanum, she stumbled to her feet

and trotted over, grabbing on to the many folds of the woman's long dress.

"I think it's time for salat and then bed," she affirmed.

By now, the last glimmers of sunlight were retreating, swallowing the jungle in an armada of blue. Even then, they peeked as soft pale beams pouring from between the leaves. The light dimmed as though it was saying goodbye to them.

The prayer area was set right behind Agha and Khanum's tent. There was a handy spring a short bit away where they often made ablution. Khanum was in front tugging Maya's hand. The little girl was clambering along too sleepy to do much more. As they approached the stream, the girls and boys separated. The water was chillingly cold and by the time they were done, all of them were chattering and shivering. Only Agha Luqman and Khanum seemed immune to its icy bite.

Beautiful stones and flowers bordered their salat spot. There was a crude roof crafted from tree limbs and large leaves. It looked so quaint and serene in the fading light, almost inviting to the little party. The ground was hard but layered with woven rugs. Each child had a designated rug that they had crafted themselves. As they lined up, Hashu made his way to the front and stood behind Agha. With a deep breath, he began the Adhan.

His voice carried well beyond their little camp, and Fati could have sworn that she could almost sense the world fade into silence. Every dangling leaf and smoldering ember stirred in the mystical ambience of the soothing tone. She felt a little sad when he finished and Agha raised his hands.

Unbeknownst to her in her concentration on the supplication, the jungle had not stirred as they began. Agha Luqman's practiced voice hypnotically wove the eloquent Arabic into a trance that stirred the hearts of everyone there. It felt as though even the jungle watched with hidden eyes the glowing faces of the pure souls it housed, and they could have all sworn that from the moment the last takbir was spoken, the world around them was a little more alive.

But even the most best and beautiful moments end, and all too soon, it was over.

Once they finished, they said good night and retreated to their respective tents. The girls' tents were surrounded by an abundance of small dainty flowers placed in bouncy sprigs of emerald green moss. During the day, they waved an assortment of pinks, yellows, purples and whites at passers. Though the colours were hidden in the dark, their delicate moonlit faces winked at the girls.

Hashu and Nomi had a tent guarding the entrance of the camp, neighbouring another sand-like clearing that they used for sparring and training. It had racks with neatly shelved hand-crafted rudimentary weapons. Finally, between the two, was the tent belonging to the younger twins, Haroon and Rafay. On the outside it was a smaller version of Hashu's and Nomi's. But on the inside, half of the tent had been transformed into Haroon's workshop and was an organized assortment of trinkets and tools.

Five sleepy heads rested peacefully on their pillows, worn but smiling.



Cold. Once again he had managed to squirm enough during sleep that his feet lay exposed. Hashu groggily sat up and half-heartily threw his blanket over them. As he sat up to do so, the fabric pooled around his stomach and he shivered feeling a draught nip at his ears and seep through his thin night clothes.

There was no light in the tent, so a sea of black greeted him. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he gathered the fallen sheets, wrapping them around his shoulders. All he could see was a sliver of blue through the tent flap flecked with orange glints from the fire pit. Just as he had been doing for years now, Hashu had awoken in the earliest hours of the morning.

In the bed on the other side of the tent, he could hear Nomi stirring, rousing from sleep. Hashu silently slipped out of the handmade quilt, a draft of cold air grabbing at his exposed feet. He quickly slid into the waiting pair of slippers by his bedside just as a chink from his left caught his attention. Turning, he saw that Nomi was sluggishly sitting up and haphazardly tossing off his blanket. It took them a while to shake off the dredges

of sleep, but soon enough, they managed to get dressed. Nomi headed forward and held open the thick tent flap for Hashu before exiting himself.

The sound of their steps was muffled by the sand and they would have barely been able to make out the path to their training ground had it not been for the multitudinous swarm of fireflies.

Like minuscule lamps, they buzzed lazily in the cold, their thorax a dull yellow. Through the aviating glints, Hashu could make out a figure standing by the weapon rack. As they got closer, he was not surprised to see that it was his twin. She greeted them and gave them a wave.

“What’s in your hand?” Nomi asked, stifling an oncoming yawn.

“This?” It was a clear glass jar about a hand tall. Inside were several fireflies buzzing excitedly around a comb of honey. “I thought it might last longer than a fire torch. See.”

She gestured around the ground and there were several such jars, bathing the sandy pit in a bright fiery yellow glow.

“Here!” she called. Nomi started as a leathery pouch flew in his direction. Adeptly catching it, he smiled when he saw what it was. Unwrapping the leather covering with great care, he was not surprised to find a pair of hand and arm guards. The guards fit snugly on his forearm, a layer of leather protecting his skin from the sheet of metal. The hand guards were much more interesting. They were metal gloves, broken at the joints so he could move his fingers. The most eye-catching part was the line of spikes that traversed his knuckles. Dubbed fondly by Rafay as his ‘Claws’, they were easily Nomi’s favourite weapon and first choice. This pair was blunted so that he didn’t injure any of his siblings, though he knew it would be extremely difficult to land a blow on either Hashu or Fati.

The girl in question, without a moment of doubt, headed to the other rack and pondered over the range of choices.

“Spear, sword, bow staff...” she smiled. “I know, why don’t you choose?” she asked, turning to Nomi.

“Confident, aren’t we Fati Baji? Very well. How about...” he tapped a finger on this chin, eyes scanning the shelves of blunted

weapons. "This!" he exclaimed.

His hand pointed to a exaggeratedly curved blade. Fati's eyebrow rose, "The scythe? Shouldn't this be with the tools?"

Hashu nodded. "Ideally yes, but the tip and blade got blunt. Someone must have forgotten and put it here."

Nomi gave his older sister a toothy grin. "What's the matter Fati Baji? Didn't Agha say that in the hands of a great fighter, everything is a weapon?"

Hashu and Fati shared a knowing look.

"Very well," she laughed. "The scythe it is."

She grabbed the tool off the shelf and flicked it, stabbing the air experimentally. All the while Nomi stood by the racks, waiting patiently as he fastened his claws. Once she was satisfied, she turned to him. "Whenever you're ready."

Hashu perched himself on the encompassing fence.

Nomi turned around to face his opponent. It was well timed. He barely managed to raise his arms up. The guards vibrated as they caught the scythe's blade. It bore down, but he pushed it with all his might. Fati leapt away lightly. She held her weapon out in front of her, smirking.

"Your move."

Nomi wasted no time, running towards her before feigning to the left at the last second. He jabbed out with his right hand but it was hooked and tossed aside. Fati took the chance to kick him in the chest, not enough to hurt him, but hard enough that he fell back on to the ground. She raised the scythe, but he rolled out of the way and back onto his feet.

The continued to exchange attacks, the air erupting with a cacophony of dull clangs. In the light of Fati's fireflies jars, you could make out two black figures constantly colliding.

Nomi threw himself down, rolling out of the way just as Fati's blade came whistling through the air right where his head would have been. She leapt back at Nomi's double punch advance, his fists landing in the ground, tossing a plume of sand into the air. The clanging of weapons echoed ominously. Skid marks were etched in the sand by flying feet. Nomi grunted, using his arms to cover his abdomen protectively. Fati swung the scythe at a

blurring speed. What had escaped his notice was a shadow of a leg. Before he could retaliate, Nomi felt his feet fly out from beneath him. With an *oomph*, he landed hard on his back, the air flying from his lungs. He opened his eyes a crack and saw the scythe by his throat. Fati grinned, her breath a little shorter than before.

“I surrender,” he conceded.

Wheezing, but with a smile on his face, Nomi dropped his head back with a soft *thump* on the sand. She offered him a hand up and they shook good-naturedly. He took Hashu’s place on the fence.

“Your turn Hashu Bhaiya.”

Hashu didn’t even look towards the weapons rack and jumped directly into the arena. His non-chalant expression earned a raised eyebrow from Fati. She decided to play along and threw her scythe to the side.

“Go Hahsu Bhaiya!” squealed a high pitch voice. They both turned at the sound. Maya was precariously slung over one of the arena fences, clapping and cheering with more energy than the two slumbering souls trailing her. Rubbing his eyes, Rafay scooped her off and set her on the ground, ignoring the look of contempt he received.

“You’re supposed to say salam first thing in the morning,” he scolded half-heartedly. The fact his eyes were closed didn’t help

“Ahhhhhhhaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhaaaaaa,”

“Use your words Haroon” chuckled Nomi at the half-asleep boy. “We don’t speak yawn here.”

“He says salam and that we are on Fati Baji’s side,” Rafay replied, stretching his arms and arching his back. Maya crinkled her nose in distaste as the air erupted with pops and crackles. Rafay however, just shook his head, immediately much more awake.

Hashu mock frowned. “I thought I was your favourite?” he pouted.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhahhhhhhhhhhaaaaaa” yawned Haroon cryptically.

“He said Fati Baji’s a better cook,” replied Rafay without missing a beat.

“Don’t worry Hashu Bhaiya!” urged little Maya. “You’ll always be my favourite.”

“And to think,” Fati replied, shaking her head. “I’m the one who tells her bedtime stories.”

“Well then Fati, let’s settle this. Ready?” Hashu asked turning to his twin. She gave him a knowing grin. This time she didn’t attack. Instead, she sat in a defensive pose, beckoning to him with one hand, a smirk on her face.

“Your move.”

Expectantly, all of the younger siblings walked around the fence and sat on the posts beside Nomi, Maya still reluctantly staying behind the lowest bar. They were not disappointed.

What followed was not a fight. At least not in the childrens’ point of view. Fights were messy, violent and throttled with confusion and chaos. The spar, no *performance* in front of them, was too elegant. The twins were in perfect synchrony. Their movements were fluid, flowing like water from one tactic to the next. Where one attacked, the other blocked without fail. Back and forth with a speed and practice that even nature would envy, they swept away each others’ attacks without so much as kicking up a puff of sand. The air had stilled and they could hear every huff and grunt, as though the forest itself was watching with bated breath. But the twins bore none of that anticipation for while both had their brows furrowed in concentration, their lips curved in hidden smiles.



Given the amazing display of skill in the arena, it was no surprise to Agha Luqman that when he chanced upon the pair, he found all the other children watching the display with awestruck looks. As he got closer, he too was quite happy with the skills the twins displayed, but could not keep away the morose niggling in the back of his mind.

Without drawing the attention of any of the children, he slunk away into the forest. It was a manifestation of the beautiful places he had read about as a child. Beautiful scenery, wonderful people, everything they needed lay within the confines of the jungle. He had made every effort to see to that. Reaching a hand, he closed

his eyes at the icy nips of the cold dew that coated the grass he had stroked. How he would have liked it to stay this way! Hidden from the world, its evil gaze and filthy reach, guarding the young six hearts that beat with intention so pure. When he saw their innocent gazes, he felt a piece of himself tear.

He was deep in the forest, far farther than any of the children were allowed to venture. As the sounds of battle faded, so did the birds' chirps, the squirrels' chatter and the rustling of the plants. He had long passed the last of the flowers and there was no path worn by little feet to guide him. But he knew where to go. He felt it yesterday, and now the reality he dreaded stood right in front of him.

It was a segment of the forest, right by the border where the grass melted into the sands of the desert that surrounded them. It had been a long time since he was last here, back when he had made the forest. In his opinion, it felt too soon that he was forced to return.

Unlike where he and his family dwelled, where the forest not only swelled but overflowed with life, this part of the forest was as good as dead.

The trees were shrivelled husks, the grass yellow and limp, and not an animal in sight. But that was not what worried him. All around him, there were sickly black creepers.

Their ugly viney fingers dug into every nook and cranny, carpeting the forest floor and devouring the trees. It bore no leaves, only grotesque poisonous thorns that stuck out threateningly in every direction.

"Agh!" he wheezed. Suddenly he felt a stab of pain in his chest. He bent over. Agha Luqman gasped for breath. He could hear himself struggling. He felt the pull in his throat. He collapsed on his knees, a hand clasping firmly onto one of the only branches with no vines. It got worse and Agha doubled over, a prayer erupted in his heart.

And then it was gone.

Just as suddenly as it had appeared.

Agha stayed there, on his knees on the hard ground. His breaths were deep and desperate as he felt air flood his chest. It

took a few moments until he was able to stand again. When he did, there was a shift on the forest floor. The thorny creepers rippled as though taking a breath and crawled forward. They climbed higher on the tree he was resting on, and inched further on the grass. As they crossed the ground, the grass yellowed instantly, flopping over lifelessly. The bushes shrivelled, their leaves withering away to dust and the trees whose roots had been covered, groaned painfully with deafening cracks.

Agha Luqman watched the scene. Swiftly, but with a little less energy than usual, he made his way back to the camp. He mustered all the composure he could and muttered, “Ya Allah (swt)!” under his breath before stepping into view.



All six children were circling an assortment of baskets.

“Ideally, shouldn’t Fati Baji lose her choice to Hashu because he won the fight?” Rafay teased.

“The rules were clear. She won the game. She chooses the chores.” Haroon retorted.

“That won’t earn you any favours, Haroon,” the older girl smiled.

He shrugged, “It was worth a try.”

“You know you’re my favourite? Right Fati Baji?” Maya asked earnestly, fisting the bottom of her sister’s long tunic. That earned her a raised eyebrow.

“Oh really?” Fati asked in amusement. “I thought Hashu Bhaiya was your favourite?”

“But that was only for the fight!”

“Okay, okay...” interrupted Hashu. “Let’s not waste any more time. The sooner we start, the sooner we finish. Alright Fati, since you won yesterday, you get to decide who does what chore.”

She smiled and began to hand over the baskets to each person.

“Hashu, you’ll be collecting the wood. Nomi will go with you considering he’ll find some excuse to run off to you anyway.”

Nomi gave her an unashamed smile and an exaggerated bow before he moved to stand beside Hashu.

“Haroon, you’ll be working on the repairs and building. The

bench by the creek is broken and Maya needs a new stool. There are a few other things as well that Khanum Bano has waiting for you when you have completed that.” That earned her a happy smile. Haroon loved any opportunity to tinker or build something.

“Maya,” she turned with a serious expression to the nervous girl. “I give you the perilous duty of flower collecting.” The boys held back their laughs as Maya’s nervousness melted into pure delight. “Khanum Bano has complained that hers are withered and worn. She would like some colourful bouquets for the food table and for each tent. Colour and design is up to you.”

“You have got to be joking!” exclaimed Rafay. Fati turned with a smirk. “Ahhh of course. That leaves Rafay.”

The boy gulped. “Now Fati Baji, my dear, dear Fati Baji. You know how bad I am at cleaning?”

“Doesn’t that mean that you need practice?” taunted Haroon, that statement earned him a glare.

“But it will take me all day!” Rafay whined.

“Then it’s a good thing that both you and I will be working on it,” Fati smiled.

That made Rafay look up. He sighed, but felt a little better. At least he wasn’t working alone.

“Well, it looks as though you have yourselves sorted. Best get started if you want to be done before lunch. I’m preparing a surprise,” tempted Khanum. If they weren’t eager to finish their chores before, they certainly were now. She watched fondly as Hashu and Nomi disappeared into the bush, whispering excitedly, but too far for her to hear. Haroon was making his way to his tent to fetch his toolkit whistling merrily. Maya had forgone walking and was skipping to her flower garden, the basket swaying back and forth with each skip. Rafay and Fati set off for the kitchen to start cleaning. She herself had turned to go find her husband. As though he had read her mind, Agha Luqman appeared from the foliage.

They greeted each other and while it was well concealed, she could tell something was on his mind.

“Is everything alright, Agha?” she asked.

He looked around. “Where are the children?”

“They’ve gone to finish their chores.”

He nodded. That was good. “Follow me, let’s talk inside.”

She nodded and followed him into the tent, neither of them noticing the curious pairs of eyes that watched them go.

The inside of the tent was simple, much to the liking of its occupants. A bed on the floor with a chest on either side of the room and a shelf with more books than there was space. Both adults took a seat on the bed, her husband’s slow movements not escaping Khanum’s notice.

“Are you hurt?” she asked in a hushed voice. Khanum couldn’t see anything.

Unconsciously, his hand moved to his chest where it ached earlier. He waved away her concern. Looking up, he met her worried gaze plaguing him for a response.

“For now. But there is something of greater urgency,” With a deep breath, he braced himself. “We must begin their training.”

She reeled back, hauling herself to her feet. “Are you sure, Agha? They are so young! Are you sure they are ready?”

He held up a hand to quell her stream of concern.

“Given the circumstances, I am afraid we have no choice.” He fisted the cloth that sat above his quaking heart.

“We are out of time.”

3

Prayers and Pain

“Sultana, the Shezada requests your presence at the table,” the young girl teetered hesitantly by the door.

Khajista turned from where she had been staring out the window.

“You may inform the Shahzada that I will not be joining him today.”

The girl shuffled uncomfortably. “But my lady, he was insistent.” “Then let him be. I will not be joining him.” Khajista’s tone was soft but firm. Only when she heard the door creak shut, did she turn around.

“Sultana? Forgive me, but is it wise to agitate the Shahzada?”

In the back of the room was a maid. The woman’s eyes widened, her brows knitting in concern.

“I am no soldier bound to his bidding, Maryam” Khajista gently reminded her. “I have no desire to meet him more than I must.” she added mentally.

The woman nodded.

“Of course, my lady. Would you like me to bring something to your room?”

Khajista smiled at Maryam’s worried face. “I thank you for your concern, but that will not be necessary. I have no appetite. You may retire to your quarters for the remainder of the day. Should I require your assistance I will send for you.”

“Of course, rest well Sultana.”

When the maid left, Khajista sighed and dropped into her desk chair. The desk itself was littered with parchment, scratched, torn and crumpled. Of course, even the rigid academics could respect her lack of ardour. It had been nearly ten years. A decade since she lost her best friend, companion, husband and Sultan. So many years since she had seen her children's face. Of course she trusted Agha Soleimani, but a mother's heart could not help but fret.

She turned back to the little book she had been writing in only moments earlier. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand, but represented about sixteen years of her life. The little anthologies inscribed on the binded parchment spoke of her heart's hope, happiness, ache and sorrow. It had been so many lonely years for Khajista, with this little book and her quill as her sole companions. Had it not been for these books, and the letters from Agha Soleimani, she would have been beside her husband.

Carefully returning her book to a secret compartment in her drawer (for only a fool would leave something so personal lying around), she reached into a hidden pocket in her dress and removed a letter. The paper was torn, the creases close to ripping with the number of times it had been folded. She gently laid it on the desk and opened it. It had been a week since this letter had arrived. Receiving news had been so much easier when Agha Soleimani lived in the castle. But with the Shehzada forcing him into the town, she had to rely on the loyal servants and Maesum, who was rarely around, to swap messages between them. It was short and terse.

'They are well.'

She clutched the paper close to her heart. How could she sit at a table and dine? Feast on the finest? No, Khajista felt no appetite nor thirst. Returning the letter to her pocket with utmost care, she hurried to her desk and removed the book. Thrusting the quill into the ink, she only paused for a moment before her pen flowed.

They say O fluttering heart,

Calm thy restless sleep.

Breathe easy lest you waste away,

In worry and in weep.

But alas, Allah (swt) has written,

*in the very being of a mother,
Can thy ever find peace,
When her children are with another?*

Khajista took a deep, composing breath, blinking away the pool of unshed tears. One traitorous trickle escaped her but she swiped it away. There was an aching in her heart so strong that it felt as though someone had reached into her chest and was squeezing the life out of her. In the solitary confinement of her room with no other company than the pages of her own writing, she raised her hands to the only one who could help her children.

“Ya Fatima Zahra...” she whispered. “The greatest of all mothers. I come to you with nothing but my tears and my woes. Oh lady who has never sent anyone empty handed! I ask you, not as a queen, but as a mother, to please pray to Allah(swt) to keep my children safe. To keep them well. To keep them happy and together. That we be reunited. And most importantly, that they be on the path of those He is pleased with, and not on the path of those who will suffer His wrath.”

Returning her book once more to her secret compartment, Khajista stood up and fixed her attire and appearance. She may not be with them but her children needed her strength and prayers more than her tears. She moved to grab a Quran. There were many hours till nightfall.



“Hashu!” He looked up from pile of wood. Fati was waving to him from across the yard, one hand clutching the handle of a large case. Brushing his hand off the sides of his pants, he made his way over.

“I need some help putting this case away, please,” she told him.

Nodding, he grabbed the other side and the two of them carried it to the library. The tent walls were lined with shelves upon shelves of books and several cases similar to the one he and Fati were holding. They set it down with a loud thump and he could hear the books jostling inside. He turned to leave.

“You felt it too, didn’t you.”

He turned back to his sister who was watching him intently with a probing gaze. He looked down, not meeting her eyes.

“I know you did Hashu.”

“I don’t understand,” he sighed. “It feels so ...”

“Sad?” Fati offered. He nodded.

“Yes and no...It’s almost as though...” He struggled to find the right words.

Fati moved around the little floor space, her fingers wandering over the book spines.

“It’s almost as though something inside us is hurt.” She stopped, her finger resting on a copy of the Holy Quran.

“Rafay! I told you not to touch that!” Haroon’s exclamation from outside roused the two from their stupor.

Sighing, Hashu reached his sister in two large steps. He placed a hand on her shoulder. Fati’s arms wrapped around his middle. Hashu clung onto her smaller frame as though he was clinging to life itself. It was as though they could sense the pent up feelings through the desperate way the two of them held onto each other. For a few seconds, neither spoke. They did not have to. They just knew.

“Hashu Bhaiya?” called a voice outside the tent. “Can I come in?”

Hashu unwound his arms and stood beside Fati. With a reassuring smile, he beckoned, “You may Nomi.”

The tent flap tousled and a very sweaty Nomi entered. He took a look at Fati’s face.

“Are you alright Baji?” he asked, worried, glancing to Hashu with concerned eyes. Fati however shared a content grin with her twin.

“I am now.”

Nomi sighed in relief. “Alhumdulillah. As much as I hate to interrupt, Agha Luqman has summoned us all to the training grounds.”

With a final nod, the two followed Nomi out of the tent. They crossed the yard, past the fire-pit where they cooked their food, past the wudhu creeks and the salat area, until they finally reached Hashu and Nomi’s tent. They arrived to find their three

younger siblings already lined up obediently and hurried to join them.

Agha Luqman watched with hawk-like eyes. Once all of them were lined up, they stood attentively.

He had spent all night, pondering and contemplating. Wondering what he would say to them. But to see those six eager faces, attentive and curious, he felt his heart wrench. From the corner of this eye, he could see Khanum by the side, her worried expression masked behind calm and composure.

“For the past ten years, we have lived in this home. Eaten from its food, drank from its streams, and slept with peace under it’s sky.”

Taking a deep breath, he continued. “You all know, that there is a world beyond our home. A world riddled with cruelty, trickery, wickedness and greed. A world that will seek your weakness and find a way to exploit it. The last part of Surah Ale-Imran Ayat 185 says:

..life of this world is no more than the delusion of enjoyment.”

“For ten years, Allah(swt) has allowed us to remain safe from its grasp. We live in a home where the light of Quran, the spark of salat and the fire of knowledge burns bright. Where we help and guide one another. This is why, our life is about to change. Because of the world beyond our homes.”

“So we can continue to be safe from it?” asked Haroon hopefully.

Agha Luqman sighed. “No, my dear child. So that we can prepare for it.”



Khanum watched. As per Agha’s wishes, she did not approach any child but she had returned to the sanctuary of her tent. Her husband’s discussion had left the children in a lurch and it took every fiber of her moral strength to not to rush to each of them and gather them in her arms and assure them that all would be well. She knew her children were close to beginning their perilous journey. She also knew that it would not be under the guidance of either her, or her husband. His instructions felt harsh and grated on her maternal instinct but it was necessary.

They needed time to understand and comprehend what was about to happen.

Agha Luqman himself, had taken a seat in the yard, watching with interest how his children responded to the news that their lives were about to change forever.

Rafay, Haroon and Maya sat right outside the training area. Haroon had taken a seat near Hashu's chopping stumps, whittling away at one of the many discarded pieces of wood. His brows were furrowed in concentration, lost in thought so deep that he was deaf to Rafay's grunts and huffs. His twin was punching and kicking a straw figure crudely constructed by Nomi for training.

He too could not help his wandering mind, looking for meaning in Agha's statement. Neither boy noticed Maya's anxious looks from her seat in the grass. She was picking the petals of a nearby flower, eyes flitting from one brother to the next.

The older children were nowhere to be seen. Had Agha wandered into the forest, he would have found the trio clambering down one of the many paths. In the lead was Hashu, head down, his mind on its own journey. Behind him Nomi, watching the older boy in concern. Fati tried to give him reassuring glances, but she too was distracted.

"What do you think Agha meant?"

Nomi's words hung in the air, halting Hashu mid step. When the boy turned, he met his younger brother's look of inquiry.

"Agha has said much with so few," Fati murmured.

Both boys looked at her. Hashu could almost see the wheel turning in her head.

"He speaks of another world, he speaks of its cruelties. He speaks of preparing for it, why? Why now? There can be only one reason..."

"That we'll be entering it." Nomi finished.

"Precisely" she concurred. "The training, the learning, why else would he have stressed so much on it?"

"That makes sense..." Hashu interjected. "But what of this new preparation? What is he planning to teach us?"

"There's only one way we'll find out."



“Why are we here Agha?”

Even in the early hour, her eyes shone bright and alert. Agha sighed, Fati had always been the hardest to keep anything from. He had quite a few close call over the past few years, especially now that she was older. Her gaze had a brewing curiosity. She was the first to speak out of them.

Agha looked around at the older children, their alert postures and focused gaze honed after years of early mornings. The younger ones struggled to keep their eyes open.

“A good question Fati, with a very simple answer.” replied Agha. “Today, we will begin our training.”

As though struck by lightening, the younger children straightened up.

“Who can tell me what is the metaphysical realm?” asked Agha.

“The other world,” answered Nomi. “The realm of souls, of heaven and hell.”

“Correct Nomi. The world beyond our own. What is the difference between our realm and the metaphysical realm?”

The children were silent. After a few moments, Fati raised her hand and at Agha’s prompt, responded.

“Physical limitation,” at his nod she continued. “Everything in our world must have a physical entity. Like a plant, a chair or an animal. Sometimes existences of this world are attached to a metaphysical entity. Like with humans, we are attached to our souls. When the physical entity is destroyed, that metaphysical entity can no longer impact our realm unless Allah(swt) gives them permission to do so.”

Agha smiled. “Very good Fati. The metaphysical realm is a powerful place that knows no time, nor space. It has very few limits. The human body is a vessel that allows the soul to travel in this limited physical world. The soul is trapped in the body until death. However...”

The children leaned forward eagerly. Agha Luqman dropped his voice.

“If one proves himself to be worthy in the eyes of Allah (swt), if he keeps his soul pure and guards it against evil, then Allah

frees the soul.”

“What does that mean?” queried Maya.

“Very well, little one. Our sins and weaknesses traps are like the tent walls. So long as they remain, we are trapped inside them, veiled from seeing the real world around us. Some will have veils so thick that they will not even believe such a world can exist, and will remain in that tent their whole life. These are the people who live life steeped in sin or ignorance. There are those who know of another world but will never see it. Because the sins that veil them are too strong. And then there is the final type, who have cut away the tent walls. They can go outside, reap the benefits of the other world and return back to the tent. These are the people who have purified themselves from sins and have the ability to use the power of the other realm. We have many scholars who can perform what we call *kamalat*, but what are they really? They are the powers of the metaphysical realm.”

The children nodded in understanding.

“So if we purify ourselves, we can do all those amazing things like walking on water?” asked Haroon, awe lacing his tone.

“And much more.”

Rafay clapped his hand loudly. “Well, how do we start?”

They grinned at his excited tone.

“Patience Rafay,” coaxed Agha. “This process takes the best of people’s years, if not a lifetime to master. But you are young and the flame of faith is strong in your hearts. Continue to let it burn, feed it, grow it. And with Allah’s(swt) will, there is no one preventing your young minds and pure souls from achieving it.”



“There is no possible way for you to have a better power than mine,” retorted Rafay.

“And why is that!?” argued Haroon, clenching the bag slung around his shoulder. “Why would you have a better power?”

“I’m older and stronger!”

“And I’m smarter and just as good as you in the sand pit!”

“Neither of which will matter in the greater scheme of things.”

They both turned at the new voice. Fati was sitting in the

bend of a low lying branch, twiddling a fallen leaf between her fingers.

“Fati Baji! We didn’t see you there.” exclaimed Rafay, both boys a little abashed at their earlier behaviour.

“I don’t suppose you could have,” she replied, adeptly swinging off with one hand. “Not with the racket you two were making.”

It was said kindly but with a slight reprimand. Rafay crossed his arms over his chest. “What do you mean? When you said it wouldn’t matter?”

“Exactly that. Being stronger...” she looked at Rafay, “or being smarter...” turning to Haroon, “Or being a better fighter. None of those will not help you here. The training we are starting will only have one opponent, the hardest opponent to beat.”

“Who is that?”

“Will it be Hashu Bhaiya?”

“Nomi Bhaiya?”

“You?”

Rafay’s eyes widened in horror. “We don’t have to fight Agha, do we?”

Fati laughed. “Of course not.”

He visibly relaxed.

“You’ll have to fight someone tougher.”

“Who could be harder to fight than Agha?” asked Haroon.

“Exactly! Unless Khanum has some secret fighting skills and didn’t tell us!” Rafay added.

“I don’t think you two catch her meaning,” A voice echoed behind them.

“Hashu Bhaiya!”

He strolled up to the trio, Nomi right behind him.

“What Fati means, is that you will be up against yourself,” his words hung in the air. “Your ego, your pride, your knowledge, your temper, your skills and your patience will all be tested.”

Rafay put his nose in the air. “I still think I’ll do a better job.”

Haroon rolled his eyes. “That assumption is your first mistake.”

Nomi nodded, “Well we can now do more than just speculate. Agha has asked everyone to come. It’s time for the training to

begin.”



“Struggle. A man struggles for one of two reasons.” All the children watched him with rapt attention. “Either he is being punished, facing the consequences of committing sins in this world. Or he is being tested.” He paused for a few seconds. “Why would a man be tested?”

“To know his truth,” murmured Fati. At Agha’s gesturing, she spoke up. “How do we truly know if we are good or not? If we are kind, patient and brave? All these things are easy to claim when life is in our favour. When we are faced with the choice between doing what is easy, and doing what is right, that is when we truly get to know our real goodness.”

Agha smiled. “Correct. All your lives you have been raised in a world which circumambulates your faith. For the next step in your training, you must be tested. Now do note, some may pass with ease...”

His gaze flickered to Maya.

“And some of you may struggle. You have no adversary other than the one that lives within you. Destroy that, and there is no limit for what you will accomplish, Inshallah.”

He took a deep breath. “Your test will begin from this moment forth. Prove yourself. Not to me or Khanum or each other. Prove it to yourself and to your Lord(swt) that you are worthy.”

The children nodded. He had them all lie down in the sand, the warmth of the sky high sun bathing them in yellow. One by one, he closed their eyes. Hashu fought the wave of drowsiness that hit him as he felt Agha’s cold fingers glide over his eyelids. But despite his best efforts, everything turned black.



Maya sleepily blinked her eyes, and winced as the sun’s rays blurred in front of her. Then she remembered. The training. Lying in the sand, falling asleep. She jumped to her feet and was very surprised. She was alone in a small clearing and had been laying on a bed of green moss. All around her, the forest towered into the sky and she felt a trickle of fear.

'I have been around camp, but never in the forest alone. Where is everyone?'

She closed her eyes and steadied her breathing.

"I must be brave..." she whispered. The forest stilled, listening to her small voice.

"I must be brave," she repeated, opening her eyes.

The forest was silent, a few leaves trembling in a breeze she couldn't feel. Maya felt a little better. Slowly, she edged her way to the clearing.

'Nomi Bhaiya always said to be careful. This could be a trap.'

Suddenly, the bush in front of her trembled violently. Maya stumbled back and screamed as a ball of grey and brown propelled out of the leaves. She flung herself onto the ground, hands covering her face, curling into a tight ball. When nothing happened, she daringly peeked through two fingers and felt all the blood rush to her face. It was just a rabbit.

A cute, nose-twitching fluffy rabbit.

How it had not fled at her scream, she did not know, but she was thankful that it was something so harmless. Of course, that didn't do much to soothe her bruised ego.

'At least Haroon Bhaiya and Rafay Bhaiya didn't see that. They would have teased me for weeks!' she thought as she slowly sat up, brushing the dirt from her scarf and shirt.

The cause of her terror stared at her innocently with large black eyes, it's nose and ears wiggling comically.

"What are you doing here?" she asked. But the creature ignored her, raising a leg to scratch its ear.

'I must have hit my head on that fall. I'm talking to a rabbit.'

As though it heard her thoughts, the rabbit turned to her. When she looked into it's eyes, two black pools stared back at her. Maya was about to shoo it away when she felt a lurch in her stomach and the world around her spun. She closed her eyes, waiting to hit the ground but it never came. Nervously, she slowly opened one eye and almost screamed. Again.

She was looking at herself! Not a reflection or a picture. But at herself, still sitting in the same cross leg pose. Her, or her body's rather, eyes were shut.

'What is happening?!' she looked around but froze. She could hear the forest. Not the birds chirping or the crickets in the bush. She could hear everything! The beetle crawling on a nearby stem, its wing clicking ricocheting in her ears. She could hear the pitter-patter from the line of ants on her left. There was a squirrel in a tree somewhere in the forest that was angrily chattering. Just as she turned to see, she noticed a tuft of brown and grey in the corner of her eye.

'Wait a minute...am I in the rabbit?'

As the realization dawned on her, she felt excitement bubble in the pit of her (or was it the rabbit's?) stomach.

'How can I get closer to myself?' she thought. Suddenly without warning, she felt the back legs kick and she flew forward, adeptly landing on her front feet. Taking a deep breath, she closed her rabbit eyes and thought,

'I want to be in my body...'

Opening her eyes tentatively, she slumped when she saw her own face looking back at her.

'Okay, one more time,' she closed her eyes hard and Agha's words from the last few days echoed in her mind. *'Ya Allah (swt), I need a little help. Or a lot of help. I don't know how to get back to my own body. You know everything, please help me,'* she prayed.

Taking a breath, she slowly opened her eyes and almost squealed in joy when she felt a furry weight in her lap. Suddenly a thought occurred to her.

'So I can go into a rabbit's mind. Can I do that with other animals?'

Looking around she saw a squirrel skittishly hopping above on the tree branches. She waited, albeit a little impatiently, since she wasn't able to do it while the animal was moving. With a gentle click of her tongue, she had it's furry head looking at her. Maya took her chance and gazed into it's small beady eyes. Not daring to disturb the process, she inwardly celebrated at the familiar lurch in her stomach and when she opened her eyes, she had a dizzying view from the tree top.

Balancing her new tiny furry paws, she edged her way down to the ground and clambered over to where her body sat quietly. As

she approached, the rabbit leapt off and vanished into the bush. She smiled, well as much as one can with a squirrel face.

'I can't wait to tell everyone. Let's see how high I can climb!'



Agha and Khanum opened their eyes, Khanum unable to keep the proud grin off her face.

"Alhumdulilah, she did it Agha!"

The man smiled at his wife's enthusiasm.

"Alhumdulilah."

Suddenly Khanum's face fell. Agha frowned. "What is it? What worries you?"

"Agha, Maya is young and innocent. The others are older and well...I worry should any struggle, it will divide them."

He sighed. "It is not Allah's blessings that divides man. It is greed, arrogance and ego that drive wedges between Allah's(swt) creations. Allah(swt) is witness that we have done our best. The rest will be up to them."



Haroon was muddled. The moment he had woken up, he had reached for his belt only to find it, and every tool in his pocket gone. That, along with waking up in a strange clearing he had never seen before, had put him in a bit of a foul mood. His first thought had been to scout the area but the treeline was so thick that he was more likely to get lost than find his way out.

'Maybe I could scale a tree and get a view,' he thought. And while he was no less of a climber than his brothers, there was one small problem. The trees were way too steep to scale bare hand.

'Let's see if there is something I can use as a foothold,' he thought. There wasn't much in this clearing besides a few shiny pebbles and some rocks. He picked up a particularly flat slate and squeezed it in frustration.

'If only this was metal...' he mentally sighed. That he could work with. Not these flecks of stone. He felt a prickling in his hand and dropped the rock in surprise. Quickly checking his palm, Haroon frowned. There weren't any burns. It was even more surprising for him, when a glint from the forest floor caught his

eye.

Haroon didn't believe it. The slate he was holding was shining. He knelt down and noticed the surface was no longer a muddy brown. It was a shiny grey.

'What is happening?'

He gingerly poked the rock.. It didn't feel warm so he carefully pinched it between his thumb and fore finger. Gazing at it with wonder, if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, Haroon would have never believed it. The rock was now metal.

'Alhumdulillah!' he cried mentally and rushed to jam it into the tree. He could use this as a foothold. Just as he reached the base of the trunk he had an idea.

Haroon put his hand on the trunk. *'Ya Allah (swt) please let this work.'*

He felt a familiar prickling under his hand. Once it faded he opened his eyes and burst out laughing. Right where his hand had been, there was a hand print of clay. He pushed the clay into the tree, far enough for him to push his toes in. Once more he closed his eyes, whispered his prayer and then the tree was now wood, with a crudely shaped hand print. Glee evident in his ear-to-ear smile, Haroon shoved a foot into the hole and heaved himself up. Painstakingly slowly but surely, he managed to clamber to a branch wide enough to sit on. By the time he reached there, there were rivulets of sweat dribbling down his face and back, and he felt dizzy.

'Maybe I shouldn't have tried so many times at once.' Groaning with exhaustion, he leaned on the sturdy trunk. He felt a tingling in his palm and shot up straight. That was when he noticed his foot holds disappearing. The wood creaked wearily as it bent and filled itself out. Rubbing his eyes in surprise Haroon dug into his pocket and pulled out the slate. It was back to being a dusty, muddy brown stone. He slumped back into the tree, torn between elation and thankfulness for his new skill, and dread for his perilous climb back to ground.



“Anyone here?! Hashu Bhaiya! Fati Baji! Nomi Bhai! Haroon!

Maya! Anyone?!” Rafay’s voice was nearly hoarse at this point. He had seen them only seconds ago, they were all in the yard. But where was he now? He had no way of knowing. The treeline was too thick to leave and the trees were too steep to climb.

‘I bet if Haroon was here he would have built a ladder or something. How do I get out of here?’

He tried shoving and pushing his way through the trees but they were packed so close together that he only succeeded in falling back in the dirt more times than he dared count. After several unsuccessful attempts, he grabbed a rock and hurled it in frustration. It fell into the trees with satisfying crackles and snaps as it broke through branches.

‘If only I could do that.’

He sighed and grabbed another rock, squeezing it in his palm. But unlike last time, he felt a hot flush run throughout his body, almost as though someone had doused him in hot water. Rafay had almost fallen over in surprise and managed to catch himself, fervently shaking the feeling out of his limbs. Annoyed and gripping the rock in one hand, he strode up to the trees and raised a fist. He brought it down hard on the trunk. The expected pain didn’t come. Rather, the tree bark had splintered and caved into a hole.

Curious, Rafay raised his fist and did it again. The tree teetered precariously before slumping over with a loud *thump*. It threw up a cloud of dust, but Rafay could only stare in wonder.

‘Did I do that?’ He excitedly raced up to the other tree and punched the trunk hard. But rather than cracking, he felt pain erupt in his knuckles.

“Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!” Crying out, Rafay was hopping around the clearing nursing his injured hand.

Once the pain began to ebb away, a sudden thought hit him.

‘Wait, where did my rock go?’ He looked down in surprise to find that all he was holding was ground powder. It was the same colour as his stone.

‘I wonder...’ He hurried around and found a shiny black pebble. He closed his eyes, squeezing it in one hand.

‘Okay Allah(swt), I’m not entirely sure what happened last

time but could you do it again? Please? You can make anything happen, right?'

He felt a wave of warmth wash over him instantly. Grinning happily, he raised his hands, "Alhumdulillah, thank you Allah(swt)!"

Steadying himself, Rafay went up to the offending tree and punched it with all the force he could muster. It shattered under his hand and he quickly ducked to shield himself from the splinters that were flung into the air. Rafay's jaw dropped. There was no more tree, just enough firewood scraps for weeks where the tree had once stood. His stone however, suffered a similar fate and he brushed the black dust off the side of his pant. Rafay smiled into the forest.

'I wonder how many trees can I break with one punch...'



Khanum frowned. "That boy, again wiping his hands off his trousers!"

Agha smiled, not bothering to conceal his amusement. "I think Rafay is more concerned with his new gift than his clothing. He was, after all, covered in dirt and dust."

Khanum did not look convinced and merely served Agha a glass of water, taking one for herself too.

"That's all the younger children," she sighed with relief. "I know the older children are strong, but I am worried about -"

"None of them." Agha interrupted kindly. "We have done our part, Khanum. The rest is up to them and them alone. No matter the circumstances, there is only one decider. Allah(swt) does not decide for one man based on the actions of another. He cares not for who they are, rather what they have become and in the case of our older children, who they strive to be."



Nomi was confused to say the least. It was disorienting to have fallen asleep what felt like seconds ago in the yard and wake up in this random clearing. Not to mention that he couldn't see any sign of his siblings. The clearing was a bare dusty patch of ground and there was little beside a few twigs and rocks. Trees towered in his path, so tightly packed that he was sure even Maya

would have had trouble getting through. On one side was a sheer cliff with a smooth face.

'There's no hold on that cliff so no point trying there. Maybe I could get a view of the area from one of the trees.'

He was hesitant. While he could climb, the lowest of branches swayed several feet above his head. Steadying himself, Nomi placed his hand and feet on the base of a wide trunk and pulled himself. He managed to raise himself a few inches. Encouraged, he quickly moved his hands up and hauled his body, grunting with effort. He was about halfway to the branch when he took a quick breather.

Not wanting to be stuck at his current position, Nomi hastily clambered up another few feet when he suddenly heard a gut-wrenching snap.

The stub of a branch he had been holding onto broke off. He felt himself teetering. His feet were slipping.

"No no no..." Nomi's hands grappled for even the tiniest groove in the trunk. His ankles burned with friction. The ground was getting closer at an alarming rate.

'Ya Allah (swt)!' he called out desperately, limbs flailing as he did his best to cling and stop. The ground got closer. He shut his eyes. Just before he crashed into the dirt, his arm was nearly yanked from its socket and he stopped. Nomi looked down in surprise. He was barely a hair away from a painful plunge, but it was what had stopped him that was more surprising. His hand. It was stuck to the tree.

Literally. Open palm against the tree trunk, he could feel the muscles in his arm protesting. Slowly lowering himself onto the ground, he watched in surprise as his hand came free without any resistance. He looked over his fingers and knuckles. There was no sap or anything sticky on them. Why did they stick to the trunk? Curious, he reached out his hand and placed it on the smooth bark. He waited for a second before gently yanking it. It didn't move.

Still in awe, he did the same with his other hand. It was stuck as well. Nomi pulled himself up but found himself struggling when his feet slipped clear.

'Hmm. I wonder if I remove my shoes.' He bent down and untied them. Wriggling his feet experimentally in the dirt, he stretched his arms and did a few jumps on the spot.

'Ya Allah(swt), please help me.' He jumped up and grabbed hold of the trunk. Nomi grinned when he realized both his hands and feet were stuck. He started off slow but soon enough, he rapidly and adeptly climbed up and made it onto the lowest branch.

Unfortunately it was for not, there was a heavy fog blanketing the tree tops and all Nomi could see was fluffy cotton-like clouds. A little disappointed but certainly not dissuaded, he shimmied down at neck-breaking speed. That was when he remembered the tall cliff by the clearing.

It was even smoother than the tree trunks, if that was possible, and a sheer drop from the top. It would be impossible to do bare hand - there was no where to grip or grab.

'But nothing's impossible for Allah (swt).' Nomi smirked looking at his hands. *'Let's see what we can do.'*



This time it was Agha who handed his wife a glass of water. The woman was reclining in her chair and gave him a weary but relieved smile.

"We are almost done, Khanum."

Suddenly Agha bent over, coughing violently. Khanum hurried and held him up as he painfully hacked and wheezed.

"Agha!"

Agha Luqman grasped the cloth over his chest and bent over in pain.

"Ya Shafi....Ya Kafi," he gasped between breaths. Khanum led him over to a seat and handed him a cup which he politely refused.

She was a patient woman, but seeing her husband in such a state caused prayers to flow non-stop from her lips.

It was several minutes before Agha managed to speak. "Dear Khanum, do not worry. I will not go anywhere before the angel of death says so."

She gave him an exasperated look, but then turned to hide the tears in her eyes.

“How can I not, Agha?”

“Death is a blessing for the true believer. It is a sign that we have fulfilled our duties. Mine was to raise these children. If Allah(swt) sees fit for me to die, then perhaps, and I pray that it is so, he is pleased with what we have done.”

“I have trust in our faith, I have trust in Allah (swt),” Khanum whispered. “But I pray that we have hopefully done enough, Inshallah. There is so little time and so much they must learn.”

“Then we will do what we can.” Agha replied strongly, ignoring his body’s protests. “If we have a day then we will make do with that. If we have a year or ten years, then we will make do with that.”

“And then?” Khanum asked.

“And then what, Khanum? All we can do is pray that it is enough.”



“Well, this is interesting,” Fati called out to no one in particular. She had already scoured the clearing, her findings accumulated in a small pile by her side. It was meagre, a few stones and sticks with some broken rush plant stalks. Not much but Fati’s training never let her discount the possibility that they may be of use.

‘I wonder if the others are in a similar position.’

She peered closely at the treeline. They were so close together that there was no way for her to pass through them or even see through them. The trees were so tall that unless she sprouted wings, it was highly unlikely that she would even graze the most low hanging leaf.

‘Having Rafay, Haroon or Nomi would have been extremely useful right now. Okay Agha, what do you need me to do? What’s your move?’

She took another detailed tour of her little clearing.

‘Wait a minute...’ Unwinding her shawl, she used one of the sharper rocks to pierce a hole and tear it into several long strips. Tying the ends together, she formed one long rope.

'Now, how to weigh you down?' Scavenging through her little collection, she collected several little stones to form a bundle. Tying it to the corner to her rope, she found the lowest branch and flung it over with all her might. The bundle soared, pulling the cloth with it. With a little fiddling and maneuvering, she managed to wedge it between a wishbone-like dip in the tree. Giving it a few experimental tugs, she began to pull herself up, using the trunk for support. She had just lifted her feet off the ground when the rock dislodged. Stumbling back, she ducked out of the way as it fell into the dirt.

'Well that didn't work. Okay, new move.'

Resting a hand on the tree, Fati pushed herself up and brushed the bits of dust and dirt from her clothes. Abruptly, she felt her palm burn and instantly lifted it. She checked her hand, it looked completely normal. It wasn't burnt. In fact it wasn't even red.

'But how?' She lost her train of thought when she saw the tree trunk. Right where her hand had been, there was a little knob in the wood protruding from the trunk. It looked like a budding branch. She frowned.

'I could have sworn this wasn't here a second ago.'

Curious, she placed a hand beside it and waited. Nothing happened. Not ready to give in, Fati merely raised an eyebrow and shut her eyes.

'Oh Allah (swt), let me know if I'm right.'

She didn't have to wait as a prickly feeling instantly blossomed under her hand.

'So that's the trick, hmmm?' she thought in amusement. When she opened her eyes, a small green shoot was peeping out of the bark.

Fati's jaw dropped. She turned to the lowest branch, one hand still on the trunk, and closed her eyes. Channeling every fibre of her thoughts, Fati imagined a long, thick green vine. She bristled as her palm grew hotter than before but she didn't stop. It was quite dizzying and right before she blacked out, she opened her eyes. The world swam in front of her in a discombobulating way and she sunk to her knees to avoid falling over.

'Did it work?' the thought hit her like lightning and she

turned her head, regretting it when the sight wobbled in front of her. However there was no long vine. Looking up, there was no vine at all. Squinting her eyes, Fati could just make out a tiny green shoot swaying merrily from the branch in the breeze.



There were five puddles and from where he lay, they looked as deep as his hand. There was little else in the clearing to draw Hashu's interest, so he groggily scooted over and sat in front of them. The water was extremely still and he could see the reflection of the azure sky in its calm surface. Why they were there though, he had no idea.

'Where is Fati when you need her...' he shook his head in amusement.

Still wondering what his twin would have done, Hashu nearly missed the small ripple in the rightmost pool. He watched in shock as the ripples grew larger until they smoothed again. But this time it wasn't the sky he saw. It was a clear image of his twin sister. She was sitting in the dirt and tearing up some cloth. Hashu reached out a hand, but hesitated. Was this his sister right now?

"Fati?" he called out. The girl in the water made no sign of acknowledgement.

"Fati!" Hashu tried again, louder. But it had the same result. So he patiently watched as she tried, and failed, to climb one of the trees. He was concerned when she crashed to the ground and let out a sigh of relief when she merely suffered a bruised pride above all. He noticed her looking closely at the tree bark. He squinted. Hashu could just make out a spot of green.

'A plant? Fati grew a plant? How?' He furrowed his eyes in concentration. He was so concentrated, that he didn't notice his hand teetering on the edge of the pool. Just seconds later, a loud ruffling in the tree top startled him and his hand slipped, plunging into the water and breaking the image. He immediately pulled it out, shaking the droplets off. But it was too late, the puddle returned to a clear mirror of the sky.

'Seriously! A bird, Hisham? A little bird. A lifetime in the

jungle and you get spooked by a bird?!'

'It's no use getting upset now. Let's see if I can bring it back, Inshallah. Ya Allah(swt) please help me!'

With that thought, he knelt in front of the pool again and thought hard of his sister, his twin. When he opened his eyes, his shoulders slumped. The pool was still clear. His hands, however, had begun to itch something terrible. Hashu scratched them roughly. It didn't work. He tried to rub it off the rough ground.

"Woah!" he yelled, backing up in surprise. The bare ground where his hand had been moments ago was covered with bouncy sprigs of moss. The moss grew for a few more seconds before it wriggled and withered away. Hashu looked down at his hand and then at the ground.

'I can grow plants too?' He fell to his knees, pressing his palm to the dirt but nothing arose.

Suddenly an idea came to him, *'What if it's temporary? Fati's image should be back in the pool!'*

He turned to it and sure enough, Fati was trying to coax a very thin sapling from one of the tree branches.

'Five siblings, five pools.' Feeling elated that he may have worked out what was happening, he turned to the second.

"Nomi," he said in a clear voice. The water swirled and rippled before smoothing out to show Nomi's eager face. Hashu almost had a heart attack, the boy was hanging from a cliff more straight than a log! Nomi, however, wasn't holding onto anything and scrambled up at an alarming speed, almost like a small lizard. Oh, he would give him a talking to when they met up.

But for now, without hesitation, Hashu plunged both hands into the water. He then looked around and chose one of the tallest trees in the clearing. Taking a deep breath he placed a palm against it and clenched his jaw as an uncomfortable prickling spread throughout his fingers and knuckles. He tried to lift his hand to shake out the sensation, but found it stuck fast to the tree. Suddenly, it made sense. Thrusting himself up, Hashu stuck the other hand further up. He shrugged off his shoes. When they slid down, he was pleasantly surprised to find that his feet

underwent a similar change. He climbed up much faster than he had thought possible.

'So this is what a squirrel feels like,' Hashu mused as he touched the ground.

Sliding on his shoes, he made his way to the third pool.

"Rafay!" he called out in a breathy voice, his blood rushing after that exhilarating climb.

Rafay's pool looked like one of the stories in those books about warrior training Agha had in his library. The boy was reducing his clearing to splinters, smashing through the trees. Hashu did notice him grabbing a stone each time.

'So if he grabs a stone, he can become as hard as the stone?' he contemplated, wincing involuntarily when Rafay smashed a particularly large tree with his head.

'Let's see about this.'

Shattering the watery image, he shook the wetness from his hands and grabbed a nearby stone. He whispered "Alhumdulillah" when it grew hot in his hand, but he held on tight to it. He chose a large sequoia with a trunk as wide as all of them put together.

With a quick, "Ya Ali Madad!" under his breath, Hashu drove his fist straight into the middle of the tree. The wood split and shattered under his knuckles, the flying splinters scratching his arm. But Hashu didn't notice. He was staring wide-eyed at his arm, buried deep into the tree. After wiggling his hand around a bit, he realized he had not just punched the tree, he had punched *through* it. Where the wood would have been, there was a hole the same width as his hand. After he carefully removed his arm, Hashu ducked down. He could see past the lacerated, splintered bark straight to trees on the other side.

He wiped the sweat accumulating on his brow and was surprised to find dust trickling between his fingers. It narrowly missed his eyes and he opened his palm, revealing the remains of the stone he had used earlier.

'So that's the catch,' Hashu surmised, letting the crumbled remains fall from his fingers onto the ground.

"Very well, let's see what Haroon is up to."

Hashu was not sure what he had anticipated but it certainly

wasn't the scene in front of him. Haroon was holding several sticks in one hand. The boy closed his eyes and Hashu's eyes widened when the sticks fell limp.

"What?" he exclaimed in surprise. The wooden sticks were now dangling from Haroon's hand like yarn. The boy hurriedly knotted them and laid them in the shape of a bow on the ground. Hashu watched Haroon fish several small stones from his pocket. Enclosing them in his hand, Haroon squeezed before opening his palm and moulding them into small arrow heads. Hashu's eyes widened. Haroon picked up the wood pieces from earlier. They now resembled a crudely made bow. Hashu continued to watch Haroon change and mould the materials until he had a makeshift bow and arrow. He looked pleased and grabbed it, stringing up one of his arrows. Hashu watched as he held it close to his cheek. Just as his fingers were about to let go, the bow quivered and disintegrated to a few sticks.

'Ya Allah(swt), that's amazing! But it looks as though it only lasts a short while. Well, for now,' Hashu deduced.

After dipping his hands, he grabbed a falling leaf out of the air and took a deep breath. Closing his eyes, he whispered a small thanks to Allah(swt) when the leaf burned in his fingers. Opening his hand, Hashu couldn't help but smile. The leaf had gone rigid and was now a shiny silver.

'Very fitting for Haroon. I can't even imagine what he'll invent with this, if he can work out how to get them to hold their shape.' Hashu watched the leaf return to its original somber shade of green.

"Finally, let's see what little Maya is doing."

Maya's clearing was comical to say the least. She was surrounded by all types of insects and animals, and was repeating a rather funny series of actions. She would gently, to not scare the animals, kneel to its level, then sit still. The animal would shuffle around before Maya would open her eyes and do it all again. Hashu frowned but his lips smiled in amusement.

"What is she up to?" he couldn't help but laugh. "Only one way to find out."

It had not been easy to find an animal, they seemed to dart

away at the mere sight of him, but finally a brave robin made its way to nearby branch. Hashu stared straight at its black glassy eye, trying to copy what Maya had been doing. The robin merely stared back.

'This isn't working,' he mentally huffed dejectedly. He was about to look away when the whole world lurched and turned black.

It took a few moments to get his bearings. Hashu felt very light headed.

'Oof, what hit me?' He looked around and saw the body of a boy on the ground. Way down on the ground. *'Hold on, that hair looks familiar, and that shirt. Oh my Allah(swt), that's me!'*

Hashu jolted back at the realization and swerved dangerously. Waving his arms wildly to gain balance, he was surprised to find that his feet were clamping onto a very thin piece of wood. Except it wasn't feet. Two twig like sticks balanced his whole body. The arms he had been waving earlier were laden with a light brown plumage.

'I'm a bird,' Hashu mentally whispered. *'I did not see that coming.'*

He gave his wings an experimental flap and stumbled when he felt his body move up. He eyed a nearby branch and before he could think about, he felt the bird body propel forward and clamp onto it.

'Okay, maybe I'm overthinking this.'

Hashu eyed another branch and successfully managed to hop to it.

'Alhumdulilah! Now for the big jump,' he mentally cheered, eyeing his own human body on the ground. Stumbling a little on take off, Hashu managed to flutter down to his body, albeit a little unevenly. His feet hit the ground early and he tumbled head over heels, landing in a lump of feathers.

"Ouch," he muttered. It came out as more of a half-hearted chirp. He shuffled back onto his feet. Closing his eyes, well the bird's eyes tightly, he felt a familiar lurch. Sure enough, he groggily opened his eyes to a very confused bird about a hand's distance from his face. He also felt a painful lump forming on the

side of his head.

“So that’s why she sits down. Clever girl...” he groaned holding the side of his head.



“Oh Hashu...” Khanum shook her head sympathetically.
“Always so hard on yourself.”

She hurried over to Agha Luqman, who was struggling to pull himself up.

“Agha you must rest! You’ll make your condition worse!”
Agha Luqman shook his head.

“If I am to die from this, then no amount of rest will help. But I can not squander what little time I have left. Our children have passed the first test. They must begin their training. I do not worry for my health.”

“But I do...” Khanum whispered in protest. Agha placed a hand over her’s placatingly.

“Then pray that I live long enough to help them reach their true potential. They may be our last hope. And if that takes until my dying breath, then I will do so to make sure they are ready.”

Khanum nodded. “And I will be by your side.”

“That’s all I ask, my dear Khanum. That’s all I ask.”

4

Warriors and Worries

Several years later...

“Maya!”

“Rafay Bhaiya! You broke my concentration!”

He raised both his hands defensively.

“My bad, I didn’t know you were practicing.”

Maya huffed and pushed herself off the grass, unbothered by the green streaks on her pants.

“What were you doing anyway?”

She looked dejectedly over the small pond.

“I was trying to mind-hop into a fish.”

He raised a brow in amusement. “Mind hop? Is that what you’re calling it now?”

“I was nine! Honestly, what would you have called it?”

She sprung up like a wound up coil from the sand. Looking around, it didn’t matter that she was back in the yard. Maya rushed to her eldest brother and slammed into his legs, wrapping her small arms around them. Hashu, who had just gotten up, toppled precariously before grabbing the fence for support.

“Hashu Bhaiya! Hashu Bhaiya! I can brain switch!”

Fati’s expression was pure confusion. Hashu, however, scooped her up and gave her a jubilant spin which left her squealing with joy.

“Yes, you can!”

“What does she mean she can brain switch?” Fati asked, rubbing a hand over her face. She imagined watching Maya skip around in her fifteen year old self.

Hashu gave Maya a grin which she returned with a toothy laugh.

“I can switch brains with an animal!”

Fati’s jaw dropped and she rushed forward to give the girl a hug.

“That’s amazing Maya!”

She smiled at the memory of her younger self’s antics.

“Honestly, you weren’t much better,” she retorted with a smirk. “Didn’t you spend the next month smashing every wood block around the camp?”

Rafay stuck his nose in the air.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I do,” called a voice behind them. They turned and found Haroon balancing several small dented metal poles in his hand. “It took me weeks to build anything. After all, it’s easier to work with wood than with splinters.”

“Trust you to complain,” Rafay grumbled under his breath. “What are all those?” he asked, gesturing to the pile in Haroon’s arms.

“Were you testing something?” Maya asked curiously which got a smile from Haroon.

“Nomi Bhaiya and I were working out the best material for bow staffs and spears. Turn out metal is too heavy and slow. So it’s back to the workshop.”

“I’m sure you’ll work it out,” she encouraged. “Do you know where Fati Baji is? Considering I’m done practicing...”

“I said I was sorry!”

“...I might as well go see what she’s doing.”

Haroon shrugged. “I don’t, but if you hold on, I’ll drop these off and join you.”

Maya nodded exuberantly. “What about you, Rafay Bhaiya?” she turned to him expectantly. “Are you coming?”

He shook his head. “I’m going to practice.”

Maya raised a brow. “So rather than watch Fati Baji or Hashu Bhaiya practice you’d rather be ramming through wood blocks?”

Rafay blew a strand of hair out of his face. “First of all, it’s Fati Baji, not Hashu Bhaiya. Secondly, as fun as it would be to watch a dandelion grow,” he jested with exaggerated hands. “I’d rather focus on *real* power.”

Maya looked a little disheartened, but Haroon merely rolled his eyes. “Leave it Maya. What else do you expect from someone who thinks the epitome of power is being a human battering ram. At this point I’d be surprised if he had anything but splinters for brains.”

Sensing a fight, Maya grabbed one of Haroon’s poles and tugged on the crook of his arm. “Very well, come on Haroon Bhaiya! Or we’ll miss it!”

The two of them broke off, but not before Haroon and Rafay glared at each other. Rafay huffed and turned away.

“He’s just jealous. Well, he can continue playing Sir Inventor. I’m going to show them what a real warrior looks like.”



Hashu ducked and rolled out of the way. He landed on his feet a few hands to the right. Where he had been standing moments earlier, two vines as thick as his wrist had embedded themselves into the sand. He grabbed hold of them, ignoring the stinging in his palm, and held on as tightly as he could. Brown, hard wood blossomed beneath his fingertips. Fati quickly severed the vine before the wood reached her. The remainder shrivelled up and disappeared into the sand. Both were panting hard, brows dripping sweat like a river. From the sidelines, Haroon and Maya were watching with fascination.

“You know you can surrender...”

Hashu smiled at his sister. “You obviously don’t know me well enough, Fati.”

She smirked, her entire body rising and falling with her deep breaths. “Fine. Your move.”

She felt the sand beneath her shift. Like clockwork, she flung herself to a new spot. Tiny shoots that had been grappling at her

feet moments earlier, disappeared.

Hashu huffed and was about to raise a fist when a cage of saplings shot up around him. They twisted and turned like snakes and in the blink of an eye, he was cocooned inside a nest of tree limbs.

Fati watched with satisfaction as the dome formed. She smirked. "Do you surrender now?"

There was no response. Frowning she went closer and peeked in. It was empty. The ground under the dome was gone too.

Fati didn't have time to react. The ground vanished beneath her.

The hole she was in was deep and she was exhausted and sore. Hashu was peeking over the edge, wearing a victorious smirk.

"Well played," she panted, letting her head fall back.

He offered her a hand which she graciously took.

"If I didn't know better, I would have thought you were sending me to the grave." She had a hand over her heart.

Hashu wiped the sweat off his forehead. "You tried to lock me in a cage," he stated, matter of factly. There was a ghost of a smile on his lips. A smattering of applause from the side caught their attention.

"That was amazing, Fati Baji!" Maya called.

"Very interesting, I haven't seen you two fight like that in a while," quipped Haroon.

He wasn't wrong. It had been quite some time since the two had a proper spar.

"We should wash up. It's almost dinner time. Why don't you two check if Khanum needs anything," Fati suggested. Both children nodded but just as they turned, they were stopped by Hashu.

"Where's Rafay?" he asked.

Haroon shrugged, "Off, destroying something under the guise of practice."

Hashu nodded and let them go. He and Fati gathered their things from the side of the arena. Fati's was a belt that Haroon and Rafay made for her. It was made of canvas and Haroon and stitched into it a thin belt with numerous pockets. In each pocket

was the seed of a different type of plant. Rafay had spent several days out deep in the jungle, gathering the seeds of all kinds of different plants. She smiled at the memory of when they made it.

“What’s wrong dear?”

Fati’s expression was uncharacteristically frustrated and the ground around her was littered with the remnants of stalks and leaves.

“Unfortunately, I am incapable of producing something as simple as an apple tree.”

Agha looked between her and the ground and smiled. He sat down next to her.

“Are you God(swt)?”

Fati looked at him in shock. “Of course not!”

“Then why do you try to create?” he gestured to the ground. “Every plant that springs from this ground is created by Allah(swt). With His permission you call them forth. But you do not make them.”

Fati’s eyes lit up. “I don’t make the seeds. I don’t create the plant. With Allah’s(swt) help, I ask them to grow,” she thought out loud.

“So if I can’t grow an apple tree, it’s because I don’t have the seed! Thank you Agha!”

So, she now carried seeds of different plants. Prickly creepers with poisonous thorns, soft, springy moss and so many more.

Hashu’s was a worn journal. It had been bound and rebound many times, as he added more and more to it. He whipped it open on a nearby rock and began a rough sketch of the cage she had made earlier. Tilting her head to see it properly, she couldn’t help but ask, “What are you doing Hashu?”

“This,” he gestured to the book. “Is a journal of sorts. It lists everything we learn about each person’s ability.”

He called out to Haroon’s and Maya’s retreating backs. Hashu patted a spot next to him and the two sat down. He put his book in the middle and flipped it open to the first section.

“Is that me?” Maya asked, tilting her head awkwardly to get a better view.

On the page was a crude but accurate sketch of a young Maya,

laying down on grass. There was a rabbit in front of her and the sketched Maya was watching it with intense concentration.

“I started making it years ago when you first got your powers. You were nine or ten at the time.” he then flipped through a multitude of pages. “I’ve been noting everyone’s progress for the past five years. Look at this...”

He flipped open to a page with a girl that looked like young Fati grappling the ground. Her face was strained with effort, but all that was drawn in front of her was a comically small plant. Once Haroon and Maya saw it, they both burst out laughing. Fati pouted, her expression slightly chagrined.

“It wasn’t that small...” which only sent her younger siblings into another fit of giggles.

Hashu barely suppressed a smile. “I only drew what I saw,” he quipped to which Fati rolled her eyes.

“Hashu! Nomi! Where are you!”

Fati clasped a hand over her mouth but could barely hold in her laughter. Hashu and Nomi were both standing around a petrified Haroon, whose arm was elbow deep in a slab of stone, leaning against a tree.

“Over here!” called Hashu. With a final heave, the boys wrenched Haroon’s arm free, flying back and collapsing in a heap. Haroon sat up and wiggled his fingers experimentally.

“Thanks Hashu Bhaiya! Thanks Nomi Bhaiya!”

“No problem, but could you get off me?” groaned Nomi from beneath them. They clambered off and helped the winded boy to his feet.

“Let’s avoid stone for some time,” suggested Nomi. Hashu frowned and fished out a scrap paper and a stubby pencil from his pocket.

“What happened exactly, Haroon?”

The boy was still watching his hand in relief. “I tried to carve a hole in it. Like I told you about when I was in the clearing, Remember? Well I thought if I could mould into into the stone like I did with the wood, then I could make the stone into weapons. Like Nomi Bhaiya’s claws!”

“So what happened?” queried Nomi. “How did you get stuck?”

Haroon bashfully kicked a pebble. “I may have forgotten that it changes back...” he mumbled.

“Okay, and at a speed for normal people?” Hashu asked with a hint of a smile.”

“I may have forgotten that it changes back.”

Nomi gave the boy an encouraging pat as Hashu folded the paper and put it away.

“Why were you looking for us?” Hashu asked Fati.

“I have hit a new milestone.” The boys around her nodded appreciatively.

“Well don’t leave us in suspense, what is it?” questioned Haroon.

“Take a look at these.” In her hand were five brown seeds. “These are apple seeds. Now watch this.”

She placed them on the ground and backed up. Stretching out her palms in front of her, she threw every ounce of energy into her power. The boys jumped as the seeds began to tremble. They hopped around and then instantly one after the other were five clean snaps. In the place where the seeds had been, were five little green shoots.

Fati’s face was a little disappointed but the boys applauded appreciatively.

“You can grow plants from seeds?” Haroon asked in awe.

She nodded. “Agha said I kept trying to grow what wasn’t there. Which only Allah (swt) can do. So if I have the seed, I can grow the plant. Albeit slowly.”

“Which will improve with time,” encouraged Hashu.

“Look Rafay Bhaiya, baby plants! They’re so cute!” squeaked a little voice from the corner. Maya and Rafay turned the bend.

“Why are you laughing?” she asked, watching the boys break down into peals of laughter, while Fati just buried her face in her hands.

“Yes, Yes, laugh while you can, won’t you...” she grumbled. “Anyways, if it’s alright with you Hashu, I would like to take a look at your notes.”

He nodded and. “Of course, but for now we should head to the kitchen,” he ushered. “Khanum will be waiting for us.”



Khanum had just set the final dish down on their short table. It was a little off the ground, and large enough for everyone to sit on the hand-woven straw mats without bumping elbows. She had sent Maya to grab a spoon, when a crackling from the treeline drew her attention.

Rafay walked out, his hair shot out in all directions, every inch of him littered with wood. Or rather what was left of it. There was, despite everything, a tired but proud smile on his face. His face lit up at the sight of the table.

“Don’t even think about it,” Khanum warned, straining to keep a smile appearing on her lips at his downcast expression. “You know the rules.”

Rafay sighed, his shoulder sagging in defeat. “No dirt at the table.” he muttered.

Huffing under his breath, he trudged over to their wudhu stream and plunged his hands into the water. Maya, along with the other children in tow, arrived and took a seat at the table, though Hashu and Nomi did peel off and head towards the tents. When they returned, they had Agha between them. Though she managed to steel her own expression, the looks on the girls’ faces did not escape her notice.

The last few years had been very difficult for Agha. He had a hand on Hashu’s shoulder, leaning heavily as he slowly stepped across the sand. Nomi stood ready by his side in case he stumbled. Agha looked as though he had aged decades.

Moving slowly and deliberately, they could hear the slight gasps of breath as he strained every muscle and joint of his thin, aching body. His eyes were rimmed with dark circles, his robes hanging limply on his near-skeleton frame. All of them stood up respectfully as Hashu and Nomi eased him into the seat Haroon had built a few months ago. Agha closed his eyes in relief and paused for a breath. He waved the boys away with a nod of thanks and repositioned himself.

While his ailing health had set them all on edge, Khanum held back a sigh of relief at the sharp and intelligent look in his eyes. A gaze hardened and toned by knowledge and experience. He

may not be well, but his mind was as sharp as ever as it critically roamed over the childrens' faces.

Hashu, after spooning out portions to his foster mother and siblings, was moving his own meal disinterestedly around the plate. The meat and vegetables were slumped dejectedly in a pile as he barely nibbled on the fresh bread. Fati did not appear to have much of an appetite either and spent most of the meal stealing glimpses at Hashu's contemplative expression. After a nod from Hashu, Nomi watched the older twins with not so subtle gazes from between bites. He hawkishly eyed their silent exchanges, not noticing the meat fall out of his bread until it was in his mouth.

Khanum was flittering between making sure the younger children were eating and stealing glances to make sure her husband had everything he needed. If the situation had not been so dire, Agha would have laughed at the youngest of the brood. Rafay was enthusiastically narrating a venture in the forest. He was gesticulating wildly much to the amusement of Maya on his right and to the ire of Haroon who rolled his eyes periodically from across the table. So innocent and free, lost in their own world of whimsical play and learning.

It saddened him to see the strain and worry on his older children's faces, but he could do little to alleviate their concern.

'Time is against us, my young ones. But I shall do what I can with what I have.'

The meal was finished and promptly cleared, with each of the children lending a hand. Hashu had just packed away the bread, when he bodily collided with Fati. She stumbled backwards with a soft *oof*, grabbing onto a tent pole for support.

"Sorry, I wasn't really-"

"paying attention?" she interrupted with an amused smile. "I could tell. Oh, by the way, Agha wants to speak with you after salat. He's in his tent."

Hashu nodded. He quickly performed his ablution, and prayed beside his brothers and sisters. Once they had finished, he bid them goodnight and moved to Agha's tent barely noticing Nomi following behind him. As Hashu crossed the ground, a myriad of thoughts flickered through his mind faster than he could keep up

with.

‘Why does it feel so heavy?’ Hashu thought. He could feel a growing weight on his shoulders and it must have shown on his face when he entered the tent at Agha’s call.

“Why Hashu, is everything alright?”

Hashu gulped and nodded, not really trusting his voice.

Agha frowned, “Continue to worry like that my boy, and you’ll have wrinkles worse than mine. That’ll set your mother after me!”

Hashu smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. With a defeated sigh, Agha sunk into a fat floor cushion and gestured to the adjacent one.

“You are worried about me, aren’t you?”

Hashu looked down. “We all are.”

“I understand.” Agha sighed. “Hashu, we have spent years in our home. Hidden from the eyes of the world. Training and preparing. Children like you are a balm on the wounded hearts of your parents.”

Agha looked up. Hashu was watching him attentively, drinking in every word he said. His sharp brown eyes, met Agha’s own. To the world they belonged to a man, a warrior. But for Agha? They were the windows to the young boy who clung to him for dear life in the shadows of the night. The boy who cried away the nights of his younger years, screaming for the mother he no longer remembered until his voice grew hoarse. The child whose eyes searched for a father who never returned. Little hands that held the edge of his cloak, that would eagerly point to every plant and shout ‘Tree!’ with a proud smile and a grin missing half the teeth. He felt the traitorous sting of tears prick his eyes, but he pushed them back.

“I am an old man, I have seen much and learnt much. But it has all taught me that there is so much more that we do not know. How the skies hold us in the palm of their hands, how the stars guide us in our darkest hour or whether we will even live long enough to see them tomorrow.”

He raised a hand to stop Hashu’s oncoming protest.

“We may like to believe otherwise. But you, I and everyone else feel that my days are few. We do not know what our Lord(swt)

has planned, but I know this. If I were to die tomorrow, I would die in peace knowing that my family is in the hand of a boy, no, a man, who will keep them safe and on the right path. A man for whom his righteousness is the most valuable treasure. A man I am very proud to call my son.”

He opened his arms and Hashu leaned into them without hesitation. He squeezed the man with such vigor that any onlooker would have gotten worried. But Agha could feel the tension and worry bleeding out of his boy. Hashu closed his eyes, burying his face in the many folds of Agha’s cloak, his nose filled with the familiar scent of earthy moss, paper and ink. After a few moments, Hashu moved back, his eyes suspiciously shiny.

“Now run along,” Agha chided. “Nomi would probably be half asleep on some bench by now.”

Hashu smiled. He bid Agha goodnight, and did the same to Khanum, who he found waiting patiently outside the tent. He barely made it two steps, when he caught sight of Nomi. Hashu didn’t even try to suppress a grin. Nomi was curled up in a ball on the bench outside Agha’s tent. His legs dangled off the short edge, not designed to be a bed for the ever-growing boys.

“Nomi...” he nudged the boy. Nomi frowned and sat up groggily. Though his eyes were still shut.

“Are yooooou done?” he drawled, yawning dramatically in the middle. Hashu grabbed Nomi’s arm and threw it over his own shoulders. With a heave, he hauled Nomi onto stumbling legs.

“Let’s get you to bed.”

“Yeshe.....trieto.....”

Hashu smirked. “Fascinating.”

“Forshe...really...”

“I see. How about we take a look at that in the morning?”

“I agrreish”

By now Hashu had managed to half-carry Nomi across the ground, into the tent. As carefully as he could, he lowered the sleepy boy onto the bed and pulled the woolly blanket until it settled under his chin.

He settled into his own bed. Despite the thoughts bustling around like bees in his head, Hashu could feel his eyelids grow

heavier until the world turned black.



“Hashu Bhaiya!”

“Mmmm,”

“Hashu Bhaiya!”

Flinging off the blankets, Hashu leapt up. He had just spent half the night trapezing on a tight rope. In his hands was a large bar with each end weighed down with his siblings shouting in fear. He was stumbling and tripping while trying to keep his balance, with Agha’s voice chiding him to do better. Needless to say it was quite disconcerting to find himself back in bed with a small hand shaking his shoulder.

“Maya?” he slurred groggily. “What are you doing here?”

A shaky breath shook all the sleep from his mind. He shook his head and wiped his eyes and was surprised to see his little sister at his bedside, her eyes wide with fear. Hashu swung his legs over the side and faced her, alert.

“What’s wrong? Is everything all right?”

Maya shook her head violently and started trembling. Hashu grabbed her shaking hands.

“Maya. Maya look at me. Take a deep breath. That’s a good girl. And another. There you go. Now tell me what happened.” His voice was calm and composed, hiding the growing concern at whatever was upsetting his sister.

“I had a bad drem and then I got up and...something’s wrong, Hashu Bhaiya!”

“Wha?” mumbled a sleepy Nomi. He took a look at Hashu’s face and flung himself out of bed. He was by Maya’s side in a moment. “What’s happening?”

“I have a bad feeling. Something’s wrong, like really, really wrong.”

“What do you mean?” Hashu asked patiently. Nothing she was saying was making sense.

Maya took a steady breath. “I went outside, I wanted to get some air and then I saw it. The animals! They’re gone!”

The boys frowned.

“Gone?” asked Nomi.

“It’s true!” she insisted. “I can’t feel them! They’re gone! The jungle animals are gone! Something’s wrong Hashu Bhaiya!”

She flung her arms around his neck in a death-grip. He grabbed on and held her trembling frame close. Both boys shared a look of concern. What was she talking about?

Then he felt it. A cold icy trickle down his spine. Hashu didn’t know how he knew, but the dread in his chest told him exactly where he needed to go. Passing Maya off to Nomi, he ran as fast as he could from the tent, not bothering that he was in his night clothes. He didn’t stop at his siblings’ tents, calling out behind him.

‘Please let me be wrong...’ he prayed, his heart was pounding so loudly he could almost hear it in his ears. *‘Ya Allah(swt) please don’t let this be true.’*

He leapt over the benches and fire pits, skidding painfully on the dust to a stop in front of Agha’s tent.

“Agha!” he shouted. “Agha! Khanum!”

His cries had roused the rest of the siblings, but Hashu was more concerned with the lack of response from his parents.

“Hashu wait!” a voice called out behind him. But Hashu didn’t stop. He couldn’t stop. He had to know. So he tossed the tent flap aside and ran in.

His heart froze. Agha lay on the bed, one hand clasped between his wife’s, who was sitting on a stool by his side. The slight rise and fall of Khanum’s back somewhat eased Hashu before his gaze settled on Agha.

The man was on his back, the blanket tucked into his sheet. His eyes were closed, but on his face was a serene smile as though he was greeting someone. Hashu raised his hand, not noticing how badly it was trembling. He laid it on Agha’s and recoiled violently, pain surging in his chest. Agha’s hand was cold to the touch. He rushed forward, fervently checking Agha’s breath, his eyes looking and searching for any signs of life. He felt hands grab his shoulders.

“Get off!” he yelled and struggled to break free. “I have to help him!” he shouted.

“Hashu stop!” he froze at the sound of his sister’s voice. He

turned.

Fati stood behind him while his arms were pinned in Nomi's strong grip. On the floor, Rafay and Haroon held their mother who they had moved out of the way. Maya stood beside them wringing her hands anxiously.

"No..." he whispered, sagging in Nomi's hold. Fati gave the younger boy a nod, who then released Hashu and sank to the floor with him.

Hashu looked up at Fati, his eyes begging, his heart screaming. "Please, it's not...You know it's not..."

Fati's brown irises met his own. They were shiny with unshed tears, her own voice shaking. "I-I'm sorry Hashu. H-He -"

She took a shaky breath and let her tears fall, meeting her brother's pleading gaze. "He's gone."

The words felt poisonous on her lips, and to the ears of every person there.

Agha was dead.



Tranquil was the town, the residents no wiser in their slumber even the knights perched on the castle walls. No one knew of the the strangled sobs of an aged man, weathered by time and worry. The streets stood silently in vigil of his anguished silent cries, the creaking of the crickets offering condolences to his shaking form. The tall walls of his library watched without a sound as he took the paper from the awaited raven. A wooden desk held up his aged frame as he collapsed, the crumpled parchment falling to the floor, forgotten. A hidden mouse, peeked from behind the window frame and watched, in the universal language of prayer, a man raise his hands to his Lord(swt). The world stood silent as Agha Soleimani was once again, alone.

5

The Beginning of the End

Silence was not just coveted, Hashu craved it. In his busy world, with what could be described as a horde of siblings, those moments where it was just him and the world were few and far between. In the past he sought them, rising and sleeping at those concealed hours of the night. But now?

He was still up early, in the quiet morning hours. There were no clangs from the kitchen where Khanum would be setting the food. No rustling from the library where Fati spent most of her waking hours. The arena was empty, tents vacant, beds untouched. He was not sure when it had happened, but all of the children had somehow collected in a nest of blankets and limbs at the foot of their parents' beds. Blinking the sleep from his mind, it took several seconds to remember. As he did, the events of the night came flooding back to him, with the hollow feeling in his chest. Sliding himself out from between Nomi, who stuffed his face further into the blanket with a frown, and a loudly snoring Rafay, he stood up. His eyes fell on the empty spot on the bed. The sheets were still indented, the comforter tossed aside.

Hashu's hands hung by his side. He recalled everything. How he and Nomi had lifted Agha's body from the bed. How light it was. It was the first time that Hashu fully understood just how sick Agha had been. Nomi and Hashu had washed and shrouded the body by the little creek where they made wudhu.

A few hours earlier...

It felt almost poetic given the pious man had been so devout. He hadn't had the heart to tell Fati about Agha's condition and had sworn Nomi to secrecy. In the middle of the night, they fulfilled all the ritual rites finally washing Agha's weak, frail form and bundling it in the special white cloth that had been stowed away in his trunk. Alongside the cloth, was a small pouch and a letter where Agha requested to be buried with it.

'If the repentance for my sins is not enough to spare me, then let this sand from the holy plains of Karbala shield me.'

Hashu had slid it on top of the man's rib, which he noticed poked through the wrinkled skin.

As they lined up for the funeral prayer, Hashu moved to stand by Fati. He remembered her eyes that held back sorrow with firm resolve.

"You must lead us..." As always with Fati, there was more to that statement than what was being said. And Hashu understood. With Agha gone, he would have to step up and take the place as leader of the family. Hashu remembered the support in Fati's eyes, the loyalty in Nomi's and while Rafay would vehemently protest otherwise, scared looks on the faces of his younger siblings. There was no choice. This was Allah's(swt) decision and with all the strength in his body, he vowed there and then to make sure that Agha would not meet Bibi Fatima with his head bowed.

With a nod, he had turned and raised his hands to announce the start of the prayer, and the beginning of a new chapter in their lives.

Hashu started as a ruffling from across the tent caught his attention. Just soon enough to see a small body dart outside. He was surprised that it hadn't roused Fati, but given the events of last night, it could be overlooked. The girl herself, unlike the others, slept by the side of the sole occupant of the large bed. Khanum had not woken up since Agha had passed. Fearing for her health, and not willing to risk losing another parent so soon, they placed her close and made sure someone was by her side. Last night, Fati had woken up several times to Khanum gasping and sobbing between breaths before the old woman would pass

out. His sister had spent more than half of the night tending to Khanum, and so, it was no surprise that Maya was able to sneak out unnoticed.

He followed his little sister outside, neatly dodging a rolling Haroon and stepped out into the yard. It was still dark, though there was a little light from the glowing embers of a dying fire in one of the pits. He watched as Maya slumped on the ground beside it and began to poke it with a stick.

Hashu called out a salam, but that startled her into dropping her stick. When she saw it was Hashu, she sighed in relief.

“I didn’t know you were awake.”

He gave her a small smile and sat down beside her, putting his feet close to the warm embers.

“I saw you leave.”

“It’s very quiet, isn’t it?”

Hashu looked up at her. Maya was gazing out into the treeline, her face stoic. He nodded and wrapped an arm around her small frame. As though out of instinct, she leaned towards him.

She was right. There were no birds, or chattering squirrels. Not even an ant crossed by.

Maya pulled her sweater closer to her body.

“I spent a lot of time in the forest,” she told him. “No matter what time of the day I went, it was always...Well...I’m not sure how to describe it...”

“Alive?” offered Hashu. Maya turned to him, but his eyes were on the treeline.

“Our home,” he continued. “It always felt alive.”

“And now it feels dead.” Maya whispered bluntly, tears pooling in her eyes. A part of him wished she had used any other word at that moment. He tightened his grip on her.

“I know Maya. We all miss him.”

“Do you think that what’s happening to the jungle has something to do with Agha’s d-?”

“Maybe,” he cut her off. He couldn’t hear those two words together. Not now.

Maya shrugged, worry etched into her expression. “I’m not sure what’s going on Hashu Bhaiya. Everything is changing. And

not in a good way.”



“Any news?” Haroon asked, concern evident in his voice.

Fati looked up from the steaming concoction in front of her. She shook her head. “She’s still unconscious.”

Taking a bowl from Haroon’s outstretched hand, she tipped it into the pot. The boys grimaced at the funny smell it emitted. Fati, however, was unfazed and continued to toss in an assortment of dry ingredients. After a few stirs she pulled out a earthen bowl and poured out a ladle’s worth into it. As gently as she could, she tipped Khanum’s head back and and poured the mixture into her mouth.

“At this point in time, I suppose no news is good news,” she mumbled.

“When did you learn healing?”

“I didn’t,” she replied, gesturing to a small journal hidden behind her pot. “This is Khanum’s personal records on natural healing. Considering we don’t have any of the rare plants mentioned in the library books, she’s found a lot of substitutes.”

“I hope they work,” Haroon whispered, he held one of Khanum’s hands.

“Inshallah,” murmured Fati.

Hashu nodded and headed outside. As he left, Fati stood up and stretched her arms above her head. She cringed at the loud pops but she did feel better.

“I’m going to get some fresh air. Will you sit with Khanum?”

Haroon’s response was a weary nod, and so, she made her way to the entrance. The tired girl sat by the edge of the tent, nodding off while leaning against the tent pole. Haroon stayed by Khanum’s bedside, one hand of hers between his own. It was a few moments later that he felt a small twitching and was surprised to see that Khanum’s fingers were moving.

“Fati Baji! Look!”

Fati jerked awake. She rushed in, knocking her knees against the table and precariously teetering the bowl of fluid. Both children watched with wide eyes as Khanum’s eyelids flickered back to

reveal tired black irises.

“Khanum?” Fati whispered testily, inching closer to the bed. Suddenly Khanum’s eyes widened and she began to gasp, looking around in panic.

“Khanum, it’s me! Haroon!” the boy exclaimed. He had one hand on her shoulder to prevent her from flinging herself off the bed. At his call, Khanum’s eyes focused on Haroon.

“Haroon! Call Fati! Call Hashu! Run! Prepare! Must! Jungle dying! No time! Must warn-”

She shuddered before her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell limp back onto the bed sheets.

Haroon backed away and Fati rushed forward. He watched his sister check Khanum and adjust her into a more comfortable position. When Fati moved back, Haroon almost reeled at the steely edge of her gaze.

“Call Hashu.”

It wasn’t a question, so Haroon left immediately after. On his way out, he looked over his shoulder and saw Fati furiously scribbling on a scrap of paper. He swept aside the tent flap and found Rafay, Hashu and Maya gathered around one of the fire pits. Hashu had an arm about Maya and Rafay sat across from them, the three were chatting in hushed whispers.

“Hashu Bhaiya!” he called. “Fati Baji needs you!”

Hashu nodded, but then he noticed the concern in Haroon’s gaze.

“Stay here,” Hashu told the others.

As he left, Haroon took his spot. Rafay didn’t look up, gazing without an ounce of emotion into the fire. Hashu quickly made his way to the tent. He pushed aside the flap. What he hadn’t expected was to see Fati scribbling violently on parchment that was terribly creased in her hand.

“Fati?”

She turned around to face her brother. Hashu could almost see the wheels turning in her head.

“What’s going on? What happened?”

“Khanum - she woke up but only for a few moments. Not like last night, she was actually conscious. She gave Haroon a

message. A warning.

That caught Hashu's attention. "A warning? About what?"

"The jungle, Hashu. Our home. She said our home is dying. The rest of it was an assortment of words. Run. Prepare. Warn."

Fati grabbed a book on the table. It was thicker than her arm. She flicked through several dog-eared pages.

"It all makes sense..." she muttered.

Sensing that she had zoned out, Hashu called out to his sister. "Fati, I'm not following."

Her eyebrows furrowed, she tapped a finger against her chin.

"Think about it. Agha passes away. The jungle's animals disappear. Khanum goes unconscious, but manages to tell us that the jungle is dying."

Hashu shuffled to the side as Fati paced across the room. He listened intently, but said nothing to avoid disrupting her thoughts.

"This can't be a coincidence. Clearly, Agha was doing something to keep the forest alive. And now that Agha is not alive -"

Hashu visibly bristled at her choice of words.

"The jungle is dying. But that means it can't just be him. Oh Allah(swt)!"

She turned towards Hashu, covering her mouth, her eyes wide in realization.

"What is it Fati?" he asked, rushing to her side.

"Don't you see Hashu?" she asked, her voice nearly cracking. "It's Agha and Khanum. They've been keeping the jungle alive all these years. It's what made Agha sick. It's what killed him. And now..."

She gave a mournful look to their foster mother. "It's killing Khanum too. The strain of keeping the jungle alive."

Fati had a death grip on Hashu's arms, which may not have been the best idea since his own legs felt weaker than a leaf stem.

"We killed them..." Fati whispered.

"No," Hashu all but ordered. He grabbed his sister's shoulders and forced her to look at him. "We did not kill them. I don't know why they did it, but I trust Agha and I still do. If he chose to do

this, it must have been the best way. They made the decision, gave us a home and a childhood and if nothing else, given Khanum's warning, they gave us a chance."

Fati nodded, but he could still see a shiny sheen in her eyes.

"You're a girl of facts and realities. And one of our realities is that there are three children sitting outside that tent without a clue about what is going to happen. Now tell me what else Khanum mentioned."

Fati did so and turned her attention back to the ragged parchment.

"She called for us. The rest was an assortment of words. But an alarming assortment. She mentioned preparing, running, the jungle dying, warning and running out of time."

Hashu drew back and folded his arms.

"We know about the jungle dying. I think it's safe to assume that the no time means exactly that. Given Khanum's state and as much as I hate to say it, I don't think we'll have our home much longer."

He forced the words from his throat. It was not a pleasant notion that they were about to lose their only living parent figure and their home.

"As for the warning, running and preparing, I believe that's probably for what lies outside the jungle boundaries."

Fati nodded. "Okay, what's our move?"



"Where's Hashu Bhai?" Nomi asked. He was balancing an assortment of items in his arms.

"Agha and Khanum's tent," Haroon replied.

The older brother nodded and started off in the tent's direction. Not before casting a worried glance over his shoulder. He had never seen the younger kids so...quiet.

It was awkward between the three younger siblings. On any other day it wasn't odd to see them riled up in banter and jibing at each other. But not today. It didn't feel right to smile or laugh. Or say anything for that matter. Rafay stared at the fire, his eyes straying every now and then to his parents' tent. It felt

so surreal. Like at any moment Agha would stride out, calling them for training or for one of the boys to fetch more firewood.

He just couldn't believe it. Agha would never leave that tent. Agha would never lead the salat in their little prayer area. He would never get to hear Agha recite Quran in his low voice. He would never get to see Agha sigh and shake his head when Rafay skimped on the training exercise. And now Khanum was sick too. Was she going to leave them as well? Not only that, he couldn't help the niggling feeling in the back of his mind that something had happened. The look on Haroon's face didn't help. He could just tell something was off.

There were so many thoughts. So many situations buzzing in his mind. He couldn't think.

"Ugh!" growled Rafay, pounding his fist in the dirt. He stood up and without warning, made a beeline for the trees, ignoring Haroon and Maya's calls.

Rafay stomped down the paths, impatiently swatting away the persistent and irritating vegetation. He didn't think about where to go. His feet just led the way.

"Get off!" he roared at a branch that smacked him in the face, shoving it with as much force as he could muster. The loud crack echoed in the eerily silent forest as it snapped under his hand. Rafay didn't bat an eye. Instead, he turned down a track that should have worn down with the number of times he had trodden it.

It led to another clearing. Rafay had no delusions about his fraying temper and found that battering a tree often helped in a fit of rage. There was an arranged pile of stones on the side.

Tree after tree caved. Rafay's fists moved at lightening speed. He didn't stop. He went from tree trunk to tree trunk. Reducing them to splinters. The pile of rocks was no better. Their granules dusted his hands and clothes. He didn't care.

Standing in front of a thick tree, he paused. Sweat dripped like a waterfall from his forehead, his clothes drenched and clinging to his skin. Rafay pulled his fist back and flung it with full force at the tree. He waited for the satisfying crumbling of wood under his knuckles. Only it never came.

A hair's length from the trunk, someone had caught his fist. Rafay looked up and the anger ebbed away as swiftly as it had appeared. Hashu towered over the young boy, one hand catching Rafay's fist. Knowing he wasn't throwing a punch with normal human strength, he was surprised that there wasn't an ounce of pain on Hashu's face. But then again this was Hashu Bhaiya. He shouldn't be surprised.

His older brother released his fist. Slowly, with a calculating look, Hashu scrutinized the clearing. Rafay followed his gaze, his face turning more and more red as he looked around. It was a mess, as though a tornado had swept through the trees. Every now and then Hashu would look back at him making Rafay's breath catch in his throat. He watched as Hashu knelt down and plucked a branch as wide as Rafay's arm. Hashu looked down at it and stalked up to Rafay. The look on his face made Rafay want to run to the other side of the world. But he couldn't move. His feet felt like they had been turned to lead.

"If you're going to fight something," Hashu whispered. "Fight something that will fight back."

When Rafay didn't move the older boy flung the branch into the scattered debris. Rafay flinched as it smacked against other strewn wood with a loud crack.

"Fight back!" Hashu yelled. Rafay needed no other encouragement.

He threw himself at the older boy with every ounce of strength he could muster. Not to hurt his brother. He could never hurt Hashu. But he just felt so angry. He could see red fraying over his vision, everything going quiet, the thundering drumming of his heart pounding in his ears. Every morsel of frustration, annoyance, anger and pain flowed into his fists.

How he would try Agha's patience, playing around during training. How he rolled his eyes and sighed or huffed each time he was asked to get firewood, or clean the table, or help Khanum. He was always so annoying, so meddlesome.

Rafay felt his arms get pinned to his sides and thrashed violently in Hashu's hold. He twisted and turned and growled and screamed but Hashu didn't budge. His throat grew hoarse and finally he

slumped in defeat against his brother. They sank to the floor.

Hashu still had a strong grip on Rafay.

He felt the boy tremble, and realised he was trying to stop himself from crying.

“It’s okay, Rafay” he whispered in the boy’s ear. “It’s alright. Let it out.”

Rafay turned and clung to Hashu, his body wracking with sobs.

“I didn’t get to say goodbye,” he choked. “I didn’t get to apologize.”

Hashu said nothing, but hung on tight while Rafay cried out his pain. He honestly didn’t know what to do. Not a feeling he was used to. When Agha was still alive, a part of him pained at the very thought, but he made no show of it, everything had always been simple. But now? The crying boy in his arms or Maya’s behaviour earlier, Hashu realised, were just the start to a long journey of finding out everything they didn’t know. Noticing that Rafay was somewhat quiet, he pulled back and was surprised to see the boy’s face as red as a tomato.

“Rafay?”

He gulped and shook his head, shame in his expression. “I’m so sorry Hashu Bhaiya. I didn’t mean to make a scene.”

Hashu pivoted to face Rafay, frowning. “Our father just passed away. Our mother is ill. Our entire lives have been turned upside down. I think you’re more than entitled to feeling upset.”

Rafay shook his head, still looking down. “I meant for...well...breaking down like a baby.”

Hashu sighed and shook his head. Ruffling Rafay’s hair affectionately, he pulled the boy into his side. “Strength is not in the number of tears you don’t cry. I cried. Nomi cried. Do you remember Agha in the middle of Muharram?”

His reply was a stiff nod. Hashu tugged him closer.

“Everything’s going to change, isn’t it?”

Hashu sighed.

“I wish it wouldn’t, Hashu Bhai. I wish I could wake up tomorrow and everything was back to the way it was.”

“So do I, Rafay. So do I.”

They stood up. Hashu looked around, “Well, we made quite a mess.”

That was an understatement. The entire clearing was littered with wood. Every tree was no more than a shattered stump.

Rafay’s eyebrows flew up in surprise. “We did that?”

“Personally I think it’s an improvement. I never did like that tree.” Nomi stepped out from behind a trunk.

Rafay sighed. “Of course you’re here. You saw it?”

Nomi raised his hands in defense. “Don’t blame me for lacking the urge to be collateral damage.”

“Well if Fati asks, I’m going to say it was you.” Hashu gave him a small smile.

“That’s right, blame the little guy,” Rafay huffed, but the corners of his lips curved up.

“Let’s head back,” Nomi suggested. “The others will be wondering where we are.”

His younger brother had taken a step, when the ground violently lurched. Hashu dropped to a crouch. In front of him, Rafay was flung off his feet and toppled onto his back. From the corner of his eye, he saw Nomi duck by a tree trunk. The splinters littering the dirt leapt back and forth like little fleas on the forest floor. A resounding crack came from the trees. Hashu’s eyes widened. He leapt on top of Rafay, and rolled them out of the way as a blur of wood and bark crashed into the ground where they had just been. Rafay curled into a ball and Hashu hunched over him protectively.

“Stay down!” he yelled.



“I’m done, Fati Baji” Maya dutifully informed her, placing the last folded blanket in a neat pile by the bed. Fati gave her a smile. The tent flap swung open and Haroon entered.

“All the ash piles are cleared and the fire pits are restocked.” He slumped to the floor beside the bed, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“It’s not fair,” he mumbled under his breath.

Maya frowned. “What do you mean?”

Haroon's eyes flicked to the tent flap. They nodded and made their way outside, not noticing Fati smiling and shaking her head.

"Kids," she mumbled to Khanum as she removed the warm towel from the woman's head and replaced it with a cold one.

Outside the tent, Maya and Haroon had claimed an abandoned bench.

"What did you mean back there?" Maya asked.

Haroon hesitated, constantly checking the treeline and the tent for any eavesdroppers. "I meant what I said. That it isn't fair."

Maya rolled her eyes. "Yes I heard. But you're not being clear. What isn't fair?"

Haroon turned away, he could feel himself turning red with shame. "It's nothing. Forget I said anything."

He stood up to leave, but a small hand gripped his wrist. She tugged him back to the bench.

"Fati Baji says if you are feeling it, then it is not nothing. Hiding it isn't going to help."

Haroon rolled his eyes. "Sure. Why don't we get a cup of tea and spill all our feelings?"

Maya crossed her arms, frowning. "What's going on, Haroon Bhaiya?"

She followed his gaze to the treeline.

"So because he lashes out and behaves like some crazed bull, they think he needs them more?"

She saw him visibly stiffen as his voice wobbled.

"They were my parents too..." his voice was barely a whisper.

"And you think we don't know that?" A voice echoed behind them.

Both children jumped in surprise.

"Maya, would you mind sitting with Khanum for a bit?"

Giving her big brother's hand a final squeeze, she stood up and made her way to their parents' tent.

Haroon didn't look up as Fati took Maya's spot. If he was being honest, he was mortified. He had just confessed that he felt his older siblings ignored him for his unruly twin. Right in front of one of them.

"I-I-I didn't mean it..."

“Yes you did.” she interrupted but her voice was soft. “You think that because Rafay is louder and argumentative, you slip into the shadows? Like you’re invisible?”

Haroon’s nonchalant shrugs told her enough. “You wouldn’t understand.”

Fati raised an eyebrow and smiled. “I don’t understand what it’s like having a twin who is stronger than you? Fights better than you? Who everyone praises and talks about? Who everyone wants on their side? Who shines brighter than anyone I know?”

Haroon’s eyes widened in realization. “Did-you...you know...?”

“Did I what?” she asked patiently. “Feel jealous? Or ignored?”

Haroon looked down, his face dusted in a blush, but his expression stoic. He nodded.

Fati shrugged. “I could have.”

He looked up in surprise at Fati’s smile. “At least you can make a claim that you’re a better inventor, but I don’t even have that. It would be so easy to be in Hashu’s shadow. Be invisible, unnoticed. But I’m not.”

“How?” came Haroon’s terse reply.

“Because Hashu is not my competitor. The reality is that Hashu is not me, I am not him. We may be twins but we are not the same. We may have the same goal, but we have different journeys.” She moved around so she was kneeling in front of him. “The reason I don’t feel invisible beside my brother, is because we aren’t working *against* each other. We’re working *with* each other. With Rafay and you, it’s always been about who’s better. But with Hashu and I, I’m Fati and he’s Hashu. He’s a brilliant leader and fighter, loyal and kind. And I am an avid reader, a fighter and will stand by what I believe till my last breath. The only person that I compare myself to, is the Fati I was yesterday.”

Haroon nodded. “I’m sorry for what I said. I know you and Hashu Bhaiya and-”

He didn’t finish as Fati gathered him in her arms. “We see you Haroon, all of you. And we love every inch of you. Even Rafay.”

Haroon rolled his eyes and playfully shoved her away. “And that ruined the moment.”

He looked up and saw her looking at a table.

“Do you see that?” she questioned.

He squinted and noticed the bowls on the table were moving.

“What-” he didn’t get a chance to finish. He was vaulted from his seat and landed straight into the ground.

Blinded by dirt, he rubbed his eyes furiously to clear them. The ground lurched and he was flung on his back. Two arms grabbed him from under his shoulder and yanked him to his feet.

“Get to the tent!” Fati yelled. Without waiting for a reply, she slammed her hands on the grounds.

The ground was violently shuddering, and Haroon stumbled as he tried his hardest to stay on his feet. He moved towards the tent painfully slowly, tripping onto his knees several times. A gut wrenching crack echoed. Haroon fell on his back. Horrified, he saw the tent beside him had come loose. A spiked wooden pike flicked from one side to the next. The tent swayed dangerously. He could hear the items inside fall and crash on the ground. He threw himself to the ground as the pike swung over his head.

Snap!

The pike was snatched out of the air. Haroon looked and his jaw fell. A fat vine had plucked the pike and roped it against a tree that hadn’t been there earlier. Not wasting any time, he scrambled to his feet. He made it to the flap of Khanum’s tent. Above it, Haroon noticed an army of tree trunks and vines intertwining themselves, leaning over in a protective circle. Haroon’s eyes widened.

“Maya! Where are you!”

“In here!”

She was crouching beside the bed, her small body shielding Khanum’s. But nothing fell. Haroon could hear the trees snapping and crashing around him. The dome he saw must be protecting the tent.

Maya looked over his shoulder, her eyes wide in fear.

“Where’s Fati Baji?”

Haroon turned around. There was no one behind him.

“I swear - She was right there!” he breathed.

“Wait!” but he didn’t hear Maya. One thought raced in his mind. ‘Get to Fati Baji.’

He burst out of the tent, his eyes wildly scanning the yard. There. By the bench where they had been talking. She hadn't moved, her hands gripping the dirt. Even from this distance he could see the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

"Fati Baji!" he yelled. She made a step towards him. Haroon felt his stomach lurch. He was flung against the tent pole. Gripping onto it for dear life, he watched in horror as Fati was pounded into the ground.

She sat up immediately after, nodding in his direction to let him know she was alright. Standing up, Fati hadn't even taken a step when they heard it. Haroon's heart stopped. A sickening series of snaps and cracks echoed. The massive sequoias by the forest line swayed ominously. It must have been at least five tents tall. Fati and Haroon shared a look.

"No," he whispered. "No!"

Screaming he ran towards her. But he never made it. A wave of wood weaved in front of him. Like a shield it held him back.

Haroon didn't even get a chance to call out to her. He heard the base snap, the sickening whistle as it flew through the air. For the hundredth time that day, Haroon was slammed into the ground. He could hear the wave of dust rattling against the wood.

Clinging to the tent pole, the crack and snaps of debris clobbering their wooden dome, Haroon called to his sister.

But his screams were drowned in the roar of the trembling ground.



"Are you alright?" Hashu's voice mixed with the ringing in Rafay's ears, but he managed a shaky thumbs up.

"I'm alright." As the world came into focus, he saw a hand in front of his face. Grabbing it, he felt Hashu yank him to his feet. He looked around, worried.

"Where's Nomi Bhaiya?"

Hashu grabbed his shoulder. "He's alright. Look."

Rafay followed his gaze. Nomi was scrambling down from one of the trees that was still standing.

When he finally made it the ground, Hashu grabbed him in a

tight hug.

“I don’t know whether to praise you or kill you,” he whispered. He was so worried when he saw Nomi disappearing into the tree branches.

“Me?” Nomi cried out incredulously. “What about you? I nearly watched you get crushed! I wasn’t sure what was going on down there! I didn’t know if...”

Hashu and Rafay both grabbed him in a bone-crushing hug. For a few seconds, the three of them just held each other.

“We need to get back,” Hashu mumbled. “We need to make sure the others are alright.”

He sprinted off into the clearing, the two boys on his heels.

Neither of them knew what to expect, but it wasn’t the wasteland they walked into as they entered the tent clearing. None of the tents were standing, their poles uprooted from the ground. The benches and tables had been knocked on their sides, the contents spilling into the ground littering the clearing with shards and splinters. One of the big sequoias was laid across the ground.

“Over here!” Nomi called out. Hashu grabbed a branch and vaulted over. He could hear Rafay’s feet hit the ground seconds after his own. That’s when he noticed a huge dome of woven tree trunks encasing the corner of the clearing where Agha and Khanum’s tent was.

Hashu’s heart jolted. “Fati...”

He ran forward and pounded a fist on the wood. “Fati! Fati! Haroon! Maya!”

“I hear something!” Rafay called out. Hashu rushed to his side. Rafay pointed to a small hole between the trees and the ground.

“Hashu Bhaiya? Rafay Bhaiya?” a trembling voice called out.

“Maya! Are you alright?” he called back.

“I’m fine, so is Khanum. The dome saved us from the worst of it. Haroon is knocked out.”

“Where’s Nomi?” Hashu whispered to Rafay.

“He found a hold in the side that we might be able to open up. The tool shed might be rubble, but the tools will still be intact.”

“Go help,” Hashu replied. “I’ll stay with Maya.”

“Hashu Bhaiya?”

“I’m still here Maya. Is Haroon hurt?”

“I-I don’t think so, he was knocked over when the tree fell. He might have hit his head off the ground. Wait...”

He heard a cacophony of noises. “He’s alright Hashu Bhaiya! He’s waking up!”

Hashu silently sighed and whispered a thanks to Allah (swt).

“What about Fati?”

“She’s not here, Hashu Bhaiya.”

It felt like his heart had dropped into his stomach. “What do you mean? Where is she?”

“S-She didn’t come inside! We haven’t seen her!”

A loud crack came from the other side.

“I found a way in!” Nomi yelled.

“Hang on Maya.”

He raced over to where Nomi and Rafay had managed to make a small hole. Rafay pulled a fist back and ploughed it into the trees. They crumbled under his knuckles and fell away leaving behind a large enough hole for them to climb through. He tossed the dust clutched between his fingers aside.

Without waiting, Hashu leapt through the hole. He hadn’t taken a step when Maya plowed herself into him, her arms threatening to squeeze him in half. He hugged her back just as hard. Nomi and Rafay circled them, relieved that she was alright.

“Where’s Haroon?”

She pointed to the front of the tent, one arm refusing to relinquish its hold on him.

“Rafay, go check on Haroon. Nomi, make sure Khanum is alright.”

Rafay had to pull off some impressive acrobatic stunts to make it past all the fallen and tossed objects. He found Haroon at the tent entrance, a hand pressed against his forehead. From the gaps between his fingers, Rafay could make out angry, red skin.

“Figures you’d need me to come save you.” he smirked. Haroon didn’t even look at him.

Rafay’s smirk dropped. “What’s wrong?”

“Fati Baji. She didn’t make it inside. I don’t know where she is.”



Hashu placed an arm around Maya’s shoulder’s guiding her outside. The young girl kept muttering and crying.

He squeezed her shoulder. “It’s over Maya, now come on. Let’s look for Fati Baji.”

Hashu gave her a smile, but the moment she turned away his expression was grim. They had to find Fati as soon as possible.

“Where did you last see her?”

“I didn’t,” she sniffed. “I was already inside. Haroon saw her. She saved us, Hashu Bhaiya. She saved us and we-”

“She was near that large sequoia. We were outside when it started,” Haroon called out. He had a hand around Rafay’s shoulder, and was leaning on him a little.

Hashu pushed down the rising panic in his throat. He needed to take control.

“Maya, take Haroon inside and make sure that his head wound isn’t serious, Nomi and Rafay with me-”

“I’m fine Hashu Bhaiya, please” he begged.

Hashu nodded and sent Maya to Khanum. The rest of them weaved their way through the rubble.

“You’re sure she was hear?”

“Yes! For the hundreth time!”

Rafay frowned. “I was just asking.”

Haroon sighed. “I know, I’m sorry. It’s just...I’m worried. She saved us, you know. That’s why she couldn’t make it inside.”

Rafay looked down, a rare, somber expression emerged on his face. “I know, Hashu Bhaiya did the same for me. Wait, do you hear that?”

It was a weak knocking.

“It’s coming from there.”

Rafay felt a weight in his stomach. He heard Nomi call the other boys, but he didn’t bother to look up. Instead, he was scanning every inch of the foliage corpse in front of him. Grabbing the nearest branch, he yanked it with all his might. It gave a mighty crack and flung free. Rafay tossed it aside and gripped

another. Haroon, Nomi and Hashu had arrived and they followed suit.

Hashu's face was stoic. He just *knew* Fati was alright, but the longer they dug the more he could feel a growing cold dread in his chest. His breaths came shorter and shorter.

"Come on Fati..." he muttered. His hands bloomed red with pinpricks from splinters, but he didn't stop.

"Hashu?"

He froze and turned in the direction of the voice. It was faint and breathy, but he would recognize it anywhere. Then his eyes found her. Tucked deep in a maze of branches, he could make out her head and shoulders. She was pinned under a branch as wide as him.

"Fati! Are you alright?"

She groaned, and gave him a shaky nod. Rafay and Nomi were by his side and together the three of them dug into that part of the tree. When they reached the trunk, Rafay and Nomi placed their hand underneath it.

"One...Two...Three!" with a heave the two of them raised the tree.

Hashu reached under. Fati grabbed onto his arms. He gripped tight and pulled her out from underneath the tree. Just as they moved the tree rolled back onto the ground. Hashu crouched over Fati's limp form, shielding her from the explosion of dust. With some coughing and handwaving they could finally breathe and see.

Hashu's breath stopped in his throat. Fati leaned in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. Dirt and mud marred her cheeks and there were multiple small tears in her clothes, stained with rivulets of red. She held a hand to her side and took short painful breaths.

"Hashu..." her soft voice drew him back to reality. "The kids...where are they?"

He blinked back tears, wary of the others. "They're fine. You saved them. And Khanum."

Fati smiled. Before anyone else could speak, her head rolled back and her eyes fluttered close.



Sore. That was the first thought in her mind. She tried to lift a hand but it didn't budge. Fati might as well have been cased in lead because no part of her was moving. She could see someone on her right and tried to call out. It came out as more of a groan. Her throat was hoarse.

Whoever it was slid an arm under her back, and helped her ease into a sitting position. She was in their parents' tent, the only one still standing after the earthquake. As her eyelids slowly lifted, she could make out Khanum's blurry form on the bed and her twin beside her own crudely made one.

"That's it. Gently now."

He managed to coax her to have a few sips of water. She tried to move to get out of bed, but froze. Her entire abdomen was wrapped in fabric. She felt the skin underneath tingling as it absorbed the paste.

"Gave us quite a scare there," Hashu smiled as he shuffled the healing supplies aside. Fati did not miss the wobble in his voice.

"Hey" she called, interrupting his brewing thoughts.

"You could have been hurt," Hashu muttered. His hands fisted the bed cloth.

"And it could have been you."

He looked up in surprise. "I heard Rafay earlier. You saved him. It could have been any of us."

"What if it had been?"

Fati sighed. "I think it's more important to note that it wasn't. That and we have company."

She dropped her voice to a whisper for the last part, gesturing to three poorly concealed figures.

"All right, enough skulking. In you come!" she called. They shuffled in hesitantly, but looked relieved at seeing their sister awake and talking.

"You too, Nomi."

"Already here," came a groggy voice from the other side of her bed. He blinked away the sleep from his eyes with a small smile. "Glad to have you back, Baji."

Both turned at the sound of someone clearing their throat.

“We have to show you something,” urged Rafay. Fati looked at Hashu with a raised eyebrow but he shrugged.

“I’ll stay with Khanum,” Maya volunteered, disappearing from view.

At Fati’s request, he slung one of her arms around his shoulders, and Nomi grabbed the other. They brought her to her feet. Slowly but surely, they made their way out. The other two boys cleared a path amidst their belongings that lay strewn across the clearing.

Following the two boys in silence, Hashu and Nomi moved slowly, essentially carrying Fati across the field. Soon enough she found her footing. They crossed the clearing to the treeline. Rafay dove in, then Haroon, after gesturing for the older siblings to follow them. The forest path was much easier, the worst obstacle being a fallen tree that Rafay made quick work of. It was what they came upon that left them awestruck.

Sickly. That is how Hashu would have described them. He had almost dropped Fati when he first saw it. Twisted, entwined vines laden with prickly thorns protruding menacingly from beneath wrinkly blackened leaves. He heard Fati gasp in surprise. All the boys turned to her. She shook her head.

“I’ve never seen a plant like that.” She eased herself out of Hashu’s hold. Slowly, step by step, she approached the plant. Raising a hand to touch it, Fati’s fingers were a breath away when a yank at her elbow pulled her off her feet. With an ‘oof’ she slammed into Hashu who pulled her behind him. Nomi jumped in front of Hashu and slammed on the ground. Peeking around Hashu, she watched with wide eyes. Nomi’s hands were clutching a large stone as big as her head. Retreating from beneath the stone, was a sharp almost barb-like vine. It slithered back into the entanglement from where she had been standing seconds ago with an eerie shriek.

Giving Fati a once over, Hashu straightened up with a hard look in his eyes.

“Rafay, Haroon, get Agha’s maps of the jungle. Both of you do a full reconnaissance. Where these vines are and how far they go. Don’t try to cross them.”

The two boys nodded and ran off.

He then turned his attention to his other siblings.

“When we get back to camp, I want you to rest-” He began but Fati shook her head.

“I’m a little sore, but I’ve come out with worse from the arena. What do you need?”

He gave her a tight nod. “Fine, I need you to get Maya and start sorting through the rubble. Look for anything of use. Tools, healing supplies, food... you understand. Also, see if you can get one of the pits fired up. It’ll be dark soon and we have enough to worry about without adding a freezing night to it.”

She turned and made her way down the path, refusing Nomi’s offered to help. Hashu didn’t miss the slight limp in her step.

“What’s going on, Hashu Bhai?” Nomi asked.

Hashu sighed heavily. “I have no idea. First Agha, then Khanum, and now our home. If I’m being truly honest, I don’t even think we’ll have that much longer.”

Nomi nodded and swallowed, “I’m just thankful to Allah(swt) we have each other. Together we stand a better chance.”

Gazing out into the orange stained skies, he asked, “How long do you think we have?”

Hashu followed his stare to the dipping sun, nestled into the horizon. “I don’t know Nomi. All we can do is pray that it will be enough.”

6

On the run

“This is all we could find,” Fati explained. In front of them, were several large patches of tent fabric laid side by side. On top was an assortment of items neatly arranged in groups.

“The kitchen had the worst damage. Most of the supplies were squashed. But we did manage to find some dried meats and breads that were still edible along with utensils like pots and cutlery.”

Hashu ran a hand through his hair. Not the best news at the moment considering they probably won’t have time to grow more and he did not want to push Fati in her state. Well, at least he could help a little with that.

“Most of the clothing, tools and weapons were undamaged. The library books too.”

“Okay, thanks Fati. Where’s Maya?”

“Watching over Khanum. I made a new dose of serum, but I still think it’s better if someone is with her.”

“Okay. Haroon, Rafay?”

Haroon pulled a large rolled scroll from his belt. He handed it Hashu. In the meanwhile, Rafay straightened one of the overturned tables and swiped away the dirt and dust. Hashu unravelled the map carefully. The other children stared with wide eyes at the amount of ink covering the map. Between Haroon’s small annotation and Rafay’s scrawl, Hashu noted the only unmarked areas were the clearing and a path to the creek. Everywhere else

was marked off.

“What happened?” he asked looking at Rafay’s bandaged arm.

He shook his head nonchalantly. “Slipped on the cliff face. I’m not Nomi Bhai after all.”

“It covers most of the jungle. We couldn’t get any closer, but the entire south side looks like it’s covered in those plants. In fact that may be where it is originating from. The east and west sides aren’t completely under yet, but they will be very soon. By the rate this is growing we’ll lose them most likely by tomorrow, Zuhr time.”

Rafay took over. “The north side is still free although it has started from the northwest and northeast parts. We still have the creek and the clearing for a while though.”

“How long?” Nomi asked, his expression as grim as Hashu felt.

Fati looked hard at Haroon and Rafay’s map. “Given the rate of growth in the other regions, my guess is we have until tomorrow evening. TO be optimistic, maybe until the morning after.”

“Then it’s settled,” Hashu announced. “We leave tonight.”

“Wait really?” Rafay exclaimed. “Leave, as in leave the jungle? Hashu Bhaiya, we’ve never set foot outside of this place!”

“We don’t have any other choice,” argued Haroon.

“That’s enough,” Hashu interrupted heading off the upcoming argument. “We’re all scared.”

Rafay opened his mouth to protest, but Hashu cut him off. “And you would be foolish not to be. Our home’s been reduced to rubble and we have hours to evacuate before it is taken over by whatever infectious plants these are. We know nothing about what lies out there, and of the people who could have told us, one is dead and the other is unconscious. The circumstances are not ideal. But this is what Agha has been training us for every morning since we were children. So let’s do them proud.”

“Hashu’s right.” Fati quipped, giving him a supportive smile. “Let’s make a list of what we need and how we’re going to take it. I’ll go check on Khanum.”



Maya jolted up. She looked around, but Khanum was as still as she had been moments earlier. She ran a hand down her face, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. With a yawn, Maya shuffled herself so she could perch cross-legged on the stool, both feet tucked neatly underneath her.

Her eyes roamed the small makeshift room they had setup. She did try to read the healer recipe to see if she could make some more, but it was riddled with cancellations and annotations. Not to mention the instructions were too complex. Not a problem for Fati though.

At the thought of her older sister, Maya felt a stab of pain in her gut. As much as Fati would downplay it, her sister nearly died saving her, Haroon and Khanum.

“I hope I’m as brave and as smart as her one day. Inshallah,” she murmured while swiping the sweat on Khanum’s forehead.

“Anybody home?” a gentle voice called before the flap pulled back to reveal Fati.

“How’s Khanum?”

“No improvement. If anything she’s gotten worse.”

Maya wasn’t wrong. Khanum was completely still, her skin pale and clammy.

“Hashu and the others need your help. I’ll look after her.”

With a nod Maya, hopped off the stool and exchanged places with Fati. With a final small kiss on Khanum’s cold knuckles, she headed out.

The moment Maya left, the smile left Fati’s face. She had no intention of mentioning it to the others save Hashu, but every logical impulse told her one thing. That Khanum would not make it through the night. But Fati would rather be damned than fail in trying, for as every healer knew, these matters only lay in God’s(swt) hands. She turned to grab the pestle and mortar when a weak arm grabbed her forearm.

Fati’s head whipped around so fast it made her dizzy, but that held no light to the fact that Khanum was awake and looking directly at her.

“Fati..listen...” she gasped.

Fati bent by her side, her hands clasped in Khanum’s cold

ones.

“My box...inside...you will need...” She began to cough horrendously, air barely passing between her lips. Fati moved to get water, but Khanum stopped her.

“No...listen...we both...Agha and...me...we love...you. Give her...my salams...”

Fati’s eyes filled with tears as she followed the soft tugging on her hand. Khanum moved it to her lips and planted a soft kiss before gently exhaling. The moment passed. Khanum did not take another breath.



It was almost unfair. A lifetime of joy, tears, training and parenting. They were looking at the people who carved them into who they are. And all there was to show were two simple mounds.

Each grave had been marked by a stone. They did not have time to carve anything elaborate, but Haroon did soften each so Fati could etch the names of the greatest people they had every known. When it was hardened, her elegant calligraphy adorned the tombstones.

On each grave, they carved the same verse. Agha’s favourite verse from the Holy Quran,

...And whoever relies upon Allah – then He is sufficient for him. Indeed, Allah will accomplish His purpose... Surah Talag, Ayat 3

No one said a word as they walked back. Especially Fati. She hung back, constantly glancing behind her. By the time they made it back to the clearing, the sun was halfway behind the trees and the bleeding colours were already fading.

The clearing was a chaotic ensemble of Haroon’s half finished work, Rafay’s piles of materials and Maya’s half prepared supplies. There was also a half-finished stretcher that lay discarded on the side. It was a morbid thought that they would no longer need it.

A low grumble echoed eerily from the trees. The older children pushed the younger ones behind them and watched vigilantly for any sign of movement. No one dared move a muscle.

Hashu waited a moment before turning to address his siblings. “Finish your preparations. We leave at dawn.”

By the time the sun had set, their arrangements had finally

started to take shape. Haroon and Rafay, pilfering supplies from the wreckage, managed to construct two small wagons. Maya scoured the forest, well, as far as she could, and was unable to find an animal to tow it and so they spent much of their time running through ideas from books in the ruined library until they found what they were looking for.

By the time night fell, Haroon had managed to fashion the wagons into two rickshaws. Each had plenty of room for supplies and enough space for a man or two to pull it. Maya had been preparing the supplies for travel; clothes, shoes, food, tools and a few select books picked out by Fati. She also managed to get Haroon to mold a few urns to carry water.

Fati had spent most of the evening in the forest. In a way, it helped the sickly feeling inside her. She honestly didn't feel like she could face any of her siblings right now. Khanum had been in her care. Maybe if she had just known more -

'You know that's not true,' echoed a voice in her head that sounded a lot like Hashu.

Steeling herself, she whispered a quick prayer to Allah(swt) for Khanum and made her way forward. She wouldn't sully her mentor's name by mooring over what was done. Her siblings were relying on her to make sure she was ready for whatever was out there. And so, she would be.

In one hand, was her notes on all the plants in their home. Using the belt Haroon and Rafay gifted her ages ago, she packed as many seeds as she could. Plants that were edible, flora that stored water, healing herbs. Unbeknownst to the others, she also packed a few less appealing plants like poison ivy, venomous barbs and a rare dangerous plant called Sayah Maut or Shadow of Death.

It had a beautiful flower with black veiny stems and the whitest petals she had every seen tipped with a smudge of inky contrast. There was only one in the entire jungle and Khanum had her hide it away in the bowels of a cavern by the creek so no one would accidentally chance upon it. One prick could easily kill them all. As she clambered in, she could make out the ghostly unearthly glow in the dimmed light. Wrapping her hands in cloth, she plucked another flower and shook it into a pouch. Several

dainty white seeds tumbled out, Each no bigger than a speck. It was almost ironic how something so small and delicate could wield such danger, but it was just another balanced element of Allah's world. She had even considered snagging a sample of the plants covering the jungle, but wasn't really keen to provide it with another attempt on her life.

In the meantime, Hashu had been sorting through the contents of Khanum's box. Luckily enough, it had been undamaged in the chaos, just buried under fallen items. So far, there wasn't anything of interest. A few blank sheets of parchment, an inkwell and several wax candles burnt to a stump. A gold glint under the stumps caught Hashu's eyes. He dug in and pulled out a strange object. Hashu had never seen something like this before, but had read about it and seen pictures in some of the history books. It was a seal. Confusion marred his thoughts. Why would Khanum have a seal? The parchment. Ink. Wax. Seal. It finally became clear to Hashu.

Khanum had been writing to someone.

The seal itself was an item to behold. It was made of solid metal and the bottom had an engraving of an intricate soaring dove. In its feet was a two-pronged sword he recognized as the Zulfiqar.

Hashu had never seen that symbol before. Unsure of its meaning, he packed the seal making a mental note to ask Fati if she had seen it in any of the library books.

Besides the writing supplies, he found a leather pouch that was quite heavy. Untying the drawstring, Hashu found a mound of gold coins inside. They were embossed with the same symbol as that on the seal. A dove carrying a two-pronged sword.

He picked up one of the coins. It felt strange against his palm, a weighty cold nip on his skin. Turning it around, he couldn't help but wonder why Agha and Khanum have a seal with the same symbol on the coins.

This couldn't be a coincidence. Hashu grabbed one of the parchments and began to make note of what he had found. Khanum and Agha were writing to someone out of the jungle, someone important for that was no common man's seal. The fact

that the seal was on the coin only proved his point. If his parents trusted this person, perhaps they could too. He continued through the belongings. Maybe he could find something that would tell him a little more about this mysterious individual.

Under the pouch was a large parchment that had been neatly rolled up. The sides he could see were marred with crease lines from being folded and unfolded. Gently, Hashu unravelled it on the floor. It was so large that if he held his arms far apart he could just see all of the contents.

Inked lines crawled and twisted in and out of the part clutched between his fingers, every segment covered in annotations, drawings, labels and warnings. It was a map. In one of the more vacant sections was a waxy imprint of the seal.

‘Aqrab Desert,’ he read. ‘Scorpion Desert.’

Since that was the only spot marked, it was likely that this was their current location. ‘Well that’s encouraging. Couldn’t have been something named after butterflies or deer.’

“Find anything useful?” a voice called behind him. “By the way, the tents and beds are ready. So is the fire.”

Nomi was by his side in a moment. “It feels strange, doesn’t it. Do you think...we could say goodnight one last time? I know we leave early but it wouldn’t feel right...”

Hashu rolled up the map and placed a hand on Nomi’s shoulder. “I wouldn’t want to leave without saying goodbye either. And yes, I found many things that could be of use. Ask Rafay to gather everyone. There are a few more things I want to see.”

Nomi nodded. Hashu continued to shuffle through, ignoring Nomi calling out for Rafay. He found a worn Quran, a turbah,¹ a tasbeeh and a folded prayer mat. He was about to close the lid, so he moved the prayer mat aside to put the parchments back. Hashu froze. That prayer mat was heavier than normal. Curious, he unfolded it and a small box tumbled out into his lap. It was wooden, covered in a velvet felt that was smooth under his fingertips. He nudged it open with care. Inside was a ring. It wasn’t like the aqiq Agha wore or the Dur-e-Najaf ring he had

¹A prostration tablet

seen Khanum wear. This ring, like the seal, was made of solid metal. It was very intricately designed with a soaring dove, only instead of a sword, this dove held a rose in its embossed feet. Hashu folded the ring and seal in some scrap fabric to protect them and put the two objects in his bag.

He closed the chest and made his way outside. Nomi was waiting patiently by the entrance, plucking the petals of a daisy. They both headed to the makeshift camp. A tent with six rudimentary beds and a roaring fire by the entrance. Together they went to the creek where they made wudhu. They also stopped by Agha and Khanum's grave and each child took a moment to whisper good night. They prayed Wahshat-e-Qabr that night and once all the children finished, they prepared for bed.

Haroon was just about to slip between the sheets when he realized how thirsty he was. Hopping past his siblings, he grabbed the jug and glass. Turning to wipe a trickle from the side of his mouth, he noticed a figure in the distance. Squinting in the dark he could just make out Fati. Intrigued, he set down the glass and moved past the fire to her. As he got further away, he could feel the slight chill of the night. When he was by her side, she was in sujood and so he sat on the ground and waited for her to finish.

Once she said her final takbeer, she turned and gave him a small grin.

"It's going to be a long day tomorrow and you're going to need your strength."

"So will you." he countered.

Fati sighed. "I know. There's something I need to do first," she murmured.

"It wasn't your fault, you know."

Her head snapped up quickly. Haroon was looking at his lap, absently twirling a rock between his fingers.

"It's just...I understand Fati Baji. Even if you don't say anything. I know what it feels like to have people rely on you and feel like....you failed them."

"I appreciate the sentiment Haroon, but this is a little different."

"So you haven't gone over what happened with Khanum over

and over in your head? Analyzed everything you did? Asked what you could have done differently? What you could have done better?”

Fati frowned. “Let’s assume, in a hypothetical situation that I have.”

Haroon nodded. “Well, in this hypothetical situation, let’s hypothetically recall a boy who tried to build a bow that could shoot many arrows at once. A boy that got too excited to try before testing properly. A boy whose invention nearly killed his brother, who if he had been holding that bow only a few nudges to the left, could have impaled his heart and died. All because I was too excited. Let’s presume that said boy fell into bouts of guilt and stayed away from the mere mention of inventing.”

Fati’s frown deepened. “I can recall such a scenario. That was you? Hashu said he hurt himself in practice.”

Haroon nodded. “I was so scared to make anything else. You and the others use what I make everyday and you trust that it will work. Even right now with the rickshaws. But after what happened with Hashu Bhaiya, I was too worried I could hurt someone.”

Fati wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “I never knew.”

Haroon shrugged. “You couldn’t have. Hashu Bhaiya, Agha and Khanum made me promise not to tell. I didn’t go near my workshop for weeks. Until Hashu Bhaiya knocked some sense into me. And I am going to say to you what he told me.”

Haroon looked straight at her. “Did you do your best effort? I’ll answer that one for you. Yes, you did. Fati Baji you almost died trying to save us and Khanum. You learnt to brew serums that take healers years, overnight. It was Khanum’s time and we must come to terms with that. She may be gone, but you’re still here and so are we. We may not say it often, but we *need* you. We need you and Hashu Bhaiya and you can’t help us if you’re so busy second guessing yourself. It’s one of the things I’ve always admired about you. You don’t care how bad the odds are, you always try. Sometimes that’ll work and sometimes that won’t. But you’ll still be the same to us either way.”

He stopped, his breaths heavy from the rant. Fati’s eyes were

glistening and Haroon momentarily panicked. He may have two sisters, but he did not like dealing with crying women. Though he needn't have worried. Fati merely tucked a loose strand back into his hair and swallowed.

"When did you get so big Haroon? It seems like only yesterday I was singing you lullabies."

Haroon smiled and gave her a cheeky shrug.

"Sometimes in trying to be better and learn much, I forget just how much you and the others can teach me. Thank you Haroon. I didn't expect it to come from you, but I suppose—" she smiled, "In this hypothetical scenario, your talk may just be what I would have needed to hear. Let's head to bed. We've got a long day tomorrow."



The morning would appear like any other to the world. The sun rising from its usual encampment in the east. Even in its budding rays, none of them felt warmth. Unlike the sky molting the dark night's casing, the jungle was entrenched with a painful chill. Not the kind that nips your skin and reddens your cheeks. This one settled deep in your bones and carried with it the ghostly embrace of that which is forever taken and never returned.

If Hashu was being honest with himself, no feeling could better describe it. That rest having been the first peace of mind they had in days, it finally occurred to him what monumental upheavals they had endured in such a short span on time. They had lost their parents, the only guardians they had ever known. Their home was falling apart around them, and for the first time in their lives, they were setting out to brave against the outside world armed with the meager scraps of exposure through books.

They began with the morning prayers. Hashu in the lead and the rest of them in neat rows behind him. Once they had finished, they arranged themselves in a line and followed him for a final goodbye to their parents.

No one spoke. Silently, they followed the worn trail, still evident in the haze of the morning fog that swallowed them up. When they reached the graves, the stones were coated in a thin sheen of morning dew. Gray, but glittering in a way which seemed

to smile as they made their way close.

As always, Hashu went first. He knelt by Khanum's grave, placing two fingers on the stone. Under his breath, he whispered a prayer. Even with his head turned, he tried to blink away the tears in his eyes. It was as though it finally settled in that they were actually gone. That Khanum was never going to make them another meal, or that Agha would never train them again. The thought of leaving them alone while the entire jungle disintegrated broke his heart. But knowing that there were five other souls behind him who would be looking to him for strength, he knew that if he had any tears to cry, it would have to be where no one could see them.

One by one, they each took a turn. First with Khanum, and then with Agha. Maya was last to go and once they turned, they didn't look back. Their life as they had known it was about to change forever.

In the clearing were two carts, ready to be moved. By them were two satchels, one belonging to Fati and one to Hashu. Buried deep amongst the maps in his bag was the seal and ring he had yet to tell Fati about. Her bag was full of dried herbs, Khanum's book and an emergency supply of balms and serums.

Haroon guided Nomi and Rafay to the rickshaw handles and so began their journey.

Crossing the jungle to reach the border was the hardest part. Every trail, every cliff and every hiding spot called out to them. But they didn't stop. Their final obstacle was a tall set of trees woven like a fence. It still looked healthy as that part of the jungle was still miraculously untouched. They did not want to risk crossing the demonic vines. Fati moved to the front of the group. She placed a hand on the trunk and closed her eyes. Slowly, the trees throbbed and withered beneath her palm before collapsing in a pile of dust. She moved back and gestured to Hashu.

He took a deep breath and stepped outside.



Hashu wasn't sure what standing in sand would feel like. Maybe to have his feet sink in or even swallowed. It was a little

disconcerting to have the ground shuffle so unsteadily beneath him, but nevertheless, he moved forward to let the others through. He extended a hand to Fati, who graciously accepted before joining him. Nomi and Rafay moved slowly, lugging the carts which moved very well. Haroon and Maya brought the rear, the former offering his little sister a hand just like Hashu. With a final look, Hashu pulled out his compass and noted the direction. It felt foreign in his hand. Having learnt most of the jungle at a young age, he never needed a compass and never understood why Agha had given him one.

He was thankful for it now. Everywhere he looked was exactly the same. Infinite waves of brown and beige. If he chose the wrong direction, he could strand them for days. By Fati's calculations they had just enough time to make a comfortably paced trip to the nearest town. He pointed out the direction they needed to go.

"That way. With Allah's mercy, we depart. Inshallah, may our journey pass safely and with His mercy."

The response was a chorus of 'Ameen'.



The initial hours of the morning were relatively tame. The sun was still low in the sky, so it was not very warm. A cool breeze whipped past them in hefty gusts, scattering the sand into the air. All of them wrapped cloth around their faces, leaving only a slit showing their eyes.

"We look like those Bedouins in Agha's story books," Rafay commented. He and Nomi had been pushing the carts since they first left the jungle and through the small opening in the cloth you could see the glimmering of sweat.

There was almost no signs of life save the plenty of scorpions the desert was named after. Every now and then, more frequently than they thought, they could see their glossy bodies scuttling across the sand.

They were moving at a steady pace and had made very good progress by the time the sun had risen up. Hashu was surprised with how quickly the temperature rose. He lifted a closed fist signalling everyone to slow to a halt.

“We’ll set up camp.”

“Here?” Haroon asked.

Hashu nodded. “There is no point travelling in the heat. We’re not used to it and we’re pulling our own burden. Fati, if you please.”

She shuffled forward and ducked down, careful to not kneel on the hot sand. From one of her many pouches she pulled out a few long thin seeds with a single groove down their middles. Each of the others took a step back as a thick trunk emerged from the ground. It passed their heads to grow several bow lengths high and sprouted large shredded leaves. And soon enough, they were standing in the shade of three large date trees. Placing her hand on the trunk, she held out her hand expectantly and caught a falling cluster of dates.

Whilst Fati prepped the plants, Haroon and Maya eased Rafay and Nomi out of the rickshaw and provided them with an urn.

“Be careful!” Haroon chided as Rafay spilt a little down the side of his mouth. “We only have so much!”

Rafay huffed between pants, wiping the fallen water with his sleeve. “Maybe you should drive it next!”

“He will,” Haroon interrupted before either could argue. “We’ll continue at sunset. Haroon and I will drive the rickshaws. Fati will be navigating.”

The boys settled down on different sides of Maya, helping her pull a few short sheets of tent tarp from the cart. Haroon gathered some sand in his hand and formed several long wooden pikes. Plunging them into the ground, he leaned the top of the sticks together and tied it with a rope. Rafay and Maya draped the tarps over it and lo and behold they had a makeshift tent.

“Ahhh that’s much better.” Maya sighed in content as she crawled in.

Everyone else agreed. As the morning passed the sun now hung straight above them and the heat was slowly becoming unbearable. Having the trees and the tent helped.

“Drink up!” Fati called out, passing a bowl to Nomi. He took a big gulp and passed it to Hashu.

Hashu sloshed the liquid in the bowl. It was thick and clear.

Without hesitation he tipped it and was surprised at the rich sweetness that slid down his throat. He could almost feel the weariness lift from his bones.

“What is that?” he asked Fati, whilst passing the bowl to Haroon. The sugary taste lingered on his lips

“Date tree sap,” she replied. “It’s sugary and full of energy. Food like this will keep us hydrated and moving, especially in this heat.”

“So what do we do now?” Rafay asked. He leaned back on the tarp floor with his hands above his head.”

“Well I’m not sure about anyone else, but I’m going to take a nap.” Nomi announced, laying down by Hashu’s side.

“It’s not a bad idea. Why don’t we all grab a bit of sleep, especially Nomi and Rafay. We can take turns keeping watch. I’ll go first.”

She sat close to the opening of the tent. It was a little cramped, but with the sweltering heat outside, it was much more comfortable to be in the tent and under the shade.

Hashu lay back on the tarp, one arm under his head. His other arm lay straight by his side, a hair’s length from Nomi. Sweat collected in small droplets on his forehead, running down the side of his face in a little rivulet. Along with the others, he had shed all additional clothing and lay garbed in a simple short sleeve shirt and loose pant. Maya had even removed her headscarf and bundled away her wild bounding black curls into a makeshift bun in an effort to keep it out of her face. Fati too had loosened her headscarf though not a hair could be seen.

Hashu flinched as he felt something shift beneath him. Not wanting to deliberate whether it was sand or scorpion, he closed his eyes in the hope of getting some rest. In their closed quarters, he didn’t even have to look to know who was awake with him and who was asleep.

Nomi didn’t count. He lay so close that Hashu could feel his hot breath on his arm. His breathing was slow and rhythmic.

“He’s so tired,” Hashu sighed mentally.

Cracking open his eyelids in a small slit, he watched Nomi’s blurred form lie blissfully unaware. Opening his eyes fully, Hashu

couldn't help but chide himself when he noticed Nomi's dark circles. In lieu of their parents' death and preparations to leave, he hadn't thought to check on the older children. Sure enough they had all been keeping a close eye on the younger children, but what about Nomi and Fati?

"He's alright you know..." Hashu didn't even bother asking how she knew.

"It's been a rough couple of days, but he's fine. Nomi is as tough as they come."

"Even then...I should have been watching him. Looking out for him." Hashu stroked Nomi's hair. The boy smiled in sleep causing Hashu's lips to involuntarily curl at the ends.

"Hashu." He looked up. She was giving him an exasperated look. "You have been pulled into an impossible situation. I know you might feel like you're being pulled underwater, but please be assured. These are hard circumstances and we're all a little out of our depth."

Hashu looked down, his hand still absently combing through Nomi's hair. "Is it wrong to worry?"

Fati scoffed. "I'd be more concerned if you didn't. But if it helps, we're fine. I'm not sure what will happen but all I can say is that with you in front, I'm not fretting and you shouldn't either."

Hashu raised an eyebrow. "I'm not fretting. I just..."

"You don't want to fail them."

Silence.

"You're not the only one. From the moment we left, every time any of them or you look at me for information or resources, I panic. What if I tell you the wrong thing? What if I didn't pack something we'll need later? Hashu, you could fall down a rabbit hole of what-ifs."

She moved over until the two were sitting side by side. Fati placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Doubt and second guessing ourselves is the surest way we will fail. We have training, we have resources and we have Allah(swt) on our side. Now please get some rest. It'll be Dhuhur soon and I'd rather not have you bleary and drowsy when leading the Jamaat."

With that, she scooted back to the entrance.

“Fati”

“Yes?”

“How do you always know what to say?”

She laughed. “I don’t. But I guess there is some being that always knows what you need to hear.”

That was the last thing he heard before the world faded to black.



Salat was a short affair. They performed tayammum as they didn’t want to risk their water supply. There was not enough room for them to stand in a line so they stood in three pairs. Hashu and Nomi in the front, Rafay and Haroon after, with Maya and Fati in the rear. Rafay and Nomi took the next two watches.

Hashu’s eyes snapped opened as Nomi gently nudged him awake. Half greeting him in grunts, Hashu stretched unleashing a series of painful cracks that had Nomi cringing.

“The sun’s almost down,” he informed Hashu.

With a nod, Hashu shook his head, alleviating some of the dreariness. Fati shuffled by plopping some bread and dates with a cup of water in his hand.

“Eat. Don’t forget to say bismillah.”

The first thing Hashu noticed was how cool the plate was and then it hit him. Gone was the humid air that hung around them like a wet blanket. He could just feel a gentle zephyr from the tent entrance as Fati returned the remaining supplies to the rickshaws outside. This weather would be much more suitable to travel. Around him, his younger siblings looked somewhat refreshed and were munching down on their respective meals.

Fati returned with a plate of her own. “Let’s eat and wrap up. The more time we get to travel when it is cold like this, the better.”

“Just out of curiosity, Hashu Bhaiya” Haroon asked between bites, “Where are we trying to go?”

Hashu nodded and swallowed. “If Agha’s map is still accurate then we were in the middle of the desert.”

“Clearly,” Rafay remarked, he pulled off his shoe and tipped it on the side. A thin trickle of sand slid out with a low ‘ssshhh’.

“Yes, which means that we’re not close to many places. Now, we’re trying to go east, towards a town called Akbarabad village. It’s not a huge town according to the map, but more like a caravan sarai town.”

“What’s a caravan sarai?” Maya asked.

“It’s one of those places where traders stop on their trips to get some rest,” Nomi piped.

“Hopefully with the money we can replenish our supplies,” Hashu explained.

“Why can’t we just use Fati Baji’s supplies? They work fin,” Rafay asked.

“Because we don’t know how long we’ll be travelling. Fati’s supplies are an emergency measure and to help while we are still not used to travelling in the desert. The journey to Akbarabad is only a few days, but that won’t always be the case.”

Fati nodded. “Also, has anyone noticed that your dates don’t have seeds? I can’t create life, so I can’t create seeds. I only have the ones I brought.”

“Along our route, there is a valley I would like us to reach before morning, Inshallah. Considering that it is in the shade, it will be much cooler and we might even be able to cover ground during the day.” To his siblings, he responded. “The sooner we get to the village, the sooner we can rest.”

Everyone finished the meals. The tarps were wrapped away, the pikes dissolved into sand, and Hashu was saddled into one of the rickshaws.

“Bismillah,” he whispered. At Fati’s beckon, he turned left and followed the little party onwards.



It was almost baffling how different the desert was during the day to how it was at night. When the sun was up, Hashu felt as though he was being stifled with a hot wet cloth. The sand was riddled with menacing scorpions and the heat reduced them to a sweating heap.

During the night, all of them were more animate. As he pushed the rickshaw, with his eyes no longer glued to the map and not much else to occupy his attention, Hashu observed his siblings.

Nomi and Maya aviated between his rickshaw and Haroon's. They were actively engaged in a game where one person would pick an object and the other would try to guess it. Though from what he could hear, many of the guesses sounded suspiciously like sand. Haroon and Rafay were arguing, no surprise there. They were whispering, but there were furious shushing noises. Fati stood ahead, sending occasional glances backwards to make sure they were all behind her. If Hashu wasn't pushing the rickshaw handle, he would have facepalmed.

"I forgot to mention the seal and ring."

He resolved to do so when they reached Akbarabad. Meanwhile, there was nothing else to do but enjoy the surroundings. Even though it was night and not a semblance of the sun lingered in the sky, it was very bright.

The moon was shining like a silver pendant. Grey but glimmering an ethereal white that stood out amidst the inky black nebulous night sky. There was not a cloud for miles and without the tall trees he was accustomed to having obstruct his view, Hashu could gaze at the stars. In a way, he could understand why people called the skies the heavens.

He was not prepared for the beauty that cascaded across the world above him. Twinkling lights of blue and white fluttered delicately like butterflies. Around them, the air was stained pink and teal in puffs barely discernible. Hashu strained his neck and felt himself vanish into the vacuous space.

He had seen colour in Maya's flowers but this wasn't colour, just a ghost of pigment dancing around the distant flaming lamps of the universe.

"Subhanallah..." he whispered. No other phrase seemed worthy of the majesty he was witnessing.

As his sibling grew silent, he knew they had just noticed the amazing scene before them.

"I've never seen anything like this." he heard Nomi murmur.

For the first time since Agha had died, Hashu felt the bud of

a blooming serenity in his chest. That, perhaps, everything was going to be okay. He gripped that feeling with as much strength as he could muster as he watched awe dawn on his siblings' faces.

As with all good things, they had to resume their journey but rest assured the scene was no less appreciated in the fleeting glances upwards.



Nomi and Maya had taken a break from their game, especially on the current strip of desert where the most invigorating sight was a sand dune. Shuffling alongside his little sister, he couldn't help but glance backwards. Haroon was too busy retorting against something Rafay said to worry about his burden, but nothing short of Hashu's previous instruction was holding Nomi back from taking the rickshaw from Hashu. His older brother was moving steadily unperturbed by the twins bickering, but it struck all the wrong nerves in Nomi's body to have Hashu working while he was strolling free with Maya.

To keep his mind off it, Nomi focused on the soothing sound of the sand. Compared to the gentle hiss of the flying grains in the desert gusts off the peaks of the sand dunes, their footsteps sounded like an elephant in a glass shop. Even though it was dark, there was a white glint that shined off each person that was almost ghostly with the deep blue hue around them. There was the lingering smell of heat, but thankfully, that's all there was and the wind slapped his face with breezy cool air every few steps.

"How did people live out here?" he asked himself. Apparently, Maya overheard.

"Uh Nomi Bhaiya, people didn't. That's why there are no villages or ruins."

"True, but imagine people like nomads. Knowing nothing but the burning sun and sands."

"At least they had horses," she replied.

"Well you have me and Rafay, and in his case I don't think there's much difference.

He said the last part loud enough to catch the attention of the mentioned sibling.

“What about me?” Rafay asked titling his head a little to the side.

Maya stuffed her hands in her mouth to hide her giggle. Nomi merely shrugged. “Ask her. She’s the one laughing.”

“Okay everyone!” Fati called out from the front. “Let’s take a break here”



Hashu gladly lowered the rickshaw handle to the ground. He was by no means exhausted, but his calves had started to burn a little with the strain. Nomi handed him an urn and a cloth. When Hashu looked at him in confusion, Nomi pointed to his forehead. Hashu ran the cloth along his brow and was surprised when it came away damp. They gathered in a little circle, this time Fati provided them with some fruit.

Hashu felt as though someone had punched him in his stomach.

“So this is what home sickness feels like.” He looked around and could see it written on everyone’s faces. His gaze met Fati’s and he could see that she saw it too. Suddenly she turned and pulled out the map from her satchel. Carefully unrolling it, she used four of the plates to weigh down the corners.

“See this spot?” she pointed to where the seal had been. Hashu had removed it before they left the camp. He didn’t want the others or anyone else to know about it in case someone saw the map. Instead, he circled the spot in ink.

“That’s where we began our journey,” Nomi smiled at Hashu, clearly aware of what the older siblings were doing. The others leaned forward, intrigued. “This is Akbarabad. Where we are trying to go.”

“What are those markings?” Rafay pointed out.

“That’s our route,” He and Fati continued to point out various spots on the map until they all had finished their meal.

Fati carefully rolled up the map and handed it to Hashu.

“Nomi and Rafay, you’re on the rickshaws.”

Without a tent to pack up, it was much quicker to wrap up their little camp. Wiping down the dishes and placing them back in their packs, Rafay and Nomi maneuvered into place and they were off.

Hashu called Fati to the front, far enough that they wouldn't be heard. "I haven't gotten a chance to tell you, but I found a few strange things in the box Khanum mentioned."

Fati's eyes widened. "What did you find?"

Hashu looked back. Maya was chatting with Haroon, while Nomi and Rafay were involved in some debate about whose rickshaw was heavier.

"I found something that looked like a seal."

"A seal? As in the tool with a symbol for signing?"

Hashu nodded. "I found a ring too. Both have the same, well, a similar insignia. But that's not the strangest part. In Khanum's box, I found candle wax and parchment. And the spot on the map? That had the wax imprint of the seal. I think Khanum was writing letters to someone and using the seal to sign it."

Fati's frown deepened. "Okay. How do you know the seal doesn't belong to Khanum or Agha?"

Hashu shook his head. "If I'm being honest, nothing beyond instinct. When you see it, you'll understand."

"Why don't you want the others to know?"

"These days have been rough on everyone. The last thing I need is to put them in danger by exposing them to something we don't understand. I was hoping that you might have seen the symbol before. It feels like I should know it, but I have never seen it in my life."

"What's the insignia?"

Hashu explained it to her. His hopes were dashed when Fati shook her head.

"I've never seen a crest like that. Could I take a look at it later?" to which Hashu replied in the affirmative.



It took them another day of travelling until something other than sand came into view.

"We did it!" Hashu called back. There was a series of jubilant echoes and whoops behind him as slowly, the silhouette of a village grew from behind the sand. Nomi and Rafay almost dropped their handles in happiness. After spending two days in the desert, with

this morning as the cusp of the third, it brought new life to their weary limbs.

They stopped a little bit away to do Fajr, as the sun was still rising and cleaned themselves up a little bit.

“We’ve been travelling, does it honestly matter what we look like?” Rafay moaned as he dodged Fati’s cupped hand. The girl frowned and tried again, this time she managed to successfully douse his face in water.

“Look around you,” Fati insisted. “These are trade caravans. With all these people coming into the city, we should be able to slip in without standing out. That would be a lot harder if all six of us turn up looking like ragamuffins.”

7

The Village of Akbarabad

As they approached the city entrance, Hashu came in front. There was a neat line forming and there were a few trade caravans ahead of his own group. As they got closer, he noticed a few soldiers gatekeeping the city entrance. When it was time, their party moved forward, stopping a bow's length from the two guards who stood in their way.

"Salam Alaikum, Who goes thee?" a third guard on the side asked.

"Walaikum Salam. Hamza, Sir." Hashu replied confidently.

"Right, who travels with thy sir."

"Family. My sisters and brothers."

"What brings thy to the Akbarabad village?"

"We're stopping by to replenish our supplies."

To his relief, the soldier nodded. "Enjoy your stay men and maidens."

The guards stepped aside and admitted them into the city.

They were spellbound. Akbarabad was a small town, but it was rich with life. The streets were bustling with traders and salesmen moving back and forth, weaving in between the crowd like small fish. The buildings were rickety and old, but worn with a charming ruggedness of a desert town. Competing aromas wafted from the plethora of caravan sarais with young boys screaming vacancies above the cacophony of the crowd.

“Out of the way! You’re blocking the road!”

Harshly shocked out of their stupor, Hashu guided his group to a small arched alcove where they watched the undeterred crowd pass them by in an ironic organized yet chaotic fashion.

“I don’t know where to look!” Maya exclaimed, her voice drowned out by the noise of the town and her cheeks flushed with excitement.

“One step at a time,” assured Hashu, his voice steady. Although, he too didn’t know where to set his gaze and faltered from one place to the next. “Let’s find a place we can load our supplies.”

They wandered until Fati pointed out a less sordid caravan sarai. It was sandwiched between several fruit stalls and a pottery shop. There was an alleyway that led around the back to the stables. Hashu and Nomi went inside to inquire while the others waited off to the side.

The were greeted by the owner. He was a large man standing as tall as Hashu, but easily three times as wide. Bouncing over merrily, he gave them a toothy grin, bearing yellowed teeth amidst a surprisingly well groomed beard and mustache. He guided them to one of the many tables that littered the hall.

“So, thy wishes a room. For how long does thee intend to stay?”

Riddling through the old-style dialect, Hashu replied.

“Two nights and two days.”

“Very well, does thou wish for stabling for thee animals?”

“Uh, no animals. How much will that be?”

“That be five piece a night.”

Nomi looked expectantly at Hashu. The older boy fished deep into his robes for the money pouch from Khanum. He had read many tales of pickpockets in places like these and did not want to risk the only income they had. He counted out five pieces and laid them on the table.

The owner picked them up and frowned before looking up at the boys and laughing. Hashu and Nomi shared a concerned look at the sudden change in emotions.

“Thee jests?” the owner asked, his tone rich with mirth.

Hashu frowned. "You asked for five pieces. There is no-I mean I do not jest."

The man chuckled, but it was not as jolly. He dropped the coins back on the table with disdain.

"Then thy's better off going to sleep in the desert."

Nomi frowned. "And why is that?"

The man snorted rudely in contempt. "See this?" he explained in a condescending tone like he was talking to a small child. One of the coin pieces was clenched between his fat fingers. "This be the old pay. Whose so ever carry that be no better than the poor man. Thy'd not even get an apple for ye whole bag. Me eyes have not set sight on such pay for nearly a decade."

He then frowned and leaned forward, curiosity brimming in his beady eyes. "Where does thee come from that it be news to thou?"

Nomi watched as Hashu bristled ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly so. The older boy's expression glazed over to cold indifference.

"No where that concerns you. Thank you for your time," Hashu gathered the coins and motioned for Nomi to get up. The latter did so and they headed out, the owner merely scoffing at their back.

They found the others leaning on the caravan wall.

"Did you get the room?" Fati asked expectantly. Hashu shook his head.

"Let's move away from here, I'll explain."

They found another spot situated between two buildings. On their left, was a small house. It had two stories but the way they were built, leaning precariously into the street, had Hashu's stomach lurching. The other was a blacksmith's workshop. It was a small forge. A man with an apron smudged with burn and soot marks was banging a glowing red horse shoe on an anvil sending glowing sparks everywhere.

Hashu explained what happened at the caravan sarai. Fati listened quietly. When he was finished, she had a hand under her chin and was deep in thought.

"Well, that's something to look into later. But we have a

problem now. How are we supposed to find someplace to stay and replenish our supplies without any money?"

"Pardon me young maiden," A gruff voice called behind them. They turned to find the blacksmith from earlier. He was much bigger than Hashu initially thought, and was even larger than the caravan sarai owner, although this man was more muscle than fat.

Hashu gently gripped Fati's wrist and pulled her behind him. "Asalaam Alaikum. Can we help you?"

"Walaikum Salam. Well met, young man." The burly individual offered Hashu a hand, which he shook firmly. "I couldn't help but hear that thou's be having some trouble with thee pay. Could be a might bold but I might be having a proposition that may suit thee."

"And what would that be?" Hashu asked.

"See thy crowd. It be the busiest time of year for us village folk with trade arriving from yonder. That be meaning plenty of work in me shop. Now my usual help be down sick with something awful and I'm short a hand or two. Hows about thy help me out whilst in town, and I'll pay you good for it and give thee a room to thyself."

Hashu shared a look with Fati.

'What choice do we have?' A voice eerily like her echoed in his head. Hashu turned to the man, "We'll do it."

He gave them a hearty laugh, "Then I'd best introduce myself. My mother named me Hasan Amini, son of Jamal Amini and I live behind the shop with my wife. It'd just be the two of us," he explained with a note of sadness in his voice. Suddenly he smiled and gestured to all of them. "Why don't thee follow and place your things?"

And so the children did. He led them down the alley on the other side of the house. It was much neater, though the floor was ashen and black from scattered soot.

"The wind and forge pipes have it blow back here," Hasan explained.

The alley curled around the house and opened into a small gated yard. There was a shed on the side stocked with many sheets and pieces of metal, some of who shone painfully bright in

the piercing sunlight.

Hashu sprung back into Nomi just as a large mass crashed where he had just been standing. It screeched menacingly and it took him a second to realize they were staring down at a fat donkey.

“Bulbul! Gerroff thy mangy pile of fur” Hasan grunted as he grabbed the donkey’s harness and led him off to the side. With his other hand, the blacksmith grabbed a handful of hay from an ignored trough and waved it in the donkey’s face. The creature brayed in glee and made an ungracious grab.

“Sorry about that,” Hasan apologized, wiping away the stray hay on his apron. “He’s our guard, stops the pickpockets from getting feisty and coming after the goods,” he explained gesturing to the shed.

With that, he had them drop off their rickshaws under an apple tree and pounded on the house door.

“Alizay! We’s be having company!” he announced before opening the door and ushering them out of the heat.

Despite the rising inferno outside, the home was deliciously cool. The room they were in was simply furnished with several floor cushions and a table in the middle. Hasan offered them a seat and disappeared into the adjacent room.

As Hashu sat down, he was surprised by how soft the cushion was and closed his eyes, relishing the feeling of the fabric.

“This ought to set thee right.” Hasan came out with a wooden tray holding six metal cups.

Hashu could feel the surge of thirst at the sight of the beverage, but a part of him felt slightly wary of this stranger. He politely took the glass from Hasan. His younger siblings eagerly gulped it down with various expressions of content. Hashu, however, did not take a sip and noticed Fati and Nomi doing the same.

“So these be the guests!” A women’s voice exclaimed. From behind Hasan’s huge frame, emerged the smallest woman Hashu had ever seen. Fati dwarfed her by a full head at least. The woman flitted from one child to the next, greeting them respectfully and kindly.

“Thy not be telling that they’d be as young and sweet as fresh

spring flowers,” she chided her husband, who gave an apologetic grin. “My name be Alizay Amini and I’m as pleased as a lamb in spring to meet thee.’

“Theys be needing a place to stay, so we need beds in the spare room. The boys here will be lending me hands in the shop.”

“We’re happy to help anywhere we can. It is very kind of you to offer us a place.”

“No need for all them thanks,” the woman smiled. “Thee being here is plenty help. Young faces like thy are easy on old eyes.” Her smile fell, a hand surreptitiously leaning on her stomach.

She promptly excused herself to set up the spare room and Hasan took a seat. While they waited, he told them many tales of his life in the village. Turns out he was an excellent storyteller and each story had them either hanging off their seats or holding their sides in stitches. His own laugh was deep and boomed in the small room.

“I’d be born in the last hours of Rajab. Was born here and never lived no where yonder. I have made me way down to some of the town nearby for supplies but,” he smiled contently with big pearly whites, “There’s no place like home.”

Hashu smiled as a pang of longing brewed in his stomach.

“This here forge been in me family since me great-great grandfather. The caravan bring business and in days like these, business is good. What about thou? Thees clearly new in town.”

None of the children leapt to respond leaving that to their older siblings.

“We were raised in the desert. Our parents passed away from sickness. So it’s just us.”

Hasan nodded. “Allah(swt) rest thee souls.” he facepalmed himself so suddenly that Hashu nearly dropped his drink in surprise.

“Well, curse my mind, it be cracking like a bad pot. I never asked thy names!”

“Oh..” Hashu trailed off. “My name is Hamza, my sister Fahima, our brothers Nabeel, Raza, Haris and our sister Marziya.”

Each child nodded, mentally reciting their given names so they wouldn’t forget.

“And they’d be lovely names,” Alizay called from the stairs.

“The room is ready for thy.” The couple left them alone to get settled.

The space was small and humble, but could comfortably fit the six children. In the corner was a neat stack of ornate blankets.

Hashu ran a hand over his face as the the other children settled in.

“Too good to be true?” Fati whispered low enough so that none of them could hear it.

“I don’t know if I’m being too paranoid or not wary enough. Agha Hasan and his wife seem like they’re really nice.” He let out a long breath. “How do I know if I’m right in trusting them?”

Fati shrugged. “You can’t know. But what you can do is trust your instinct and perception.”

That did not do much to alleviate Hashu’s concern but there was little to be done at this point. They all changed out of their travel worn and sweat ridden clothes into a fresh set and arranged their belongings in organized bags.

“Hashu Bhaiya?” Maya whispered. The other children hushed as Hashu turned to her. “Why did you give Agha Hasan different names?”

Hashu thought for a moment. “I know they seem really nice but I want to be completely sure before we trust them.”

“Isn’t it a bit late for that Hashu Bhaiya? I mean we are literally at their house.” Rafay quipped.

“As six orphaned desert children who have never lived in the city. Considering that Agha went to such great extremes to make sure we were raised alone, in the middle of a desert, where no one could find us makes me think that Hashu Bhai is right. Does that make sense *Raza*?” Nomi smiled.

Rafay rolled his eyes. “Of course *Nabeel*”

Nomi shook his head. “You make that sound like an insult.”

“In my defence I didn’t have much time to come up with names.” Hashu raised his hands hoping to placate them.

“Well I think Marziya is a pretty name,” Maya announced.

“At least someone is on my side,” Hashu replied giving Maya a wink.

Once they were all set up, they shuffled down the thin stairs one at a time.

Haroon and Rafay were right at the back.

“Hey *Haris*, if *Nabeel Bhai’s* right, who do think Agha was hiding from?”

Haroon shrugged and shook his head in the negative. “I have no idea. But must have been someone really dangerous for Agha to have been so worried.”



“Curses!”

The myriad of shattering glass and thudding scrolls did little to thwart Nazar’s frustration. Slamming his palms on the now bare oak desk, he glared at the map on the wall opposite him. It hung stretched in an ornate frame and showed every corner of the Sultanate, *his* Sultanate. Well, it would be soon. The map was beautiful in its own right, but the surface had been marred by several cancellations, each more ragged and unruly as the next.

“My liege? What troubles you so?”

Nazar did not bother to immediately respond, choosing to ignore the figure that materialised from behind the map.

“If this is about the peacocks-”

“This is not about the blasted birds,” Nazar spat. His companion wisely stayed silent,

“Every city, every village, every town has been overturned,” Nazar hissed. “And not so much as a whisper anywhere.”

“Its been more than a decade my liege?”

Nazar stood up, his bright red cape flapping dramatically behind him as he strode with heavy steps to the map.

“My coronation, *my* ascension to the throne lies not four weeks away. I have been planning for this day for more than twenty years, Dabur. To finally take my rightful place as Sultan! As King!” he said viciously. “I shall be the Sultan! It is my right!”

“Indeed it is,” Dabur assured him. “Then pray tell what plagues you?”

Nazar smacked the map loudly. The sound echoed ominously in their cavernous room. “The law Dabur. I may not be as rigid,

but the council is as stiff as their walking canes. They still hold out hope for an heir.”

“There has been no mention of an heir in years. Why fret?”

Nazar turned to look at Dabur, a sinister sneer on his lip, “This Sultanate will be mine and even if God came down from the heavens himself, He would not be able to stop me.”

8

The Games Begin

Living in a village close to other people did not offer Hasan the liberty of running the noisy workshop at night and so the boys found themselves rising at the crack of dawn, laced up in aprons much too large for their frames. The ties on Rafay's were done twice around his torso and the neck had to be pulled up high so it wouldn't lie at his stomach. He watched carefully as Hasan pointed out what materials were needed from the shed.

Off onto the side, uncomfortably close to that pesky donkey, were two wheelbarrows for him and Haroon. The older two boys would be working in the shop with Agha Hasan.

Rafay strode forward, pausing suddenly when the donkey gave a territorial bray.

"I just need the wheelbarrow." His eyes didn't leave the equine for even a second as he came closer, ignoring the huffs and hoof stomps. He dropped his gaze to find the wheel barrow handle. Rafay's fingertips just brushed the tip when he felt a painful pinch.

"Ouch!" he cried, springing away defensively, a hand cupping his rear. The donkey look unabashedly pleased.

"What's going on?" Haroon asked, having just turned the corner.

"It bit me!" Rafay accused pointing his finger at the donkey. It gave a bray that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "Why you—"

"Rafay!" Haroon scolded.

“He started it!”

Haroon rolled his eyes and grab a lump of hay and walked up to the donkey confidently. When he was an arm’s length away, he held out his hand, offering the yellowed stalks. Bulbul watched him with one wet black eye and hesitantly took a step closer. When Haroon didn’t move, he got bolder and soon enough, he yanked the hay from Haroon’s hand. The boy let it fall to the ground, the donkey’s head following it and used the distraction to move the wheelbarrows beyond the rein’s reach.

“Do you need some hay too?” he teased Rafay, whose jaw hung open in surprise. At Haroon’s comment, it snapped shut and he rolled his eyes.

“Let’s just get started,” he replied, glaring at the content animal.

Back in the forge, Hasan had Hashu and Nomi pumping large bellows to fan the fire. Hashu took the chance to learn a little more about Hasan. The man was happy to share.

“You said this forge belonged to your father?”

“That’s right,” Hasan nodded as he ran the whetstone along the curved blade of the axe in his hand. “Back then, we not have the pay to live in the village center so he had a small shop where thee be standing and our house was over yonder.”

He pointed north over the village houses.

“I may be living with them here village merchants, but I was raised in the village outskirts with me brother. We were no different than thou’s own younger brothers. I took on me father’s forge and my brother is a healer, best in the village Alhumdulilah,” he declared proudly, his chest swelling with pride.

“Interesting. Fahima’s the one who likes healing among us.” Nomi replied.

Hasan nodded in agreement. “She do be the type. Everything alright, Hamza? Thou’s mighty quiet.”

Hashu looked up from his internal musing. “Oh, everything’s fine. I was just trying to figure out something I heard in one of the caravan-sarais”

“I might be able to help thee. What was it?”

Hashu and Nomi shared a look. “I heard this man arguing

about how ridiculous it was that old pay isn't worth anything anymore."

Obviously that wasn't exactly what happened, but given the way that owner had responded, Hashu thought it better to not arouse suspicion.

Hasan gave him a look of comprehension and nodded with a sigh. "Aye, it was strange for all of us."

"What does it mean?" Hashu asked.

"Thy doesn't know?" Nomi opened his mouth to respond, but Hasan stopped him. "Right, raised in the desert. Not much use for pay out there."

Nomi nodded.

"Fine, let me tell thee. Twas' a tad over ten years ago when a message came from the Sultanate."

"The Sultanate?"

"Aye lad, they be the ones who rule the land. The family of the Sultan goes back generations and each one is sworn in with the promise to rule Bi'idnillah."

"Bi'idnillah? as in 'with the permission of Allah(swt)?"

"That's right. The last sultan ruled years ago and a mighty great sultan he was. We'd be a little too far to know but the travellers talk of him being very just and kind."

"What happened to him?" Nomi asked, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"Keep thee bellows blowing. That's good. Right, about the Sultan? He died. Something be wrong with his heart. Said it was a family disease. Killed them all save his poor widow. But if you ask me-"

"Oi Blacksmith!" A sallow man waved to get Hasan's attention. "I've got a horse with a bad shoe that's driving her lame."

"Bring her round to the alley and I'll take a look."

The man nodded and turned to fetch his horse. Hasan looked to Hashu and Nomi. "Keep them fire's going strong, a forge only works when the fire's hot."

They watched in curiosity, not daring to stop pumping, as Hasan leapt over the storefront and made his way around. Through the back entrance, they watched him calm the upset creature and

gently lift it's foot. Even from this distance, the hoof looked out of shape and so, Hasan grabbed what looked like a giant walnut cracker and plucked out the shoe with ease. He had a word with the man and hurried back into the shop.

"Hamza! Give him some strength!" he called and Hashu bore down on the bellows. The fabric quivered and flapped in protest but Hashu ignored that, giving it frequent mighty pushes. The heat rushed to his face as the fire roared under the stones and metal. Hasan plunged the shoe into the hot forge until it glowed a bright fiery molten orange. Once satisfied, he switched it to the anvil and hammered away at it mercilessly. It only took him a few minutes before he plunged it into the cold water releasing a satisfying sizzling sound and a puff of steam into the air. He pulled it out moments later to reveal a perfect horseshoe. Just then, another man called over the storefront asking about his sword. Over the noise of the fire, Hashu couldn't hear what they were saying.

"Keep it going lads! There's plenty more coming!" Hasan yelled over the noise as he rushed off to put the shoe back on the horse.

Rafay and Haroon reappeared from where Hasan had left and headed straight to the back of the workshop, shovelling their loads into organized baskets as tall as Maya.

Throughout the afternoon, the workshop was extremely busy with Hasan running in and out mainly to help horses and wagon wheels. By the time Dhuhur came, Hashu and Nomi could barely lift their own arms. With most people leaving for the masjid, they finally got a chance to rest.

"Thous wait here while I return this" Hasan told them, gesturing to the handful of sheathed swords in his wrapped bundle. Hashu and Nomi managed no more than an exhausted nod. After he left, a small figure in a long headscarf teetered in carrying a tray. Alizay tsked loudly at the sight of the two boys.

"Ah there thee are!" Her voice sounded over fire. "Poor boys, have some of this!"

She pushed a tall glass into each of their hands. There was some red liquid inside, and honestly, Hashu was too exhausted to

be wary. He tipped his head back and poured it down. Seeing him do so, Nomi followed. What hit his throat sent a surge of energy to each and every one of his aching muscles. It was sticky and sweet but refreshingly cool and Hashu and finished the entire glass. Alizay pulled out a jug and poured him some more.

“Drink, thy shall need strength to finish.”

Hashu didn't need to be told twice. At that moment, Hasan returned and happily took a glass from her.

“Keep eating and keep drinking,” he told the boys, handing each of them some bread and chicken. He gave a parcel to Alizay and asked her to give it to the boys in the back.

Hashu wasn't sure how the chicken actually tasted because it seemed to have vanished in two bites. He felt satiated but not full. Hasan led the two round back to meet up with Haroon and Rafay.

“This is for thy,” Alizay said, handing Hasan a bucket and giving each a small bowl.

“We make wudhu and do salat out here,” Hasan explained “Alizay doesn't want all the soot on her carpet.”

Hasan recited the adhan and then lined up for jamaat. It was short and swift but not hasty. Hashu had just finished his tasbeeh when Hasan stood up.

“Do you not pray in the masjid?” Nomi asked. Hasan shook his head.

“Many merchant be over here to pass the market rush before the prayers finish,” he explained. “Alright, now thou's be all full and rested, we will swap. Thy twins be in the forge with me and thees older boys will move material.

As Fati rinsed the dishes, she could see Nomi and Hashu through a small window in the wall. It had taken quite a bit of convincing but Alizay was finally allowing them to help with the chores. Maya and Fati were currently sorting out the lunch dishes, some chicken and fresh bread from the market.

“All done Khanum!” Maya announced as the woman stepped into the kitchen.

“Bless thee heart” Alizay praised, her hands over her heart. “Thy's not need to but I am grateful for the help. Now enough

with the chores, come sit with me.”

She led them into the living room and sat Fati and Maya on either side of her.

“Thy’s mother must be special to have raised such pretty flowers.”

“She was,” Fati replied in a small voice. “She always said the best way to live life was with a kind hand, a pure heart and good intentions.”

“And she be right.” Alizay sighed. “There was a time, twas an age where chivalry and decency be the shining stars of a man and woman.” Her expression darkened. “This be no longer the case.”

“So we can see...I mean we grew up in the desert but she was from town,” Fati’s tongue felt tainted at all the lies but she needed to know what happened all those years ago. She looked at her lap, “If I’m being honest, it’s very different from what she described.”

Alizay placed a hand on Fati’s. They were soft and warm. “The world is a very dark place, little flower. I am glad thee chose to trust Hasan and myself. But know, not all homes are as inviting, not all people are as they seem. When evil spread from the strongest to weak, many a people turned to a life stained by sin and corruption.”

She gripped Fati’s hand tighter. “Thee brothers may be thy’s shield and protector, but thou are the eyes and mind. There will that which thee will see and know that they will not. Thou must use that to protect each other.”

She sighed and turned to Maya, running a hand over her headscarf. “I wish the world be a garden for flowers like thee, but it is not. So do not treat it as such. Thy must be vigilant and wise. But don’t forget to live and smile.”

Fati nodded and was silent as Khanum ushered them up and outside to bring in the laundry. When she headed inside, Maya found her sister deep in thought.

“What did she mean by that?” Maya asked in a whisper.

Fati took a deep breath. “To be careful. That people have changed and not everyone is like her and Agha Hasan. To not trust so easily”

They didn't notice that Khanum could hear them from the house. They didn't notice that she nodded to herself with a look of relief that they understood.



At the end of the day, Hasan had pressed two shiny coins into each boy's hand. He smiled thinking of how they protested, but upon his insistence, they accepted. It was strange, the empty ache that filled his chest. Of course he was grateful to Allah(swt) for all that He had given him, but there was that unresolved yearning for the one thing they couldn't have. A soft hand pulled him from his thoughts.

"I know" Alizay whispered. She gazed longingly at the wall separating the two rooms. "We may not be able to call thee our own, but so long as thy are with us I will not treat thee any different."

Hasan nodded. "They're incredible. I have not met such manners in any other young men in the entire village."

Alizay's head drooped down and Hasan was alarmed at the tear that fell.

"I've told thou a thousand and I will tell thou a thousand more. Pay no heed to the fools who think they can talk about us and our lives. If this is Allah's(swt) test, then let it be so! There will be no child around us that does not know a parent's love. So what if they are not are own? They are the children of Islam and if they need us, we will be there."

He glanced at the door. "Like these young ones."



"Enter," Uzair whispered.

The desk in front of him was littered with half open scrolls. Everyone either contained a formal complaint or demand. It wasn't the vibrant excitement the position of Akbarabad guards' captain had promised, so any distraction from the mundane complaints of entitled merchants was welcome.

"What is it Ibrahim?" he drawled, his body lolled against the worn yet grand wooden desk. Seeing Ibrahim's excited expression, Uzair stood up straight.

“Speak boy!” he spat.

“An informant wishes for an audience, sir,” Uzair frowned.

“Very well. Tell him to proceed to the basement. I will meet him there.”

The guard bowed but tripped and stumbled, knocking the helmet off his head. He grabbed it before it reached the floor and rushed out of the room, his cheeks a brilliant red.

Uzair paid it no mind. He did not care for the training of lower troops like Ibrahim, their uniform was enough to *convince* people to behave. With that thought, he moved around the desk and left through a small side door. For such small headquarters, at least compared to some of the larger cities, the basement dungeons were roomy and clean. A clear sign that they were heavily used. Even now, some of the cells were occupied with grumbling men. He paid no heed and went straight to the end and through another small door.

He did not expect the man who awaited him on the other side. He was hunched over so low that he was almost doubled over. A black patchy robe ridden with dirt and muck garbed him. His face was concealed by a hood. Uzair stopped at least a bow’s length away. He was sure the man reeked.

“Thou’s insignia?” he asked, not bothering to greet the peddler.

“Of course,” came a croaky reply. The peddler dove a grimy hand deep into his robes and pulled out a small ring. He held it out for Uzair. The captain internally groaned and plucked the ring from the peddler’s palm. At that proximity, he could see the blackened undersides of his untrimmed nails. The ring was a simple silver band with a flat top. Engraved was a single symbol, ۞. He lowered it back into the man’s palm.

“No one saw you come in? No one followed you?” He asked. The peddler shook his head in the negative. “Very well then, the information?”

The peddler explained. “I be near a caravan sarai, the small one by the fruit stalls off the merchant’s way. It was quiet but then the owner comes out to buy some fruit and starts talking to the stall owner.” The man went quiet.

Uzair rolled his eyes and pulled out five coins from a bag he had grabbed on the way down. The peddler’s head bobbed in thanks and he continued. “He said some weird kids came, looked like they were from the desert. They tried to pay him in old pay. Said they didn’t know any better.”

The captain frowned. Old pay? He hadn’t seen a single coin of the old pay for years. Not since the the Sultanate declared it worthless and offered to trade any of it for the new coins. Considering the man said kids, they must have been young, young enough that they should have known no different.

“I see? Anything else?” The peddler shook his head. “Very well.”

Uzair deposited five more coins and left the room. Once he was gone, the peddler scowled at the meager amount but nevertheless, snatched them up and hobbled out the secret entrance he came from.



“It’s odd,” Uzair thought aloud. He was alone in his office and thinking over the information he had just received. If he was being honest, he wouldn’t have paid it any mind. Given the number of desert nomads and travellers, he couldn’t help the niggling thought in the back of his mind as well as his instructions when he left the capital.

“The timeline fits oddly well.” He almost thought it fit too well. But the last thing Uzair needed was to cry wolf and have the Sultanate’s army and fury banging down the village’s doors. “So I suppose I will just have to make sure it is true.”

“Ibrahim!” he called. The soldier practically fell over himself in his haste to push open the door. “Fetch Gohar.”

Ibrahim rushed out. In the meanwhile, Uzair pulled out a

map of the town and began charting the possible caravan sarais the peddler could have been referring to. He grabbed a quill and gently etched a small circle around each.

“One over here....Another over here...” he looked up at the sound of the door opening. “Ah Gohar, please come in.”

Gohar had been one of the men who had been under Uzair’s command when he worked in one of the largest cities. He had specifically requested that Gohar be transferred with him.

The man himself was a tall, lean soldier. Unlike the others who carried swords and spears, he had two scythes hanging from his belt. There was a rugged scar running from the edge of his hairline to the bottom of his right ear, crossing over a white cloudy eye.

“I have a mission for you.”

Gohar nodded attentively. “I await your command.”

Amongst the barbaric slang of the village folk, he never did tire from hearing a fellow city man. Uzair handed him the map. “There are several caravan sarais marked on this map. One of them was recently visited by a group of children who tried to use old pay. Find out which one it was and find out where they have gone. Should you be successful, you shall be heavily rewarded.”

He pulled out a large bag of coins from the desk from a secret compartment and threw it on the desk. Gohar made no move to it, but he looked satisfied.

“I will find them,” he confirmed and then left.

Uzair shook his head as he watched him leave. There was no greater power for a man than the glimmer of gold.



Hasan pulled down the fabric tarp and tied it to a hook at the base of his shop front. Every merchant in the village center was doing the same, many wrapping up to head home to their families. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, a silent prayer escaped his lips. The heat was finally disappearing as the sun dipped into the rooftops. A thought occurred to him and he looked around.

“Boys?” he called. No one responded. Curious he headed to the side alley and peeped into the kitchen window. He saw his

wife walk past.

“Alizay!” he called in a whisper. The woman paused and turned to him.

“Hasan? Is all well?”

“I can’t find the boys, do you know where thee are?”

Her worried expression melted and she smiled.

“I have. Why don’t thou come inside?”

He was confused, but did as she said. He gave Bulbul a firm pat and pushed open the door. What he saw made his heart melt. The four boys had collapsed on the living room cushions. The oldest two were side by side on the same one, and each of the young brothers had claimed a large cushion to themselves. Their limbs hung off leaving the floor a mess of sweaty legs and feet.

Both husband and wife shared an amused look.

“The girls are no better,” she whispered. “Thee helped me so much that they be like their brothers upstairs.”

“Let thee sleep.” Agha told her. “We’ll wake thy up at Maghrib. I’ll go get something from the market.”

Though most of the larger shops were closed, many of the fruit stalls were still open. They called their wares noisily into the crowd. He stood by a wagon overflowing with plump oranges.

“No, that one,” Hasan pointed out. The teller followed his gaze and grabbed the orange Hasan was pointing at. The burly blacksmith counted out the coin pieces and left with his purchase. He couldn’t help the small spring in his step as he headed home. There was a warmth in his chest that had been there since he had left the children in his living room. His hands were laden with a heavy bag of fruit but his head felt light. So this is what it would have felt like. To be a parent.

He was so lost in his thoughts he didn’t notice the bent figure that hobbled in his way. The man was knocked clear off his feet.

“Many apologies is thou alright?” Hasan grabbed the man’s hand and helped him to his feet.

“I be fine. Thee need not worry about a peddler like me.”

Hasan frowned. “Peddler or not. Thee be no different in the eyes of God(swt).” He reached into his bag and pulled out an orange. “Take this, thou not be a peddler tonight.”

It took some insistence but the man finally conceded, shaking Hasan's hand with thanks pouring from his lips.

"Don't thank me, thank Allah(swt)," Hasan replied. He then turned and continued on his way.

Gohar watched his retreating back, the pleased look melting to indifference. He tucked the orange away in one of the many folds of his oversize robe. It may come in use later, as a snack if nothing else. With a flick of his wrist, he replaced the hood that had fallen from his head and brushed the dust off his front. He watched Hasan's light steps with disdain.

"I wonder what has him so pleased." But then he threw the thought from his mind. On the list of caravan sarai, he had already checked four of them. This was the last one. He made his way inside. It felt filthy and even in his bedraggled disguised, he felt cleaner than the table a few poor tradesmen were eating at. A fat man came at him.

"Be gone beggar, do not occupy the doorway." Gohar, unfazed, moved closer and whispered.

"I do not seek shelter. I seek information."

The owner raised an eyebrow and smirked. "That'd cost thee more than thy can offer."

Gohar said nothing but pulled out ten shiny coins. The owners eyes gleamed as he watched the gold hungrily.

"This way..." he gestured to an office off the side with much more respect.

'*Greedy peasants*' Gohar sneered mentally, though his face stayed blank.

He was offered a chair and some drink. Gohar sat down but refused the sherbet. "I seek news about one of your visitors."

"Who wishes to know?" the owner eyed him inquisitively. He looked like a fat rat with his round stomach and beady eyes. Without moving his gaze, Gohar glared.

"If thee wants pay, I'd be asking the questions." The inn keeper raised his hands placatingly and gestured to Gohar to continue.

"Someone tried to use the old pay. Who?" Gohar asked. When the man didn't respond immediately, he tossed a small coin pouch on the table. It landed with a soft thud, emitting a

series of jingling noises of metal against metal. The owner eyed them and began to spill his story like a fountain.

“Aye they’d be odd. Bunch of kids, the biggest a nasty little snob. Told him straight up that his pay wasn’t worth the dirt he trod on. They didn’t like that. Stuck his nose up like some sort of prince and left.” He continued to watch the bag with a ravenous look. He leaned in close and Gohar steeled himself to not retch at the smell of chicken on the man’s breath. “If thee asked me, I’d be thinking their thieves coming to scout-”

“Does thy know where they went?” Gohar cut him off frostily. He wasn’t interested in the man’s conspiracy. At least the owner had the good sense to cut off his tales.

“One of the farmers saw him talking to the blacksmith. The one who’s got a shop on yonder, over in the courtyard.”

Gohar nodded and slid the bag towards the owner. Without another word, he turned and made to leave. He hadn’t even crossed the doorway when several small dull thuds echoed behind him.

‘Couldn’t even wait till I left.’

It was still daylight when he was on his way to the courtyard. Many of the shops had reopened for the last time that day. There were small swarms of people moving between them. Rugs, pottery, tea and glassware, the amount of items on sale was overwhelming. Gohar knew exactly what he was looking for. He hobbled along the side, ignoring the disparaging views from the more affluent passerby’s. He followed the ringing sound of metal pounding metal. When he saw the shop, Gohar cursed. It was the same man he had run into earlier. He needed a different approach with this brute.

Limping into an alley, he shed his patchy outer robe and turned it inside out. It was lined with cotton and a few scrubs from a random water urn later he looked like the average man. He also stood up straighter and fished a long thin cloth from his many pockets and wrapped it around his head to form a turban.

“I say good sir!” he called in a foreign accent. The blacksmith put aside the dagger and whetstone in his hand to address Gohar.

“Asalaam Alaikum. Thee called, how can I help?”

“Walaikum salam. I am seeking a dagger. Travel is not as safe as it was and I would like a simple means of protection. It shouldn’t be plain though.”

The large man nodded and pulled out a variety of blades and handles.

“Thee be wanting a carved blade. Gorgeous to look at but not enough to draw thieves and pickpockets..”

He continued to explain but Gohar was only half listening. He peeked between glances, but could see no one else in the shop.

“It seems quite busy this season, how do you manage?” he asked in a surprised tone.

Hasan smiled. “I’ve got me help. Couldn’t do it without them and Allah’s(swt) mercy.”

Gohar smiled. “I see. Any idea where I might find some? I’ve been looking for help with my caravan. A few spry young lads.”

Hasan pointed to the mosque. “Thy’d find it there.”

Gohar nodded. This was tricky, how could he ask about the kids from the caravan sarai? Not wanting to draw too much suspicion, he asked a few more questions about the daggers, thanked the blacksmith and left.



If Uzair didn’t know it was Gohar, he wouldn’t have believed that it was him. He was hunched over, his face looking awful. Bloodshot eyes rimmed by dark circles, sallowed cheeks and a limp. His beard was scraggly and wild jutting uncontrollably in all directions. A moment later, gone were the dark circles and sallowed cheeks. His eyes no longer looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

“I take it you were successful?”

Gohar nodded, straightening up with no sign of discomfort.

“I have traced them to the village blacksmith with the shop in the courtyard.”

“Have you seen them?”

Gohar shook his head.

“Very well. Watch them for another night. If you don’t see them, take two guards and question him.”



Hashu was up way before everyone else. Of course, he had only just folded away his blanket when Nomi stirred. The boy mumbled something in his sleep restlessly and it only took a few strokes in his hair to settle down.

Once Nomi's breathing grew heavy, Hashu tiptoed out of the room and up the winding steps to the roof. Most of the houses here had a rooftop patio of sorts. It was roughly crafted with a levelled floor and a simple wall of stone blocks as tall as his knee.

"Bit early to be starting the day."

"Salam Alaikum" Hashu greeted Nomi. "I thought you had fallen asleep."

Nomi shrugged. "I did. But I woke up a few seconds later. I heard movement on the roof."

He took a seat beside Hashu on the wall, his legs swaying over the edge.

"Agha Hasan and his wife are really nice," Nomi admitted. "But you know we can't stay here forever. Do you and Fati Baji have a plan?"

Hashu nodded and dropped his voice to a whisper. "There are a few things we need to take care of. Thanks to Agha Hasan, we now have some money, but we should get a little more before we leave. Also, Fati has gotten Khanum to agree to take her to the scholars academy tomorrow."

"Academy? I get that Fati loves to learn but—"

"There's a reason." Hashu looked around to make sure no one was listening. "Back at the camp we found a seal and a ring."

Nomi frowned. "Okay, but what about it? It could have been Khanum and Aghas."

Hashu shook his head. "They had the same crest as the old coins."

Nomi's eyes widened. "But that would mean—"

"Yes" Hashu confirmed as Nomi connected the dots. "Agha and Khanum worked for someone very important. Someone in the old Sultanate. Not only that, Khanum has been writing to someone all these years."

"What does it mean Hashu Bhaiya?"

“I don’t know,” Hashu confessed. “I’m hoping that Fati can find out who the crest belonged to. It may give us a clue as to who Agha and Khanum really were.”



Gohar had spent the day meandering around town as a fruit seller. He had a small tray with a strap around his neck and no longer wore the heavy robes from earlier. Instead he chose a tunic and pants with open sandals. It gave him the chance to linger around the blacksmith’s shop without seeming suspicious. In all his years of experience, he had learned nothing destroyed a cover quicker than looking too curious.

He had not seen anyone resembling the children all evening but he showed no frustration. Missions like these took time, unfortunately that wasn’t a luxury he had much of. To make sure the workshop remained in his sights, he rented a room right across the shop, above a carpet store. He offered them a large amount of money in his merchant disguise claiming he wanted his sellers to work them. Now he was the seller. The owner hadn’t even thought of refusing. People never refused money,

There was no one but the burly blacksmith all evening and that hadn’t changed when Gohar decided to retire for the night. His sleeping accommodations were some thick blankets on the stone floor.

He tossed and turned. Finally he flung off the cover. He was not going to get more sleep. He looked over at the robes discarded in the corner. Without a sound, he made his way over and dug his hand in. Gohar felt his fingers clasp around the object he was looking for and pulled it out. The room was dark but the large window let in plenty of air and moonlight. In his hand was an orange. He headed to the window and leaned on the frame, absent mindedly peeling away the skin.

That’s when he saw them. Two boys. Well they weren’t exactly children, but definitely on the younger side. From asking around, Gohar knew that the blacksmith had no children of his own. So who were these strangers staying at his house? He was too far to get a closer look, but he knew what he had to do.

Using those few hours of the morning to rest and change into the fruit seller, he packed his small bundle and snuck out of the house.

Finding a position much closer to the blacksmith, he was doing small circles around the little plaza. The blacksmith had the older boys working in the back and there was no way he could go down the alley without being suspicious. Taking a chance, he went up to the stall. Getting a closer look, he noticed the blacksmith was a little younger than himself.

“Asalaam Alaikum, fruit for thee hardworking folk of forge,” he called into the shop in the native way of speaking. Despite all the time he had been here, he hated the sound of it.

The blacksmith stood up and from around his wide figure he could clearly see two boys. They weren’t the ones he had seen last night though. They all returned his greeting.

‘*Four of them?*’ he thought to himself.

The blacksmith gave the fruit a hard look.

“Six of these please,” he pointed to the apples. Gohar nodded, gathering them in some scrap cloth when he finally saw one of the boys turn the corner.

All the apples tumbled from his hand as he stared in shock.

The boy was tall with slender muscled limbs that strained with the weight of the wheelbarrow. But it was his face that had captured Gohar’s attention.

His brown eyes, black hair, the subtle smile in his sweat ridden expression and the deep laugh he shared with his sibling. Then there was the simple at-ease demeanour and calm poise Gohar was all too familiar with. But most of all was the kind face. It was a striking resemblance and the last time he had seen such a face was a very long time ago.

He suddenly noticed the blacksmith narrowing his eyes.

“Apologies fine sir, I’d just be seeing thee craft!” He exclaimed, pointing out some shields on display. He pretended to be enamoured and impressed, asking him many questions until a new set of apples were wrapped and in his hand. “There be thee ware. I bid you well Inshallah.”

He continued to circle the courtyard until he was close enough

to duck into the alley near the house he was staying in.



“That was odd,” Rafay commented taking a big bite out of the red apple.

Hasan shrugged. “That’d be all towns of travellers. Thou would never believe the kind of people I’ve seen come through the city gates.”

He then proceeded to tell them the tale of a man who brought a horse driven wagon of donkeys sending the children into peals of laughter.



“Right this way dear,” Alizay gently tugged Maya at an elbow so she didn’t miss the turn they had made.

“Look at all the scholars!” Maya marvelled. “It looks like a little academic army!”

Fati smiled but she couldn’t fault her little sister. It was a small school overflowing with students. They crowded in small groups their arms laden with books as wide as her hand. It felt like an intellect’s little oasis.

“This way!” Alizay’s call nudged her out of her thoughts and she followed the woman into a large building. Fati couldn’t hold back a gasp of surprise. Her entire life she hopped between two shelves in a tent but here, there were rows upon rows of books from the ceiling to the floor. She couldn’t help smiling as her finger ran over the spines, her eyes skimming the titles.

“Hadith narration, Hajj rulings, Healing for Battle wounds. This place has everything!” Maya whispered.

Maya continued to whisper out the titles to herself. Khanum found a chair and went to take a seat where she could still see the girls.

Fati’s finger stopped on one particular title. “Hierarchies of the Modern century - 100 years of historical leaders.”

She felt her hands tingle as she pulled the volume from the shelf. Just as she had seen the other students do, she took a seat at the foot of the wood, waving to Maya to continue looking around without her.

The book was extremely detailed and thorough covering not only rulers but their ancestry, families, descendants and analysis on how they ruled. She continued to flick through the pages. Suddenly her breath hitched in her throat and she froze. Right there on the page were the two crests Hashu had told her about. One with a soaring dove holding a two-pronged sword. The other, a similar dove only its feet gripped a rose.

‘*The Zawar Sultanate*’ it read.

‘Few regimes in the modern time can be quoted as truly bound to the morals and principles they claim. It is, however, with great pride that the Zawar Sultanate, led by the Zawar dynasty, is one. Founded more than two hundred years ago by the great tribal leader Sultan Murtaza Zawar, the warrior rose to power after his defeat of invading forces from the western lands. With a smaller army of three hundred horsemen against a trained army of a thousand, the Sultan has gone down in history as one of the most renowned battle leaders and strategist of his time.’

She continued to read about the various leaders. There were warriors, politicians, scholars and explorers. She turned the page but the last monarch listed died nearly forty years ago.

‘*This book must be a little out of date,*’ she thought to herself.

She carried it to the librarian but it turned out there were no newer copies. Fati made a note about the author and noticed the book was published from the city of Zerzura. She remembered seeing the city on Hashu’s map. Judging by the way it had been marked, it was probably the capital of the Sultanate.

“Maybe the author lives there. He could tell us more about what happened to the Sultans,” she whispered to herself. She looked up as Khanum called her and Maya.

“I have to tell Hashu about this.”



“It could have been nobody else.”

Uzair was pacing in front of Gohar, his chin sunk on his chest deep in thought.

“And you are sure of this?” Uzair asked.

“I would risk my uniform on it,” Gohar replied without hesitation.

Uzair sighed. "Very well. Prepare a contingent. We will arrest them the moment night falls."

Gohar nodded and left. He pushed the door and it flung open with a slam. The guard on the other side clearly wasn't anticipating his departure and jolted to attention, his metal helmet tumbling to the floor with a loud crash.

"Ibrahim!" Uzair called from behind. "Go with Gohar. Assemble and arm a contingent. We have a raid tonight."

The young man nodded and eagerly followed Gohar. The older man merely rolled his eyes.



Hashu's arms slumped uselessly by his side. The blankets helped but his body ached. Around him the other boys were groaning too. Maya was sitting between Rafay and Haroon, telling them all about their visit. Fati on the other hand was scribbling furiously on parchment.

Ignoring his protesting muscles, Hashu moved to sit beside her.

"How was your trip?" he whispered.

She smiled. "I found something about the crests you mentioned," she responded. The smile dropped to a frown. "I'm just not sure what it means yet."

Hashu nodded. "We'll talk about it tonight."

She nodded and he sagged against the wall.

"Get some rest, you're exhausted."

She gathered everyone's dirty laundry and headed downstairs. Alizay was kind enough to provide her with a bucket of water and a washboard. One by one, Fati rinsed the stinky, sweat ridden clothes. She didn't mind, considering she was used to it having four brothers. She would help Khanum with the chores whenever she could. At the thought of her motherly figure, a pang of pain filled her chest. She looked down, forcing back the tears that threatened to slip down her cheeks. Once she had composed herself, she sniffed and flung the wet clothes onto the drying wire. Gone were her tears, but her heart felt empty. She really missed them.



Rafay felt like he had just fallen asleep when his eyes snapped open. He couldn't see anything in the room, but the dry itching in his throat explained why he woke up. As carefully as he could, he blindly hopped over the log like forms of his siblings. Somehow in his sleepy state, he managed to not step on any of them. He reached the door and entered the little hall. Tiptoeing past Agha Hasan's room, he managed to make it downstairs without too much noise. There he found a pitcher and glass. It was surprisingly cool, so much so that he could feel the cold blooming in his chest.

He was just about to head up when something outside the window caught his eye. Rafay rubbed them and glared. He could have sworn he saw something. Just at that moment, he felt the hair on his neck stand up, like someone was watching him. Without making a fuss, he headed back upstairs. Once he reached his room, he hurriedly shook Hashu awake.

"Wha...Rafay?" In the pale flicker of the lamp in Rafay's hand, he noticed the worried expression on his brother's face. He sat up, alert.

"What's wrong?"

"There's someone outside, watching the house."

Hashu frowned. "You're sure."

Rafay nodded.

"Okay, wake the others. Grab the supplies."

It could just be a false alarm, but something about Rafay's behaviour told him otherwise. Hashu slipped out of the room in the dark and snuck down the steps. His movements were slow and close to the floor to avoid being spotted by the window. He watched it carefully. There was no sign or movement. Hashu frowned. Maybe it was just a scare. He turned to head back up.

"Eeeeeuuurgh!" An ear piercing braying filled the air followed by a man's yell. Hashu slapped his hands over his ears to drown out the sound. He ran up. The other room's door flung open. Hasan stepped out a candle in hand.

"What's going on?" he asked Hashu, but he shrugged.

Hasan squared his shoulders and hurried down. Another shuffle

by the door drew his attention. It was Khanum Alizay wrapped in a black head scarf that reached her feet.

“What’s happening?” she whispered to Hashu. He gave her the same response and carefully crept down the stairs. Hashu peeked around the wall edge. Hasan towered in front of the door’s entrance, blocking his view.

“Step aside,” a man ordered. “And secure thou’s beast.”

“Who be thee who dare come to wake us from our beds in the dead of night? I will do no such thing, thee be sneaking around like thieves,” Hasan growled.

“This is by the order of the captain. We have received word thou are hosting suspicious foreigners. Thee must surrender them to us.”

“Come!” a voice behind him whispered. He turned. Khanum was beckoning to him. When he reached the top, she shoved a pouch of money in his hand. “Go! May Allah (swt) protect thou.”

Hashu only had time to utter a quick thank you when he ran up the steps. He reached the roof and noticed his siblings waiting on the roof of the neighbouring building. Suddenly the lower portion of the house filled with noise. He could hear Agha Hasan shouting, soldiers yelling and Bulbul’s erratic braying which didn’t help.

Without wasting another moment, he took a few steps back and ran, easily jumping over the gap between the two houses.

“Come on!” he urged. They found stairs leading down the side and ran out. They had reached the courtyard when they were spotted.

A soldier pointed in their direction.

“They’re here!”

The man advanced towards them with a spear.

Hashu stopped and moved in front of his siblings.

“Nomi with me! Everyone else, go!”

He would have sent Nomi too but the boy wouldn’t have gone. Rafay was about to protest but he was pulled by Haroon; Fati grabbed Maya and they ran into the shadows. Nomi joined Hashu on his side. The soldier had already been joined by some men.

“We need to give the others time,” Hashu said between deep breaths.

In the thin sliver of moon that graced the sky, Hashu could just make out the glinted curves of swords and spears.

One of the soldiers yelled and charged. Hashu ran forward and ducked to the side at the last second. The sword pinged on the ground. The soldier raised the sword again. Hashu swerved, the metal blade whistling past his ear.

“Woah!” He leapt and rolled out of the way as it was swung at his head.

“We need them alive!” someone shouted in the dark.

The man scowled at him and jabbed the sword forward. But Hashu easily dodged and kicked the man’s hand. He gave a cry of pain and the sword clattered to the ground. Hashu snatched it up before the man had a chance. Without a sword, he turned and ran.

“Got ya!” a voice hissed in his ear. The shaft of a spear came over his head and slammed against his chest. Hashu gasped as all the air was knocked out of his lungs. The wood dug into his ribs, pinning his arms to his side. The sword fell from his grasp. Another soldier grabbed it. He held the blade to Hashu’s neck.

“You kids are going to make us very rich!” the man hissed.

“Hashu Bhai!” he saw that behind the man, his brother was in trouble.

Nomi was being physically held back by two men, a third pointing a spear at his stomach. He thrashed relentlessly in their grasp trying to get to his sibling.

Something snapped inside Hashu and he saw red.

“Leave them alone!” he growled. Using the man behind him, he jumped and propelled his feet into the chest of the soldier in front. The man wheezed and fell backward. Hashu then threw his head back. There was a satisfying *crack* and the man dropped him, grabbing his bleeding nose.

He heard cries of pain around him and looked up.

Nomi dropped his choke hold on a soldier as the man’s body sagged in his arm. Behind him a tall figure slammed the heads of the other two soldiers together with a painful knocking sound.

“Agha Hasan!”

The man’s eyes were terrifying but they softened at the sight

of the kids.

Before either of them could say anything, a barrel top flew out of the darkness straight into the head of the man creeping up on Hashu. A familiar figure ran out.

“Fati!”

“Come on! I found a way out!”

“Thee must leave before the city gates are sealed!” Agha told them.

Hashu, flushed and panting, stopped for a moment in front of Agha Hasan.

The man nodded as if understanding what hadn’t been said. “I’ll be alright. Look after them, Hamza.”

“There they are!” Hashu watched as more soldiers converged on them.

“Go!” Agha ordered. “I’ll take care of them.”

He didn’t give Hashu a chance and ran into the mob. Hashu turned and followed the alley he had seen his siblings taking. He had turned the corner when a hand grabbed his elbow. Hashu yanked it away but stopped when he noticed who it was.

Maya grabbed him around his waist, “I thought you got caught.”

Hashu relaxed and grabbed her in a tight hug with one arm. “I’m alright. Where are the others?”

She pointed to a stable a few houses down. They found the others lingering at the entrance of the paddock.

“Get in!” Fati urged. The rest of them followed his lead, Nomi first. he leapt into the cattle wagon without a second thought. Hashu sat by the entrance and pulled them in. He was about to move when the wagon lurched. Hashu was flung backwards. Just as he was about to fall out two hands gripped his own and pulled him back in.

“Thanks Fati, Nomi. Let’s hide.”

They squeezed themselves amongst the young cattle who didn’t seem to mind having the children there. They found little nooks to squeeze into. Hashu had just settled in when an authoritative voice called.

“Halt!”

His heart froze in his throat. He held a finger to his lips, signalling to his brothers and sisters.

“What be thou’s load?” a man asked. Hashu could see his shadow through the thin cover of the wagon.

“Young cows. I’d be taken the wagon to -” the farmer started to reply when he was cut off.

“That’s fine. Move forward.”

Hashu couldn’t have been more relieved. He couldn’t stop smiling as the wagon pulled out of the city gates and it started to grow smaller.

“Will Agha Hasan and Khanum Alizay be alright?” Maya whispered. From their hiding spots, Fati and Hashu shared a look.

Rafay noticed and huffed as softly as he could. “Of course they’ll be fine! Did you see Agha Hasan? He picked up two men with his bare hands! I don’t think they even have chains that fit him!”

Hashu gave Rafay a thankful smile.

He couldn’t see her full face, but from between the cow legs, he could tell Maya was smiling.

“I swear if you step on my toes I’m turning you into a kebab,” Haroon muttered to a particularly fidgety cow in front of him. It stared back with solemn eyes.

The excitement still ran hot in his blood. Hashu wanted to smile and laugh. They got away!

“Everyone rest well. We don’t know where he is going.”

“I’ll take first watch,” Nomi volunteered.

They settled as away and off the floor as they could. Slowly, the thrill from their earlier chase wore off. With the lulling of the cows and the wagon, Hashu felt his eyelids grow heavy. The world around him slowed. A quick prayer for Agha Hasan and Khanum Alizay escaped his lips just as everything faded to black.



Fati was gently nudged awake by one of the cows. It mooned around her, nuzzling her hand.

“Hey,” she stroked the side of it’s face. The animal leaned into

her touch. “Not exactly how someone wakes up in the morning.”

“Finally. Asalaam Alaikum” a voice quipped. The hay beside her sunk as Hashu settled in. “I was waiting for you to wake up.”

Fati raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Walaikum Salam. I presume it wasn’t because you missed my company.”

Hashu smiled. “I wouldn’t say that,” his grin dropped to a more serious expression. “I wanted to talk to you about last night and your time at the library.”

Fati nodded, “The raid first.”

Hashu sighed, “I have no idea what happened. We didn’t do anything to draw attention to ourselves.”

Fati snapped her fingers. “We did actually. Remember the caravan sarai? Someone must have heard you arguing with the owner.”

Hashu nodded. “Okay, so I tried to use some old coins. Why would that be a big deal?”

“It actually wouldn’t be.” Fati frowned, deep in thought. He could see the wheels turning in her head. “Let’s assume someone did overhear. They tell the soldiers. The soldiers think it’s weird but we really could have been desert nomads who knew no better.”

Hashu played along with her theory. “They still need to check but they don’t want to spook anyone. So they send...”

“A spy!” the both of them whispered in unison.

Fati pulled back with an unsure expression. “That still doesn’t explain something. Why come after us? In the middle of the night? We were just desert kids for all they knew.”

Hashu shook his head. “I don’t know. But they wanted us in particular. Someone said they had to keep us alive. Keep thinking about it. Maybe we’ll figure something out. Now about the other thing, did you find any information on our mysterious crest?”

“I did. There was a book in the library Khanum Alizay took us to. The crests belonged to the Zavar Sultanate. It dates back nearly two hundred years, to the Zavar dynasty. They’re pretty impressive, filled with sultans, warriors, generals and scholars. The book however was a little outdated. The last mentioned sultan died nearly forty years ago.”

“And there wasn’t a new edition?”

“Not according to the librarian.”

Hashu frowned. “Why would Khanum and Agha have the seal and ring of a Sultanate?”

Fati shrugged. “Multiple reasons, but none that make sense. Either they were the Sultan and Sultana. I honestly don’t think that was the case.”

Hashu nodded in agreement. His mentors had been many things but a sultan was not one of them. “That means it was either given to them or stolen. Knowing Agha and Khanum, it was probably the former.”

“So if it was given to them, that means they were working for the Sultanate.”

Hashu slumped in his seat, a little overwhelmed at the realisation. “These answers just bring more questions.”

“We’ll figure it out, Inshallah. We’ll find out how Agha and Khanum fit into this,” she didn’t say it out loud but she mentally added, *‘and how we fit into this...’*

She noticed pair of hands stretching in the air followed by a small smack.

“Before you ask...” Haroon told his older two siblings. “It’s because he has the loudest yawn in existence.

Rafay scowled behind Haroon’s hand, not moving because of Maya’s head in his lap.

They heard the farmer exclaim and the wagon started to slow. Had they reached their destination?

They shuffled around the cattle until they could see without being spotted. The back of the wagon was open but fenced off. The flat barren land around them suddenly sprouted fences. They were crudely made, essentially sharpened pikes in the dirt. Once a small child darted into view chasing a tumbleweed. Hashu couldn’t tell much because they flew past before he had a chance to get a proper look. It wasn’t long before the cart grinded to a halt. They were in front of a large closed off field.

The farmer, whistling merrily as he did, came around and opened the gate. He was so occupied with the thought of what to eat that night that he didn’t notice six not-cows slip between his bovine burden. He was about to shut them in, when he noticed a

fallen pouch.

The man checked his own but it was bound securely on his belt. He opened it and found two coins in it. With no where else to put them, he slid them into his own pouch. Humming a merry tune, he thought no more of it. He had horses to attend to.



“You what!” Uzair grabbed the soldier by the throat and pinned him to the wall. Armour clattered noisily against the stone and the man’s hands feebly pulled at Uzair’s.

“You had one job! One simple job! You couldn’t arrest a bunch of children!”

“They were trained!” the man wheezed painfully. “They could fight! And the blacksmith helped!”

“Argh! You’re soldiers! And you were defeated by a man and two boys!”

“He’s starting to look a little blue,” A voice called behind him.

Uzair huffed and released the man. He collapsed in a heap, his hands flying to his throat. With deep gasps, finally, some of the colour returned to his cheeks.

“You and every other guard on that contingent is relieved from patrol, you will work in the stables and sewers until I see fit to reinstate you. Now go!”

The man wasted no time and fled out the room.

Gohar rolled his eyes. Uzair never did take failure well.

“That won’t help, you know.”

Uzair turned around, but much of the steam he had earlier seemed to have faded. “And what will Gohar?” he puffed.

The man in front of him smirked. It was a terrifying sight. “If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

9

Stowaways of Sarwad

“I think we’re safe.” Hashu declared. They were a good distance from the wagon. It was a small miracle that they were able to sneak out unnoticed. Not wanting to leave without some form of recompense, Hashu left the man two coins. In all honesty, he didn’t know how much a trip by wagon would have cost, but that much he could spare.

“It feels good to stand,” Haroon reached his hands way over his head. Hashu couldn’t agree more. He was glad they had a chance to stretch their legs. Turns out their ride had stopped on the village outskirts. There was still quite a walk.

He shouldered one of the two supply packs Rafay had a chance to make. Nomi carried the other.

“I think I see some houses up ahead!”

Hashu squinted in the sunlight. Maya was right. Up ahead, he could make out some buildings. As they got closer, he noticed the dry cracked dirt they were treading on was slowly changing. First the cracks grew smaller and as they moved closer the soil grew darker.

“Look!” Maya called. Up ahead, he could clearly see houses bordered by several small green fields.

“We must be in a farmer’s village,” Fati quipped.

Hashu noticed a boy in one of the fields beside them. He was a scrawny and scraggly thing wearing a short sleeve tunic and pants

rolled up to his knees. He reminded Hashu of a small deer with the way he leapt over the neat rows of plants and hopped up to them. The boy couldn't have been older than eight or nine.

"Asalaam Alaikum. Welcome! Are you travellers? Where did you come from? Wait, are you traders? What are you selling?" the words tumbled out of his mouth like a rushing river. Hashu and Fati shared a smile. With so many younger siblings, they were fluent in 'excited child'.

"Walaikum salam, little one." Hashu replied, getting down on one knee to be at the same eye level. "My name is Hamza. Yes we are travellers, and no, we are not tradesmen. What's your name?" he purposely avoided the question about where they came from.

"Mukhtar," the boy announced proudly with his hands on his hips.

"Well Mukhtar, could you tell us the name of this village please?" while he asked, he took the map from Fati's outstretched hand and unfurled it. "We're a little lost."

The boy smiled revealing a row of pearly whites that shined against his sun-kissed skin. "Of course. This is the town of Sarwad, you should be around....here!" he pointed to a small marked dot on the map. "See that river?" he pointed to a large curved line. "That runs through the town. Gives us water so we can have crops. "

"And the town is this way?" Hashu asked. The boy nodded enthusiastically. "I'll show you, follow me!"

They all shared a smile at his hyper behaviour, but complied.

"Quite a precocious little thing, isn't he?" Fati whispered.

Hashu grinned. "It's an improvement from running from guards and hiding with cows."

The boy chattered the whole way to the town about his mother, the village, his friends...honestly, everything his mind could think of.

"Mukhtar Ali Asghar! Where have you been!" A woman's voice yelled. Fati saw a face disappear from the window of a nearby house and reappear at the door moments later. She ran up and grabbed the boy's shoulder. "Where have you been? I thought you got lost..I thought..."

She continued to ramble as she checked him all over. Mukhtar's eyes rolled, but he humoured his mother. "See, I'm fine! I met these travellers!"

The mother was not impressed. "What have I told you about talking to strangers?"

Mukhtar sheepishly kicked at a rock. "I'm sorry".

She gave him a side hug and turned to the rest of them. "Asalaam alaikum! I apologize for that."

They all replied to her greeting.

"Welcome to Sarwad."

She insisted that they come inside for a cool drink and wouldn't take no for an answer. It wasn't long before Hashu relented.

Their home was much smaller than Agha Hasan's. The entire house was a large room with a curtain separating the kitchen and living room from the sleeping quarters. A small bucket, water urn and clay stove made up the kitchen. Across from it were several worn out pillows lined against the wall. It was quaintly simple but impeccably clean. She had them take off their shoes and have a seat on the pillows. Mukhtar brought them a jug of water and a single glass.

Hashu was quite taken aback at how simply they lived. "I don't have much," Mukhtar's mother confessed. "But I have a child, a roof over my head and can feed him plenty. Alhumdulillah. Oh, where are my manners? My name is Husna, and you've already met Mukhtar."

The boy gave them a cheeky wink.

"What about Mukhtar's father?" It slipped out before Rafay could stop himself.

Haroon gave him a withering look that Husna noticed. "No worries little one. My husband passed away from a disease a few years ago. It had spread throughout the village and killed many people. That was before the healer arrived in our village."

They expressed their condolences. She told them some very useful things like information about the small caravan sarai in town and the best places to buy supplies.

Hashu cast a glance out the window and was surprised to see the sun lower than he thought. He excused himself and asked for

directions to the caravan sarai. She was very helpful and a little sad at seeing them go.

“Come back any time!”

They found the place easily enough. It was a relatively small town and so all the shops were in one area. There was a small mosque, several stalls, and the caravan sarai. A merry man greeted them with open arms and had them in a room quicker than they could say salam. And it only cost them a piece of gold a night. Their room was furnished with six beds, a fireplace in the corner and a water jug. Once they had stashed away their supplies, the younger children wanted to explore.

Relieved that they weren't too shaken after what happened in Akbarabad, he let them go as long as they stayed with Nomi and returned before dark. It would also give him and Fati some time to discuss their next steps.

Once the little party left, he unrolled the map in the only spare space in the middle of the room.

“We have to figure out what to do next,” Hashu told her. “Where are we going, how to get there and how long before we leave? Also, do you think there's a chance we'll be followed here?”

Fati raised her shoulders. “It's possible. Although, I don't think so. We have almost a day's head start and there are too many villages in the surrounding area. But I wouldn't stay for more than a few days.”

“I agree. It's too risky to stay long. Any idea where we should go?”

“Here,” She pegged her finger on a town by the sea.

“Zerzura?” Hashu mentally tallied the days in his head. “On foot it'd take us a week at least. Why there?”

“That's where the author of the book was from. Maybe he, or someone there, can give us more information about the Sultanate.”

Hashu nodded. It wasn't a great plan but he could think of nothing else.

“It still doesn't answer why they were after us,” Hashu frowned.

“We'll figure that out. But we can't do that in a jail cell. Now let's plan the route.”

The started to chart the path, all the places to stop and how long it would take. They had just put the map away when there was a rapid knock on the door.

Hashu gave Fati a tense look.

“Hamza Bhaiya!” came Maya’s voice. “Can we come in?”

He visibly relaxed. It was just their siblings. He called out ‘yes’. When they opened the door, he noticed an extra person with them.

“Asalaam Alaikum everyone. Mukhtar! I didn’t expect to see you here, does your mother know?”

“Of course!” the boy chirped.

“You have to see the place Mukhtar showed us!” Maya gushed. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Fati and Hashu shared a look and shrugged. They might as well. They locked the room behind them and followed Mukhtar. He led them out of the caravan sarai, and headed in the opposite direction from where they first entered. As they progressed, the number of houses got fewer until there were only fences and fields.

“Over there!” They followed his outstretched arm. Neither of them had any words.

Fati could hardly believe her eyes. It was a city. Tall buildings, paved roads and empty fountains with elaborate carvings.

“What is this place?” she breathed.

“That’s Sarwad,” explained Mukhtar. “Or what it used to be. Come on, I’ll explain on the way.”

He led them down the trodden path. As they got closer, the dirt became paved road. They passed massive city gates that were flung open. The entire town was empty. The wooden doors and window shutters had been eaten away, swinging dejectedly from their hinges. Tall buildings loomed over them, the vacant entryways gaping at the little party.

“My mother says, before I was born, that Sarwad wasn’t always a village. Before, it was a huge city and really popular with traders. People from all over the Sultanate would come here. That’s why it got the name Sarwad, it means story. We became really famous for our storytellers because we had tales from so many lands.”

“What happened here? Why is it abandoned?” Hashu asked.

Mukhtar shrugged. “I don’t know all the details. My mother says there was an important man and he really liked the city. He would send his caravans here all the time. When he died, people stopped sending business here. Eventually, there were so few people that there weren’t enough to maintain the city so we left. Without the trade, they became farmers to survive. Ooh, this one is really cool!”

He led them into a particularly tall building. To their surprise, it turned out to be a large library. It was grand, with several shelves though many of them were only half full. Fati was surprised at the amount of books and dust.

“Wow, this is amazing,” Haroon said in awe. As if on cue, he sneezed loudly.

“And clearly, no one has been here in a while,” Rafay commented over Haroon’s sniffing.

Mukhtar hopped on top of one of the tables. “Kinda hard to use a library when you can’t read.”

Maya looked at him in surprise. “You can’t read?”

He shrugged. “None of us can. All the scholars left and that knowledge died with the older people. Besides, it doesn’t really help with farming so no one tried to learn.”

“But it’s so important to know how to read!” Maya argued.

The boy held up his hands. “Don’t shoot the messenger. We would if we could, but we can’t.”

Nomi meandered near a shelf where Hashu had found some books on fighting techniques. They had found everything from ‘Twenty Ways To Cook Tomatoes’ to ‘A Thorough Analysis On Ancient Battle Tactics’. In his hand was a book on weaponry and the different kinds found in other parts of the world.

“What does it say?” A small voice asked. Mukhtar was oddly timid when doing so. Nomi took a seat on the ground and patted the spot beside him. The boy sat down.

Nomi pointed to the title. “Weaponizing the world. It’s about different kinds of weapons from different nations.”

“Wow...” Mukhtar marvelled. His small hands delicately grazed over the scuffed cover, almost fearfully as though he could knock

a letter out of place.

“Sometimes,” Mukhtar said softly. “I like to come and look at the pictures.” He looked up wistfully and Nomi followed his gaze to where Fati was looking at a text ridden book with no pictures. In that moment, he didn’t look like the precocious little man who escorted them in the village. More like a small child too scared to ask for something he wanted.

Nomi suddenly stood up. “Wait here.”

He didn’t wait for Mukhtar’s nod before he starting browsing the shelves. It took him a little bit, but finally, right beside a whole shelf of Qurans, he found it.

It was only half as tall as the other shelves, and from the chipped and stained wood, he could tell it had probably been green. Avoiding the dusty rug, he reached over and plucked a book. It was in pretty good shape. Nomi ran a hand over it, smacking away the dust bunnies against his clothes, sending them flying into the air. He headed back to where he found Mukhtar flipping through the book on weapons. He had stopped on a page on panther knuckles from the Far East Kingdom.

“I have something like those.”

The boy looked up and gave him an awestruck expression.

“Haro-Haris helped me make them.” Thankfully, it didn’t look like Mukhtar noticed the slip-up.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to the book in Nomi’s hand.

Hashu watched as Nomi whispered something in Mukhtar’s ear. The child’s curious expression melted to confusion. Then the corners of his lips turned up and he looked at Nomi in shock.

“Really?” he all but shouted. Nomi grinned and gave him a nod.

Hashu, curiously made his way over. “What’s happening here?”

“Look!” Mukhtar thrust his arms up to show Hashu.

“The childrens Qaida” Hashu read, a smile growing on his face.

“He gave you a letter book?”

Mukhtar pumped his head up and down so fast, Hashu thought he might hurt himself. “I’m going to learn to read!”

”Inshallah,” Hashu added.

“Inshallah,” the boy repeated. His hand traced the letters on the book, his mouth slightly parted in wonder, his eyes hungrily eyeing the mysterious text.

“We should start heading back,” Hashu told them, glancing out one of the holes in the roof. “It’s going to get dark soon.

Mukhtar’s eyes widened. “Mother doesn’t like it when I’m not at home after dark.”

Haroon and Rafay, who joined them at Hashu’s call, shared a mischievous look.

“Well I guess last one to the village is a rotten potato!” The three of them took off out the door, Haroon in the lead with Rafay and Mukhtar on his heels.

Maya rolled her eyes, “Boys.”

The rest of them followed at a much more sedate pace.

“A part of me honestly can’t believe that they have this entire treasure trove and none of them can use it,” Fati shook her head incredulously.

The others shook their heads.

“Ouch!” Maya yelped, grabbing onto her foot.

“What happened?” Fati asked worriedly.

“I don’t know. I felt something prick my foot.”

“There!” Nomi’s sharp eye caught the disappearing tail of a snake. “I think you were bitten.”

Fati moved the flap of her shoe to get a closer look. “I’ll take a look when we get back to the room. Can you hang on till then?”

Maya nodded and they continued. They were nearly there when they noticed Maya was sweating profusely.

Hashu frowned. The evening was quite cool, but she had beads forming on his forehead and her skin was covered in a thin sheen of perspiration.

“Fati. Something’s not right with Maya.”

The girl turned and her breath hitched. She rushed forward, one hand going to Maya’s forehead and another to her wrist. She then bent down and unfurled the girl’s shoe.

They stared in shock. Her seemingly innocent bite had swollen, the skin around it was starting to bruise.

“Hashu Bhaiya, I don’t feel so good,” she wheezed. He didn’t have a chance to respond when her eyes fluttered close and she tipped backwards.

He leapt forward and grabbed her out of the air. Hashu felt his brain freeze as she slumped lifelessly in his arms.

“What do we do?” he asked Fati in a whisper, not trusting his voice.

Fati’s own breathing was faster than a stallion. “We need to get her back to the village.”

Hashu nodded and slipped a hand under Maya’s knees and back, easily lifting her up. The three of them wasted no time and sprinted.

Nomi and Fati kept throwing back glances. Hashu didn’t look down. The sight of Maya so quiet in his arms was like an arrow in his heart.

“Hashu Bhaiya?” she mumbled.. “It hurts..”

That started a fire in him. “You’ll be alright Maya. Bhaiya’s got you.”

She nodded, her head falling back against his arm.

‘*Ya Allah(swt)*’ the words repeated in his heart non stop, even as the village came into view.

He noticed the three boys by the entrance.

“Mukhtar! Take us to the healer, quick!” Nomi asked between panting breaths. The boy nodded and headed towards the village square. The three older siblings followed after him.

Rafay and Haroon shared a look. Something had happened to Maya. They took off after their siblings.

“What’s wrong with Maya?” Haroon asked.

“How would I know?” Rafay retorted. Haroon noticed Rafay looked a little scared.

They raced to keep up with their older siblings.

Mukhtar led them straight through town to a small house not much different to his own. The roof was thatched with large palm leaves and there was a curling smoke from somewhere behind the house. The whole place was washed in orange and pink from the sun’s dying rays.

Without waiting for them, Mukhtar ran up and banged on the door. “Baba Yunus! Baba Yunus!”

The door swung open to reveal a bedraggled old man.

“Baba Yunus we need your help!”

The man’s look was briefly annoyed but quickly changed to concern. “What’s the problem Mukhtar?”

Hashu stepped forward, Maya still limp in his arms. “Our sister, she was bit by a snake, she just collapsed.”

He patted a table in the middle of the room. Hashu laid her down, his stomach in knots at how cold and clammy her skin was.

“Will she be alright?”

The old man hummed. He paced his fingers on his temple and squeezed his eyes shut. Hashu looked to Fati but noticed she was frowning in confusion, equally perplexed at what this man was doing.

“Do you remember what the snake looked like?”

“It was light brown with small black scales,” Nomi offered.

The man nodded grievously. “A Sarwad sidewinder. Venomous. Luckily I have just the cure.”

Hashu sighed in relief as he pulled down a bottle from the nearby shelf. Using a stick, he fished out a damp piece of parchment that had smeared words on one side.

“Put this under her pillow and chant Surah Fatih seventeen times under the moon. Also feed her this once a day for seven days.” He handed Fati a small corked bottle.

“Now that’ll be ten gold pieces.” he grinned, Hashu tried not to grimace at the blackened teeth. “I also accept cows, chickens and vegetables. No fruit though.”

Hashu frowned. “We don’t have that.”

The man huffed. “Fine what do you have? If you can’t pay, I can’t give you this special dua soaked in Zam Zam water and blessed by the grave of Hazrat Muhammad(pbuh) himself.”

“This is just lavender and ginger,” Fati whispered. In her hand, the bottle was uncorked. She lowered it slowly onto the table, a calculating look in her eyes.

Hashu and the other boys watched with wide eyes.

“Now see here, that’d be the best medicine in this part of the country!” the man blabbered.

“Lavender can’t cure snake venom! And that paper has no dua! It’s nonsense!” Fati confronted in a steely voice. Her eyes widened in realisation. “You’re not even a real healer are you?”

“Now see here you horrid, rude-” he stalked up to Fati but Hashu jumped in front.

“Back off,” he threatened, his voice cold and emotionless. “Speak with respect.”

The other three boys watched in surprise. They had never seen their older siblings so fearsome.

“What’s going on? Is everything alright Mukhtar?” a man’s voice called out.

Turned out the noise had drawn the attention of some of the villagers.

“Ah Agha, so glad you’ve come,” Baba Yunus shoved Nomi as he rushed outside. “You must throw these children out of the village, for they are disrespecting me!” He crossed his arms confidently over his portly stomach.

Hashu stepped out after him. There were a small group of villagers, craning their necks curiously to find out what was going on.

“Is this true?” the man gave Hashu a hard look but the boy didn’t flinch.

“It is not,” he replied back confidently. “That man is a fraud.”

“Lies!” Baba Yunus hissed.

“It is not!” Fati had joined them outside. “This man is using you and your people. His ‘duas’ are only nonsense on a piece of paper. I bet that water isn’t even Zam Zam water, where would he find that out here? Makkah is leagues away and not many travellers go through your town. And his medicine!” Fati held out the bottle, “It’s just lavender and ginger! You can’t cure snake venom with that!”

The villagers whispered noisily amongst themselves.

“How do you know that?” the man turned to her.

“My mother’s healer journal.” Fati replied instantly.

The man’s eyes widened. “You can read?”

“We all can,” confirmed Hashu. “Which is how we know he’s lying and using you.”

All the villagers turned to Baba Yunus. “Is this true?”

“Now see here....I was just trying to-”

“Get him! He’s a liar!”

The mob angrily pushed forward, circling Baba Yunus.

“They’re liars! I have helped you!”

“Enough!” the man ordered. The villagers instantly went quiet. “Baba Yunus. Pack your things and leave immediately.”

The old man spluttered. His eyes caught Hashu and he turned to him.

“You pathetic little b-” his voice was cut off by a hand on his chest that stopped him moving forward.

“If I were you, I would think very carefully about my next words,” Nomi whispered, “No one insults my brother.”

“If I were you, I would think very carefully about what I do next. Your move.” Fati quipped.

It worked and Baba Yunus backed off. “I’ll get you back for this. You just wait!”

“Come on, let’s get Marziya and get out of here,” Hashu ordered.

Nomi retrieved the still unconscious girl. They headed back to the caravan sarai, the mob of villagers following them.

“A moment please.” The man from earlier stopped Hashu and Fati.

“Get Marziya upstairs. Mukhtar, you head home.” The other children nodded and headed off.

Fati and Hashu turned to face the man. Gone was the aggressive and stern nature from earlier. “I wanted to thank you for exposing Baba Yunus. He has been fooling us for a very long time. We are in your debt.”

Hashu shook his head. “There is no debt, It was Allah’s (swt) doing. We would only want your friendship.”

The man grabbed Hashu’s hand and gave it a firm shake. “You’re a noble man, it will be an honour to be your friend. Your father must be very proud. If you need anything, we are at your service.”

“Thank you.” The father comment was not easy for Hashu to hear. “I am only in need of one thing, is there another healer in the village?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Hashu turned to Fati. “What do we do now?”

She was deep in thought. “Agha, we need a favour.”

“Anything, young Khanum.”



“Is thou sure thee should be working tomorrow?” Alizay asked in concern.

Hasan rolled his shoulder, stifling any sign of pain. He had just gotten back from the jail and the guards, especially the ones he had pummelled were less than gentle. But he didn’t want to worry his wife any more, so he smiled.

“I’m fine. I promise I’ll take it easy and rest plenty tonight,” he reassured her. A knock sounded on the door. Hasan frowned.

“Go upstairs.” Alizay wanted to refuse but she knew he was right. Just in case, she stayed by the stair wall.

Hasan opened the door but there were no soldiers, only a young man holding a letter. “I’m looking for Agha Hasan.”

“That’s me.”

He handed over the letter.

“Whose it from?” Alizay asked.

“I don’t know.” He opened the letter.

*Asalaam Alaikum Agha Hasan and Khanum Alizay,
First and foremost my siblings and I wanted to apologise for the
attack on your home. I don’t know who sent the soldiers or why,
but we never intended for any harm to come to you due to our
staying there. I can only hope that you’ll forgive us.
I’m ashamed to ask for more when you have already done so much
for us, but I have no choice. Our youngest sister Marziya is
extremely sick. There is no healer here and no one who can cure
her. You once mentioned your brother was a healer.
I swear in front of Allah(swt), when I get a chance, I’ll return
every one of your favours, Inshallah.*

There are not many people we can trust right now, but I know you and Khanum wouldn't betray us. We're at Sarwad.

We need you Agha, now more than ever.

May Allah(swt) protect you.

- Hamza

Alizay's hands flew to her mouth. "That poor girl!"

Hasan was already half way out the door. "Write a response Alizay. Tell them I'm sending Hussain."

He didn't even think twice. He had to help them. Alizay grabbed some parchment and scribbled down a response. She handed it over to the man.

"Make haste, let them know help is on the way."

He nodded and left.

Luckily the healer's home wasn't far from Hasan's own home. His brother Hussain lived a little more in town, away from the hustle bustle of traders and travellers. He had arrived home the night before, right after Hasan's house had been raided.

The blacksmith pounded a heavy fist on the door.



"What if Agha is mad at us? What if his brother doesn't come?" Haroon whispered.

Rafay shook his head. "We can't think like that. If Hashu Bhaiya thinks that Agha's brother will come, then we need to believe it too. What we can do is pray."

They were sitting in the mosque. It was relatively empty given it was the middle of the night. That man Hashu and Fati were talking to was kind enough to provide one of his men as a messenger. Turns out the cow wagon they were on was quite slow. Akbarabad was less than half a day's journey on horseback from Sarwad.

It was an odd silence the two brothers sat in. Majority of their regular conversation was jibing and banter. Nomi had rarely seen them so serious before.

He felt very restless himself. Not being at Hashu's side made him feel a little lost but his brother's instructions were clear. Both of the older twins refused to budge from Maya's side. He had

never seen either of them that furious before. Hashu was always composed and Fati was always the picture of calm. To see them that enraged at Baba Yunus's attempt to scam them only told Nomi how worried they were.

He returned his focus to his prayer mat. Maya was going to need all the prayers they could send.



Working in a healer's clinic in a travellers town often meant seeing the strangest of sights. That could probably explain why Rustam wasn't alarmed to see his mentor throwing supplies into a bag in the middle of the night.

"Please don't tell me it's another sword fight at a caravan sarai?" Memories of the last one still made him sick. Why couldn't people fight with spoons instead of swords? It would save them a lot of trouble.

"No. Pack your things. We're heading to Sarwad."

Rustam nodded. He began to grab some basic tools. "Why are we going?" he asked while putting away a pestle and mortar.

"A little girl, someone who Hasan Bhai knows, is very sick. If we hurry, we can be there before dawn. Once you're done with the tools, get the horses ready. We ride as soon as we're ready.

Rustam nodded and sped up. This must be something serious if Agha Hasan came to them. He put away the last of the tools, luckily there weren't that many, and was out the door.

"Hey girl," he patted his horse's wet nose and shoved her long face away when she sleepily tried to nibble his ear.

"None of that. We've got an emergency." He grabbed the bridle, leading her out of the stall. With his other hand he did the same to Agha's horse.

Rustam had barely finished saddling them when Agha came out of the house and tossed him a bag. "We'll have to stop at the caravan sarai on the edge of town to grab a few things."

They secured the bags carefully so they wouldn't be jostled too much. Rustam leapt up, grabbing the front of the saddle to swing himself into place.

"Ready?"

“Alhumdulilah”

“Good. Inshallah, we’ll be there before dawn.”

They set off on a side road to avoid the rush of caravans preparing to leave at night.

First, as he mentioned earlier, Hussain had them pull up in front of a caravan sarai. The owner greeted him warmly and pulled him aside. Rustam waited patiently near the door holding onto the horses reins. He already knew what Agha was going to get, this caravan sarai owner purchased rare shrubs and herbs for them from incoming travellers. It was more convenient than having them flood the clinic.

Hussain himself was inside by the kitchen entrance as his friend gathered the supplies he had purchased.

“You’re a healer!”

He turned to face who said that. It was an old man with sandy skin and wild grey hair peppered with white.

“Yes I am. Can I help you?”

The man scowled. “I was a healer too you know. Had ten cows, my own house and land. I was rich. And now look at me! Curse those wretched brats. She said I wasn’t real. Bah!” he muttered bitterly.

Hussain nodded him off, counting the moments till his friend returned. His arms contained various bottles and pouches.

Thanking him, Hussain counted out the money he owed and sprinted out. On his way out, he saw two guards escorting the old man from earlier.

‘I wonder what he did. Guess it never is dull in a travellers village.’ He and Rustam resumed their journey.

The guards let them through the city gates and then it was braving the desert. Rustam visited many villages before and always found travelling exciting. It sounded like a tale out of the stories he heard as a child.

Hussain seemed to already know the way, since he didn’t stop to consult a map even once. It was extremely dark and without a moon, it was near impossible to see. Hussain had actually tied Rustam’s horse to his own supply pack. They couldn’t afford to get lost.

“You said it was a little girl?” Rustam called over the sound of their horses galloping. “What happened to her?”

“I don’t know.” Hussain shouted back.



“I swear if I get my hands on them..”

If only he could get his hands around the old man’s neck. All he wanted to do was enjoy some cool sherbet with a hot meal but no. This man continued to ramble on and on about kids and villagers and cursing one or the other every sentence.

Finally the traveller had enough. He took the chance while the pathetic fool talked off the ear of another poor soul, and approached one of the caravan sarai’s guards.

“Asalaam Alaikum good men.” He received a firm nod in reply. “Pardon me but would it be possible to remove this man from the premises.”

“Is this man bothering you?” The guard’s tone was flat.

“I guess so, if I have to hear one more line about kids or villagers.”

That caught the guard’s attention. “What did he say?”

Pleased that they were finally taking him seriously, the traveller nodded. “He has been talking non-stop about how some desert kids got him kicked out of his village.”

He didn’t miss the look the guards shared.

“Thank you sir. We’ll take care of this.”

The two of them left their post and promptly scooped up the bumbling old fool from under his arms, practically carrying him outside. He continued to shout and curse all the way to the door until one of the guards threatened to gag him.

“*At last!*” the traveller thought to himself. He could finally enjoy his chicken kebabs. Silence never felt sweeter.



“We have the man, Captain,” the soldier saluted sharply.

Uzair nodded. “Send him in.”

The guard nodded and left. A stream of curses and excuses reached his ears.

“I swear I didn’t do nothing! Get your hands off me! Do you

know who I am?! I am the great Baba Yunus I will have you damned by-

“Silence!”

At the guards roar, Baba Yunus’s voice died in his throat.

“No need to shout. Who are you?”

“Captain Uzair, head of the village guards. I apologize for my men’s treatment. Is there anything I can get you Baba Yunus? Some food? Maybe a drink?”

“Sherbet?” His aged eyes lit up hopefully.

“But of course. Gohar, have the servants bring some...sherbet for Baba Yunus. He is our guest after all. If you will excuse me a moment.”

Uzair went up to his desk and unbuckled the strap holding his sword.

“What are you playing at?” Gohar asked, Baba Yunus was too busy admiring the office to listen in.

“When a hunter lays a trap...” he whispered, putting his swords and daggers on the table. “He doesn’t lay a net, he lays seed.”

The servant came in blearily with the sweet rose sherbet. It was the middle of the night after all.

“So tell me Baba Yunus, how does a man of your esteem find himself scraping the bowels of sherbet bowls in a caravan sarai at the end of town?”

The man spilled his whole tale, highly embellished and exaggerated, Uzair was sure.

“And so you see, it really was the fault of those scheming siblings,” he spat. Baba Yunus took a large swig of the glass in his hand, maroon dribbling through his unruly beard. Uzair forced down a grimace. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the man was kicked out for his manners.

“Tell me more about these *kids*”

“Oh I could tell you so much-”

He began to describe the children, not noticing the growing smile on Uzair’s face.

“I see. And you said you came from a village called Sarwad? Perfect.” he confirmed after the man finished. “Well, I’m afraid

our night has come to an end Baba Yunus. The guards will see you out.”

“Now just hang on a second, I’m a guest! You can’t throw me out! If you do, I’ll tell everyone that you tortured me and tried to throw me, a respectable healer, in jail!”

Baba Yunus crossed his arms over his chest confidently. He had them cornered.

Uzair gave Gohar an impressed look. “Quite the hustler Baba Yunus. Very well, Gohar, why don’t you show our guest the *special* quarters.”

Baba Yunus gave a large smile. “That’s right, I should be treated with the respect as I deserve.”

Gohar smirked. “Certainly. Follow me.”

He led the man to one of the side doors. The entire way Baba Yunus commented and criticized every thing his eyes set sight on.

“Lovely curtains, would have had them done a bit longer though, that looks more grand. Ooh, is that real silver? Must have cost a pretty coin. The chandelier could use some glass work...”

Gohar just ignored him. They entered into a small room. Baba Yunus looked around in disdain.

“What is this place? There is no bed, no couch, no food and drink! You call this a room?! Wait, what are you doing?”

Gohar was advancing towards with, his large hands wrapped in a black bowstring.

“You gave us some valuable information. I’m giving you your reward.”

Before Baba Yunus could blink Gohar had appeared behind him and slid the string around his neck.

The old man wheezed. His hands grappled at the string. It dug painfully into the folds of his neck. He tried to grab Gohar’s arm. The man didn’t budge.

Gohar himself watched with grim satisfaction as a hue of purple blossomed on Baba Yunus’s lip. He dipped down and whispered into the old fool’s ear, just as his eyes were fluttering shut.

“Hope you had a pleasant stay.”



Hashu's head flew up with a jolt. He was sitting beside Maya's bed, one hand grasping hers. Fati was on the other side, muttering a dua with a hand stroking the unconscious girl's head.

They were in their room at the caravan sarai. There was a knock at the door.

Hashu rose up and opened it to find the man who helped them. He stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

"Asalaam Alaikum...I'm sorry I don't know your name."

"Walaikum Salam, call me Dawud."

"Hamza"

"I'm sorry for disturbing you, Hamza. I know this is a difficult time for you and your siblings, but the messenger returned."

Dawud could see the hesitation in the boy's eyes as he held out a rolled up piece of parchment. "He came with this letter."

Hashu took it and stared at it.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Dawud asked.

Hashu swallowed. "I'm afraid of what's written," he confessed.

Dawud placed a hand on his shoulder. "No one but Allah(swt) is going to choose what happens to your sister. If they will not help, there will be another. We can not lose faith. No matter how grim things may seem."

There was something in Dawud's tone that told Hashu there was more to his statements.

"You speak from experience."

Dawud smiled. "You're sharp, I'll give you that. A few years ago there was an awful plague in our village. It took many lives, including Mukhtar's father."

Hashu nodded, Mukhtar's mother had mentioned that.

"My own daughter was among those who caught it. She was only a baby. I remember those nights sitting by her bedside feeling like a failure. As her father, it was my job to keep her safe and here she was in pain and I could do nothing."

"What happened to her?"

Dawud smiled. "She is a very happy and healthy young girl. And that's when I realized that I wasn't the one who was supposed

to save her. So I left affairs to the one who could. Trust in Allah(swt), He does not disappoint. Open your letter.”

Hashu obliged. The letter was only two lines long.

May Allah(swt) bless you all and keep you safe from the hands of evil. Help is on the way.

Forever your friends,

Hasan and Alizay

Hashu slumped against the wall in relief, all the strength he had been battling worry with, leaving his body.

“Hamza! Is everything alright?”

Hashu looked at Dawud’s concerned face, disbelief etched in his expression. “You were right Agha Dawud. Allah(swt) has sent us help.”



“There it is!” Hussain yelled. Rustam looked up from the sand and saw it. Past the stretch of cracked and shrivelled land was a small set of buildings. With the darkest hours behind them, and dawn on the approach, the little structure stood out more in the dull horizon.

“We’re almost there!”



“As you’ve ordered, we are arranging the best guards in the city.”

“How long will this take?” Uzair snapped impatiently.

The guard was hesitant but answered, “We’ll be ready to leave at dawn.”



10

Of Friends and Foes

Someone shook Fati awake. She blearily sat up to see Hashu's brown eyes searching hers.

"You asked me to wake you up. There's not much time left till Fajr."

The first thing her gaze looked for was Maya.

The girl was as still as she was the night before. Her skin was a sickly pain hue and her breaths were low and slow.

"Hey," Hashu drew her eyes away from their sister. Their baby sister. "She'll be alright. She's young, but she's always been a fighter."

Fati blinked back the traitorous tears in her eyes. All of her siblings needed her strength right now. If Hashu was holding himself together for them, she could do the same for him.

"I'll be fine. I just wish the healer was here."

"And he will be, Inshallah."

"What's that noise?" Rafay groggily murmured. There was a thundering of steps outside the door followed by intense pounding. The other boys jolted awake in surprise.

Hashu jumped over Haroon's feet and opened the door. There was a man on the other side. He was panting and leaning on the wall.

"Hamza?"

Hashu nodded.

“Agha Dawud sent me, the healer has arrived.”



“Where is the girl?” Hussain asked.

“Right this way,” the man led them through the town on a horse of his own. “She’s at the caravan sarai.”

They wasted no time, their racing rides catching the eye of the awaking town folk. The man pulled to a stop at a little square in front of one of the large buildings in the village.

“This way!” he urged. Hussain jumped off his horse, handing the rein to an awaiting stable boy. “Rustam, the bag!”

Rustam followed and they were ushered inside. The man led them to the second floor and stopped in front of a wooden door, which Dawud pounded on.

It was swiftly opened after the first knock. The first thing Hussain noticed was how young the boy was, he couldn’t have been older than Rustam. Greetings were quickly exchanged and they were let in. What he saw left him more surprised. There were five more children, one of whom was laid on the bed. That must be his patient. He wasted no time in being by her side.

“What happened to her?”

“She was bitten by a snake,” the oldest boy replied. “It was light brown with small black scales.”

Hussain nodded. “Rustam, the notebook please.”

It was promptly handed to him. Under his watchful eyes, he rapidly flicked through the pages.

“Rugarian Riverjack, Akbarian Asp...Ah! Sarwad Sidewinder!”

He could feel them peering over his shoulder as he ran his finger down the notes.

“Rustam, the venom bag, find the sidewinder bottle please.”

Rustam, from their sacks, removed a small bag. Inside was a myriad of bottles, each carefully wrapped and labelled.

“Let us help,” one of the younger boys offered, Rustam nodded but he was a little surprised. He thought Sarwad villagers didn’t know how to read. Suddenly it clicked to him. Living in the caravan sarai, the small supply bags around them, even the way they were dressed. These must be travellers. That and the fact

Agha Hasan knew them.

“Here!” one of the traveller boys called, giving the bottle to Agha Hussain.

The man was already crushing herbs in a pestle and mortar.

“How long ago was she bitten?”

The oldest girl responded, “A little before dusk last night.”

Hussain mentally frowned. That was not good news, the poison would have had time to spread. That explained her pale hue.

“I need room to work,” he told the eldest girl. She nodded and asked most of them to wait outside. Only her and one of the older boys stayed.



Rafay ran his finger along the ring of the cup for the umpteenth time. Across him, Haroon was tracing the grooves of the wooden table. The caravan sarai owner was kind enough to provide them with some fruit and water. They sat on the table untouched. Nomi was pacing the length of the room enough to wear in the floor. He kept throwing desperate glances to the room door. Rafay didn't blame him. He would do anything to be up there, but he knew there was nothing they could do.

“It's Fajr time,” Nomi muttered. “We'll pray here.”

It wasn't a question and so the other two boys grabbed some sajdigas from a nearby box and stood in a line on the scuffed stone floor.

“Uh, Nom- I mean Nabeel Bhaiya, shouldn't you be in front?” The pseudonym slipping on Haroon's tongue.

Nomi shook his head firmly. “Hamza Bhai leads the salat. I will not stand in his place.”

So they prayed in a line. Even after Fajr was done, they continued. Haroon's fingers were skimming over the beads of a rosary, Nomi was in sajdah and Rafay was reading a dua.

The door to the caravan sarai swung open and the owner walked in. He gave the boys a sad look.

“Any news?”

Nomi shook his head.

“The whole village is praying for her you know.”

“Jazakallah Agha, that is very kind of you.”

The man smiled and headed to the kitchen.

Nomi wasn't sure how long it had been before the door of the room swung open. All three boys jumped from there spots and rushed to the base of the stairs.

Hashu stood there, he looked ragged but there was a smile on his face.

“They did it. Her fever broke. May-Marziya's going to be fine.” The air chorused with ‘Alhumdulilahs’ and Nomi grabbed Haroon and Rafay in a rib-crushing hug. No one noticed the mistake with all the cheering.

Rafay pushed himself out and took a deep breath. “When can we see her?”

“Soon. They're just giving her a dose of medicine. In fact Agha Hussain is sure she'll be awake soon.”

“I'm going to find Agha Dawud! We should sacrifice a goat, no, a whole cow! They'll be a feast this morning!” The caravan sarai owner ran out of the room before anyone could stop him.

Hashu felt a warmth blossom in his chest. He didn't care about anything else. Maya was going to be okay and that was all that mattered to him.



“So just give her another dose of this after she has breakfast. Don't worry if she can't eat much. If possible, get her some soup.”

The girl nodded attentively, drinking in every word. Agha Hussain gave her a smile.

“Don't forget to eat something yourself. You can't help her if you fall sick too.”

“I will.”

“Rustam, please wrap up the supplies.”

They headed outside. He smiled as the crowd of children piled into the room. Hussain turned and was halfway out the door when a statement caused him to stop.

“At least that old fraud got one thing right.”

“Let it go *Raza*”

Hussain turned back. “What fraud?”

The boy who made the comment sat wide eyed and a little abashed that he had been overheard. The oldest boy leapt in.

“There was a healer in the village, but it turns out he was a fraud. He had been using the fact that the villagers couldn’t read and made up fake remedies. When he tried to give us some for our sister, Fahima caught him and the villagers kicked him out.”

Hussain contemplated. “What a small world, when I was leaving Akbarabad I saw an old man who told me he was a healer. Well, until some kids came along. ”

He decided to leave out the man’s accusations and more colourful statements.

“Last I saw, he was being escorted by some guards.”

Five heads snapped in his direction.

“Guards? As in city guards?” one of the boy’s confirmed.

Hussain nodded. Curiously, all five of them looked worried.

“Stay here,” The oldest boy ordered. “I need to have a word with Agha Dawud.”

He headed out of the room, thanking Hussain again. Before he descended the stairs, the healer caught up to him.

“Wait, why are you so worried about the city guards?”

The boy hesitated.

“Don’t worry, you trust Hasan Bhai right? You can trust me. Why else would he send me to you?”

The man had a point so Hashu conceded. “Your brother took us in when we first arrived into Akbarabad with no money or ways to earn it. He gave us his home and food.”

Hussain smiled. That sounded like his brother.

“One night, some soldiers tried to secretly raid the house. They were after us and Agha Hasan helped us escape. Before you ask, I don’t know why they came after us, but we did nothing wrong.”

Hashu frowned. “If the person you saw was Baba Yunus, the old healer,” he explained at Hussain’s confused expression. “Then that means the guards might know we’re here.”

“My brother spoke highly of you and your siblings. Let me help you.”



“That’s the village up ahead!”

The navigating soldier pointed to a growing speck on the horizon. The sun had long since risen and it didn’t help that they were riding fully clothed in armour in the sweltering heat. The horse beneath him was panting too, but they had already wasted enough time being fed and watered. Various calls of ‘Ho!’, ‘Giddy up!’, and ‘Hey!’ sounded around him.

Slowly, the speck grew. In front of his eyes, the black dots turned into little homes and fences. He was jolted, but remained firm in his seat when the ground became hard and cracked.

Uzair snapped his whip and felt the horse speed up. There was no one on the worn trodden path to the village so they stormed in. They passed green fields and only once did they spot someone, a small boy. But he had already darted out of view when they rode close.

“Onwards!” he yelled, his men cheering behind him. The houses got closer and in the blurs that passed by, he noticed some doors and window shutters opening.

The horsemen stampeded into the town square, their rides rearing noisily.

“People of Sarwad!” Uzair shouted. It only took a few moments for the crowd to assemble. “On behalf of his Majesty the Sultan, We the soldiers of Akbarabad bid you well and seek your help. We are looking for six young fugitives that have escaped from Akbarabad. We have it on good authority that they have fled into your village. If anyone has any information, come forth and you shall be rewarded.

No one moved, but whispers erupted amongst the crowd. A middle aged man stepped out.

“I’m afraid we have seen no such people, Captain.”

Uzair squinted in the sunlight. “Are you the leader of this village?”

Dawud nodded. “I suppose so”

“If you can tell us anything about these fugitives, the reward is plentiful for you and your people.”

Dawud frowned. “I told you, there is no fugitive here. Your information is wrong.”

Uzair slid off his horse and stepped up to the man. The farmer didn't budge, meeting his gaze calmly.

"Very well." Uzair turned to his men. "Check every building! Leave no stone unturned!"

There were gasps of surprise as the men methodically moved forward. They scouted every home, turning over rugs, knocking away furniture and opening every door and trapdoor in sight.

"Please step aside, Khanum. We have orders to search the property." Husna felt a small push by her knee as Muhammad made his way in front.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The soldier ignored him and addressed Husna. "Move aside!" he shouted startling the poor woman.

"Hey!" a voice called behind them. The soldier turned around.

"The only way you will search is if you do so respectfully," Dawud warned. He had two more men behind him and his wife rushed forward gathering the worried Husna in her arms.

"You dare oppose a soldier of his Majesty, the Sultanate's army?" the soldier threatened, a hand on the sheath of his sword.

"I *dare*," Dawud told him, coming so close he could have grabbed the sword from the soldier's hand. "To oppose anyone who unjustly raises their hand or voice at my people. Soldier or not."

The soldier was about to retort, but seeing the shiny pitchforks and wary stances of the other two men made him reconsider. He turned and entered the house.

"Mukhtar, Khanum Husna come here. I'll explain everything later."

With a nervous look, Husna moved, her arms gripping tightly onto those of Dawud's wife. Mukhtar had one hand clasping her skirt. He was a little scared, but was wearing a brave look. He liked the other kids much better than these scary people.

The soldier soon came out, a haughty sneer on his face. "It's clear," he told his waiting men. As they turned to leave Dawud heard them mutter something under his breath.

"Just give us the order Agha," one of his villagers murmured, glaring at the passing soldiers.

“No, let them search. We have nothing to hide.”

Uzair watched the soldiers go through each of the hut-like hovels these desert people called home.

“Captain,” Ibrahim came up to him, panting intensely and swiping a leather clad arm off his brow. “There’s no one here.”

Uzair narrowed his eyes focusing on Dawud, who was mumbling something to a man laden with satchels. By their side was a younger boy who had just passed his teenage years.

“Where are they?” he asked Dawud, in a voice so low it barely met his own ears.

Dawud shared a look with the satchel man and shrugged his shoulders, replying a little too innocently, “Why Captain, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”



There was no question about it. Travelling the desert was infinitely easier with a wagon than on foot. Hashu and Nomi were in the front of this one, with Fati and Maya in the back. Beside them, Haroon and Rafay were driving the other loaded with supplies. Even from here, he could hear the two of them bickering. The sight filled Hashu with a bit of relief. Everyone was feeling a little better.

A few hours earlier...

“Hashu Bhaiya?” He didn’t bother to hide the tears in his eyes. “Why are you crying?”

He grabbed Maya and held her close. He could feel her little arms circling him. Fati joined them and one by one they were swallowed in a sea of arms and some hastily swiped tears. When they pulled away, Hashu tucked a loose strand back into her scarf. There was the faintest hint of colour in her cheeks.

“Never scare me like that again.”

“Hamza,” a voice from the door called. Hashu reluctantly pulled back and opened it.

“Agha Hussain.”

“It’s done.” Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Rafay and Haroon leaning in curiously. Maybe it was better to do this outside.

Hussain caught his eye and gave him room to come out. "I have a way for you to be far away from here in case any soldiers decide to stop by."

Hashu's gaze fell to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Hussain asked. With a young apprentice of his own, he was well versed in the behaviour of young men.

"There is no way we can return this Agha, this favour of you or your brother."

Hussain laid a hand on Hashu's shoulder.

"Hamza, I may not know much about you or your siblings, but I know you're barely an adult yourself and in an impossible situation. If Hasan Bhai and I have the means, it is not a choice, it is our duty to help you. And before you argue, this is a duty given to us by Allah(swt). I am honoured that he chose me to help not just you but many others every day. Do not sully that by being in our debt. You owe us nothing." He pointed upwards. "But you owe him everything."

And he was right. Maya had improved dramatically. She was still a little weak, but at least she was talking, moving, even arguing with the younger twins a little while later.

Given their route was a common travellers path, they did see other travellers. Most of them were smaller caravans with no more than a few horses and camels. The boys made sure to cover their faces completely and exchange no more than polite greetings. Once they were well out of earshot, Rafay called out to them from the seat of the other wagon.

"The horses are tired. Should we stop?"

The curtain behind Hashu pulled back and Fati stuck her head out.

"No need, there's a caravan sarai up ahead. We can give them some rest there."

She was right. It didn't take long for a building to appear on the horizon. Well timed too. Hashu's horse was panting heavily.

"Just a little farther," he whispered soothingly, easing up on the reins. Even under the cover of the wagon, he was dizzied by the heat. The very air in front of him danced around in waves.

They veered off the flat path to the caravan sarai. It was

humble, but large enough to easily accommodate several guests. Hashu and Rafay leapt off to talk to the approaching stable boy. He greeted them cordially.

“How much would it cost to have the horses stabled till sundown?”

“Two gold pieces. Do you need a room?”

“We’ll be fine, thank you.”

Hashu turned to Rafay. “I’m going to move the wagons to the side. Can you make sure the horses get in fine?”

Rafay nodded dutifully. Hashu headed back to the wagon. He pulled the curtain aside.

“Is there anything we need?”

Fati tapped her chin as she contemplated.

“How much gold do we have left? There are a few things Agha Hussain recommended to pick up, he says they’re useful as quick remedies.”

“Okay, here’s the bag. Why don’t you check out the caravan sarai and see if you can find any of them? Make sure to take Haroon with you. I’ll stay with Maya.”

Fati took the pouch from his outstretched hand. She climbed out, adjusting her face veil in place. No need to draw unwanted attention to themselves.

“Haroon!” she called the boy over. He hopped off the cart and the two made their way inside.

It was much cooler inside although the caravan sarai was much busier than any of the ones they had previously visited. Fati preferred it that way. The more people there were, the less attention would be on them. She ran into another girl by the kitchens who greeted her extremely jubilantly. Fati pulled her veil up, it would have been rude not to.

The girl was a little shorter than Fati, but wore a grin that lit up her entire face. She could have sworn there was a twinkle in one of her hazel brown eyes.

“Asalaam Alaikum! Oh my Allah(swt)! You’re veil is so pretty! My name is Jamila!”

Before Fati could reply she was pulled into a strong hug. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Haroon smirking.

“What’s your name?”

“Fahima. I’m looking for some herbs.”

“Of course, right this way.”

Fati didn’t have a chance to protest as she was pulled to another room. It was smaller than the hall they were in before and there was another man looking over some bags lying around. Each was filled to the brim with something or the other. The bright hues of red and orange were probably spices, the more mud-like and earthy tones were the herbs. Well, probably not all of them. Fati pointed out the ones she wanted and Jamila bundled them up.

“Do you need help taking these outside?”

“That’s what he’s for.” Fati gave Haroon a smile. He just rolled his eyes and took the sack to put it in the wagon. The girls followed him to the door.

“Are you staying the night?”

Fati shook her head. “No, only till sundown. We wanted to rest the horses.”

Jamila looked disappointed. “Oh. I had hoped you’d stay longer. There’s barely any girls here.”

“Really?”

“Well, there are some women. Mostly travellers’ wives or ladies who are too lofty to speak to a lonely caravan-sarai owner’s daughter.”

There was an uncharacteristic bite in the latter part of her statement. And the girl made no effort to hide her downcast expression as she tucked away a stray hair back into her scarf. Fati frowned.

“That’s ridiculous.”

Jamila looked up at her in curiosity.

“Your father has a halal business and makes a hard-earned, honest living. What’s there to be ashamed of? Besides, in Allah’s(swt) eyes, we are all the same, be it a queen or a maid. It’s foolish that people put so much importance in something as flighty as wealth.”

She received an appreciative and curious look.

“Not many people think like you.”

Fati paused. Had she said too much?

“I wish they did.”

She let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. Looking up, she noticed Rafay by the stables. He was talking to two men.

Jamila followed her gaze. “Someone you know?”

“My brother. I think he's watching the horses.”

Jamila frowned. “A word of advice, I wouldn't want my brother talking to *them*.”

She said the last word like it poisoned her tongue. That instantly set Fati on alert.

“What do you mean?”

Jamila's gaze had not left the trio. “Those men are part of the Sultanate's army. Now I'm not one to tell tales, but let's just say that used to be something to be proud of. They come through here often with kids.”

Fati gave her a puzzled look so she elaborated.

“Anytime one of the villages or towns has too many orphans, they send a message to the larger cities. Guards are sent to pick up the children and bring them back to work as labour and servants.” There was a sad look in her eyes. “The youngest I saw was about five.”

“Give me a moment.” Before Jamila could stop her. Fati whipped on her face veil and headed towards them. As she got closer, she could catch phrases of the conversation. She did not like what she was hearing.

“Yeah so enough about us and being soldiers, what about you? Are you here alone?”

“No, I'm with my siblings.” Rafay did look slightly uncomfortable at the turn of questioning.

“What about your parents?”

“Raza!” Fati called before Rafay had a chance to answer. His gaze snapped to hers and she saw recognition in it even though he could only see her eyes. The guards also turned in curiosity. She dropped her voice a little to sound older.

“Help me put the stuff away.” She copied the way she had heard some of the other women talk. Rafay seemed to have sensed

the edge in her tone and said goodbye to the two men, following her back to the wagon. Once they were out of sight, she removed her veil.

Rafay had crossed his arms over his chest and was clearly annoyed. “What is it?” he asked. Fati did not like the irritation lacing his tone.

“We’re supposed to be laying low.”

“I wasn’t saying anything. They were just telling me about this new training scheme for older kids who want to join the Sultanate’s army. I’m not a child, Fati Baji, you don’t have to keep treating me like one,” he huffed.

She frowned. “Rafay, did you know those two men were soldiers?”

Judging by his expression, he didn’t.

“So? I was just another desert nomad to them.”

“They were asking if you were alone. I was told these guards move kids to the larger cities for indentured work.”

He went silent.

“You’re a smart boy Rafay, don’t put yourself in situations without thinking.”

He was about to reply when Hashu turned up from behind the wagon.

“Is everything alright?”

“It’s fine.” Fati reassured. “I think we should rest a bit. It’ll be sundown before we know it. Then we can be on our way Inshallah.”

She gave Rafay a meaningful look and entered the wagon. He turned and went into the other. Haroon was lounging inside with a hand tucked under his head.

“Is everything alright? You look ... annoyed.”

For once there was no jest in his twin’s tone. Just curiosity. Rafay rolled his eyes.

“Fati Baji saw me talking to some guys and she completely panicked.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“And? I know there’s more to the story.”

Rafay didn’t know if it was a blessing or a curse to have people who knew you so well.

“Okay, so they might have been soldiers. But I swear on Allah(swt) I didn’t tell them anything! We were just talking what it was like.”

Rafay was expecting Haroon to burst into a rant or something. Instead his brother was stoic.

“First, don’t swear on Allah(swt) for such small things. Secondly, do you want my opinion?”

Rafay sat down. “I’m just sick of being treated like a child. Especially by Fati Baji.”

“Then don’t act like one.”

He shot his twin a glare.

“What does that mean?”

Haroon pushed himself up to face Rafay. “Exactly what you heard. If you don’t want to be treated like a child, then don’t act like one.”

“I don’t act like a child!”

Haroon raised an eyebrow at his yelling. “Really? You always go around complaining that the older siblings, especially Fati Baji are coddling you. That they don’t trust you. Well, what have you done to show you’re trustworthy? Even right now, you know that Fati Baji was right. What if they had been looking for us? What if they had been sent from Akbarabad?”

Rafay blew a stray hair out of his eye. He couldn’t fault Haroon there.

“The problem is that you want to go gallivanting off with half of the knowledge and experience you need. You can’t become Hashu Bhaiya overnight, and even then, have you seen how much he learns from Fati Baji? Or Nomi Bhai? If you want to be a great leader like him, you first have to accept that you’re not.”

“So? I should hide behind Fati Baji like you? or Maya? Okay, well she’s still young. What’s your excuse? Why don’t you try and step forward? Are you too afraid?”

Haroon’s hands balled into fists. “Not everything is about being brave and strong. I know I have much to learn to even get close to Fati Baji.”

“Can you two please stop.” Neither had noticed the wagon flaps pulled aside. Maya crawled in and found a spot on Haroon’s

wall.

“I can hear you two outside the wagon. In fact, I’m sure the whole caravan sarai could hear you,” she told them wearily.

They had the decency to look properly abashed. While they might butt heads more often than not, it was an unspoken rule to not fight in front of their younger sister. A rule they just broke.

“Sorry Maya. What happened? Are the older siblings having a meeting?”

She shook her head. “No, but it was too boring. How about we do something fun?”



Rafay was shaken awake by a small pair of hands.

“Rafay Bhaiya, wake up! It’s time to go.”

He finally swatted them awake and sat up, giving his arms and back a good stretch.

“There you are!” Fati’s head was peeping through the wagon flaps. She pushed them aside and entered. “Come on, we’re leaving after Maghrib.”

He jostled past and already found his other siblings doing wudhu. Once they had washed, they lined up and did their prayers. Hashu added an extra dua for them to have a safe trip.

“Are we ready to go?” he asked Fati. She nodded.

“The horses are saddled, we’ve got our supplies and we just finished salat.”

They weren’t the only ones preparing to leave. There was another large caravan with several camels that trudged past. They were, however, heading in the opposite direction.

“Bismillah,” Hashu whispered as he gently whipped the reigns.



There trip was, compared to the last few days, pleasantly boring. They had crossed a few caravans in the beginning of the night. Now, the desert was vacant. Hashu had never thought he would welcome the monotony, but it gave him a chance to think about everything he had to push aside. What with Maya falling sick and all.

“Are you still here?” Nomi asked. He had taken the reigns a

while back and noticed the older boy slouching beside him lost in thought.

It was still dark and so he could just make out his brother's silhouette in the paling moonlight. Hashu snapped his head up when he realized he had zoned out.

"Just...enjoying the calm."

Nomi clicked to have the horse speed up a bit. "Understandable. It's been hectic."

Hashu arched an eyebrow. "That is the understatement of the century. I was just thinking about Akbarabad and Sarwad."

"The soldiers?"

Hashu nodded.

"Fati Baji and I were talking about it earlier. According to her there is one final piece of this puzzle that we're missing. Something that will tie it all together. We just don't know what."

The boys sat in comfortable silence until the dredges of sleep starting to sink their talons in. They passed off the reigns to their other siblings before turning in.

This is how they managed to travel the whole night and even through the earlier moments of the morning. Having six of them meant three rotations.

It wasn't until after Fajr that Hashu and Nomi took their seat behind the horses. The two of them preferred to ride side by side, to pass the time if nothing else. They tried to cover as much ground as they could knowing the day would be a better time to take breaks and rest the horses.

It seems as though they were to face the full brunt of the desert today. Angry waves of humid air beat down upon them. Hashu was thankful for the airy robes and whatever little zephyr the wagon provided. It was stifling having to hide his face beneath the cloth, but he was more bothered by the stinging sensation every time he handled the hot leather of the bridles. Even the horses looked hot and a little haggard. He didn't blame them remembering his own stint as a cart pusher when they first left their home.

No matter how many times he tried, each mention always reared a familiar ache in his chest. How he missed the breezy

winds, whispering trees and grey cliffs. The babbling creek where they made wudhu and the simple tents that were their home. On the other hand, he praised and thanked Allah(swt) for how far they had managed to come. He could never have imagined doing this a few years ago.

'I just hope I'm doing Agha and Khanum proud,' he wished
 "Hashu Bhai..." Nomi whispered. "Look, behind us!"

Hashu frowned. He turned around, gripping the side so he wasn't jostled into the sand. Squinting in the sun, he almost turned back to ask Nomi what he was talking about. Almost. Something over the dunes caught his eye.

At first, he thought it was a trick of the light, but there was no mistaking the flicker of cloth. Someone was following them.

'Okay, it could just be another traveller,' Hashu thought to himself. They were on the more popular trade routes. *'Let's see...'*

He turned back to Nomi.

"It could be another traveller...just in case"

He turned around and pulled aside the cloth curtain. Inside the covered wagon, Maya was sleeping on a blanket while Fati was reading a book.

"Fati, there's someone following us, they might be another traveller. To be safe, give us a detour. We can go a little longer in the desert."

She nodded and swiftly pulled the map and began charting.

"Pass me your compass please...okay, if we go east, we'll cut through the desert and into a valley, there's no place down that route for at least a day's journey. We're still some distance from the closest village. "

Agha Hussain suggested they visit his mentor; that he would help them. Luckily, he lived in one of the largest cities on the map, Babahud. It was on route to Zerzura.

"Then that's the route we'll take."

The speed of the wagon was no match for the horseback man, and soon, he was right close to them. Hashu and Nomi adjusted the cloth wrapping their faces. They held their breath. With a gentle tug on the reins, Nomi guided the horses to veer left. Rafay

and Haroon followed suit.

Hashu got a good look at him. Brown overcoat, green tunic and a dark brown turban that wrapped around to conceal his face. His horse was a glossy brown with short cropped black hair.

Slowly the man got close and closer and then... he passed them, racing forward without stopping or giving them so much as a second glance. Hashu let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. One less problem for them to worry about.

They had already started on the way down into the valley. Even in the heat, it was much cooler. That served their purpose well, letting them ride for most of the day. At sunset, they stopped to give the horses a break.

"See..." Fati pointed to the map. "If we camp here tonight, and start tomorrow at dawn, we'll reach the village in two days Inshallah. We've already restocked our supplies, so we have plenty of time to reach there."

Hashu nodded in agreement. "Then that's what we'll do."

They didn't even need to set up camp, since they could sleep in the wagons.

Hashu was about to call Haroon to give them something to tie the horses on, but then he stopped and thought '*Let me give it a try, it has been a while since I've practiced.*'

In truth, he hadn't had a chance since Agha had died. Hashu took a breath and fisted a handful of sand. Nothing happened.

He squeezed his eyes shut, channelling every ounce of effort. There. He felt it. Like a little trickle of water, he felt a part of Haroon's power seep into him. The sand grew hot and he quickly stretched it out into a wooden pike. Once it was done, Hashu felt a hint of exhaustion.

"I'll never get used to that feeling," Haroon shivered.

Hashu shared a smile with the boy. It had taken them ages to figure out exactly how his ability worked out. Turns out the five puddles meant he could actually use *all* of their powers. It was amazing, but he learnt the hard way when he almost broke his hand trying to smash something when Rafay was in another part of the jungle. He had to be close to them to do it. According to the others, it felt like a trickle of their power was leaving them.

It did make things a little more difficult for Hashu. While everyone else had a chance to practice their ability, he had to juggle all five. That was why he had his precious journal that had now survived the jungle, Akbarabad and Sarwad. It had been a while since his last entry, so he should probably start practicing again.

He jammed the pike into the ground.

“Not bad,” Haroon smirked. “But you could use a little work here.” he joked.

“Very funny.”

They tied up the horses along with some food and water. Once they were secure, he and Haroon got to making firewood. If nothing else than to offer them a little light. The desert was pitch black at night. They had dinner in silence.

“Well, I’m turning in for the night” Rafay yawned as he stretched out his limbs. They felt a little stiff. As he got up, the other boys stood up with him.

“You guys go, Maya and I will stay up a little longer,” Fati told them.

Every time she looked at the girl, a prayer for Agha Hussain would escape her lips. Maya looked almost normal and was back to her talkative self. She still got tired a little quickly, but it was almost miraculous to see her so well after the entire ordeal.

“What are you reading?” she asked her older sister.

“It’s Khanum’s healing notes.”

“You brought them with you?”

“Of course, that’s how I knew that old oaf was fake. Bad move on his part.”

Maya smiled and lay on her back, gazing up at the sky.

“When we were back home, I don’t remember seeing so many stars.” she turned to Fati, “It’s almost like Allah’s(swt) garden in the sky.

Fati shook her head incredulously. “Only you Maya. Only you.”

They settled into a comfortable silence. To Maya, it actually felt quite peaceful. The crackling of the fire, her older sister reading in its molten glow and the gentle swishing of the sand

above the valley they were in. Even the waning crescent of the moon smiled down on them. She gazed wide eyed at the twinkling mist of speckled lights dotting the open air. It was surreal. In a way, Maya felt very small when gazing out into a universe so big.

She turned to ask Fati something, but the question died in her throat. There was a flicker of light behind her sister.

“Fati Baji!” she whispered. The girl looked up and behind to where Maya was pointing. Two small specks of light glimmered down the valley. They were steadily growing larger.

Fati closed her book quickly and quietly. “Maya, get in the wagon. Wake the boys. I’ll get the horses.”

The younger girl nodded. Using the wooden frame of the cart to help her move faster, she scuttled around to the back and reached in.

Nomi blearily opened his eyes. “Nomi Bhaiya, something is in the valley!” she whispered.

The sleep disappeared from his eyes and he reached to shake Hashu. Maya made her way to the other wagon. As she did she glanced over her shoulder. The lights had divided into several pairs. They were low and close to the ground, eerily glinting in the moonlight. Suddenly, it dawned on Maya.

Wolves.

She hurriedly shook Rafay and Haroon awake.

“Wake up, wolves!” She didn’t need to say anything more. The boys sprang up and clambered to their feet.

On the other side, Fati had managed to saddle the horses back into the wagon bridles. Suddenly, a mournful howl pierced the air.

Hashu felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up. It was followed by another. And another. And several more.

He leapt out, Nomi on his tail and they ushered the girls in.

“Come on!” he urged his brother. He pulled himself into the front of the wagon as Nomi climbed into the other. Hashu grabbed the reins and whipped them hard. The horse reared, neighing loudly. It crashed down its on two front hooves. He fell back as the wagon lurched forward, barely avoiding smacking his head on the wooden frame. The horse was galloping incredibly fast. The wheels and wood clattered noisily. Behind him, he could

hear the banging sounds of Nomi's wagon.

The howls got closer. Hashu glimpsed back. The moon reflected off the pack. There were at least twenty of them, dusty grey fur streaked with brown glinting in the light. He could hear snarls and growls too. Their eyes were ghostly specks of light.

He whipped the reins again, pushing the horses faster. The lights were gaining on them.

Back in the wagon, Maya and Fati were holding on for dear life. The young girl covered her head with her hands as they were tossed and flung against the wagon wall. Gripping onto whatever edge she could, Maya inched her way to the wildly flapping entrance.

"What are you doing?" Fati yelled over the noise.

"If I can control the leader, maybe I can get them to go!" Maya yelled back.

"Hang on!" Maya barely heard Nomi's yell as the wagon momentarily tipped.

She rolled across the wagon, dangerously close to the edge when something caught her arm. Fati had a firm grip and helped Maya get close enough to look outside.

It was nightmarish. She was staring down more than twenty snarling and growling snouts. From between their menacing yapping, she got a good view of horrifying long canines shining a ghostly white while gnashing with a terrifying ferocity. Lying flat on her stomach, she found the lead wolf and stared into its eyes.

It was hard with the jostling and Fati's death grip, but Maya poured all her focus into her stare. She mentally cheered as she felt a familiar lurch and everything fading to black.

Fati watched closely as Maya's body went limp. Her arm screamed as she yanked Maya away from the wagon edge, her other hand firmly gripping a handhold of the frame.

A growl resounded far too close for her liking. Why hadn't Maya led them away yet?

Fati felt a sinking in her gut. Something was wrong. Suddenly Maya's eyes flew open and she gasped loudly.

"What happened?" Fati asked. The girl in front of her was frowning, perplexed.

“Something’s off about the wolves! They’re not normal! I can’t control them! It’s mind is...mad, like it’s gone insane!”

As if on cue, there was a loud thud and two paws clawed into the wagon edge. One of the wolves had managed to jump on, the claws of its front paws burying itself in the wood. It growled, baring a nasty set of teeth, trying to snap at them.

Fati pulled Maya out of the way and grabbed the handle of her satchel. She whipped it forward with as much strength as she could muster. It hit the canine straight in the face with a nasty crunch. Whimpering pitifully, its claws broke loose and it was thrown back out onto the desert floor.

“Wow!” Maya watched in awe as Fati smacked away another over zealous wolf.

She swung it at a third, but it caught the bag in its mouth. Fati was thrown off her feet, falling on to her stomach. She looked up to see beady eyes glaring barely a hand away from her face. It released the bag and launched itself at her.

“Fati Baji!” Maya screamed.

Fati held both hands on the wolf’s body, holding back its snapping jaws. It wriggled in her grip, gnashing teeth getting closer. She tried to kick it off but it twisted out of reach, trying to clamp itself on her arms. She struggled to maintain her grip, her hands sliding over loose skin and fur. Fati pushed, but it was stronger. She closed her eyes as its mouth got a hair’s length from her.

Without warning, the weight disappeared. She opened her eyes. Nomi had grabbed the wolf by the fold of its neck and wrenched it off. With a growl of his own, he threw it out onto another gaining beast.

“Are you alright?” he asked breathlessly, helping her to her feet. She didn’t trust her voice and gave him a shaky nod. ‘

‘Maya’s up front. Let’s keep these beasts at bay.’”

They faced the entry waiting for the next one. It came bounding up to their wagon, a wild ravenous look in its eyes, spittle flying back from its open jaws.

Abruptly, it stumbled and skidded to a stop, disappearing in the kicked up dust. The other wolves leapt over its still form

without care. Maya was right, that wasn't normal. She could also make out a long thin shaft protruding from the fallen wolf's side.

Nomi broke out in a laugh as he peered out the frame. "Well it's about time!"

Hashu was swinging perilously close to the other wagon's side, essentially hanging half out. In one hand he gripped the edge of the frame and in the other was a long spear. He aimed and with immaculate precision, impaled another wolf. A hand from inside the wagon handed him another.

'*Of course, Haroon!*' it clicked to Fati. He was making Hashu weapons!

Regardless, she was glad they came to help.

Despite Hashu's kills, the wolves were undeterred. Fati was relentlessly smacking them away with her satchel. Nomi somehow tackled them bare handed, kicking or punching any snout that got too close.

The ground under the wagon grew soft as Rafay and Maya led them out of the valley back into the desert. The wolves followed, mere blurs against the sand and dust.

Then they stopped. Almost as suddenly as they had attacked. Nomi and Fati shared a confused look. The wolves had not crossed the top of a sand dune, beckoning with horrendous barks and snarls. As they grew smaller, she noticed them turn and disappear.

"Stop the wagon!" she called out. It took a few moments but soon, it skidded in the sand to a halt.

Maya peeped through the curtain by the riders seat.

"Everything alright?"

She was drawing deep breaths, her face flushed as she waited for a response.

Seeing that their counterpart had stopped, Rafay yanked on his reins.

One by one, they clambered out.

"Look!" They followed Fati's gaze to see the last tails vanish over the dune.

"That's...odd. I've never seen a wolf do that. Or any animal

for that matter.” Haroon frowned looking up at the vacant dune.

“Don’t bother,” Maya told him. Everyone turned to her. “They’re crazy. I tried to mind hop into the pack leader’s head. It was...” she shuddered

“What do you mean?”

Maya thought for a moment. “It was mad. When I was in there, it was like seeing the mind of a deranged lunatic. Which is the crazy part. Animals are simple. They only think about what they need which is why it’s so to take over one. But the wolves? It was like there was a consistent need to kill. Not to eat, or feed, or even protect. Just kill. And did you see what happened when one of them got hurt? They didn’t stop. Wolves live and breathe as a pack. This was a group of crazed animals bunched together.”

“Crazy animals that we completely destroyed!” Rafay cheered. “I mean, did you see my riding?!”

Haroon, “No, you should have seen Hashu Bhaiya’s throwing, he didn’t miss any of them.”

Hashu smiled, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

“Well, Fati Baji took down a few with just her satchel,” Maya declared proudly.

Everyone turned in Fati’s direction.

“A satchel?” Rafay asked incredulously.

“What was in it?” Nomi asked.

She shrugged, “Books. What can I say, knowledge is power.”



The pigeon house was a filthy place. This was not the exciting task he had been promised when he joined the Sultanate Army. Most of the days, he just shovelled waste and changed the nests. If there was one thing he learned, it was that pigeons were filthy creatures. He cursed as another brute soiled the freshly mopped floor. As the soldier went for the wet cloth, a feathered mass swooped over his head. It landed in one of *those* pigeonholes. The ones that had always been empty. Well, since he arrived there.

He was so shocked, he didn’t move. Not until the incessant cooing brought him back. He grabbed the bird with practiced

ease and flipped it over. Sure enough, bound to its leg was a small leather pouch. He didn't dare open it. He was out the door moments later.



Nazar was pacing. Very quickly. Very *angrily*. He kicked aside a stool that came in his way.

“What took you so long?” he all but growled at the man who entered.

“My apologies, Shahzadah. I was attending to a matter related to the new army-”

He didn't get a chance to finish when Nazar thrust a parchment in his face.

“Read.”

So he did. It was clearly a pigeon message. As his eyes skimmed the text, they widened. He looked up to meet Nazar's gaze. There was fury brewing in his yellow hazel eyes.

“How!”

Dabur didn't reply. He was still staring at the parchment in disbelief. Nazar tore it from his hand, casting it aside.

“How!”

His voice echoed in the chamber. Nazar was drawing deep breaths, a storm of rage bellowing in his mind. The accursed parchment lay unfolded on the ground. Mocking him. Taunting him. Unfortunately, the soldier who delivered it was gone. Pity. Nazar would have liked to add his blood to the maroon carpet.

As usual, Dabur was frustratingly calm. Not an ounce of surprise, or even shock was there.

“Did you know?” Nazar gritted between clenched teeth.

“I did not.”

The silence was deafening. Nazar's eyes darted around the map, his hand stroking his trimmed beard thoughtfully.

“I'm sure that Soleimani fool had something to do with it.”

“Then why do you not detain him?”

Nazar gave him a long suffering look. “I would, but it would not be worth the backlash. The old scholar's got too many followers. All with that ridiculous righteousness. Besides, I have in the past. That old geezer is a bigger demon than he looks.”

It was true. No matter how secretly he tried to have the problematic man killed, he kept popping up. Like a little cockroach under Nazar's shoe.

"I'm sure he's not alone."

Nazar raked a hand through his dishevelled hair. He knew exactly who Dabur was referring too. It wouldn't be a surprise if the Sultana was collaborating with the old man on more than just academic research. He wanted nothing more than to throw that woman to the dogs. Literally. It seems that she had made it her personal mission to undermine *his* authority in every way that she could. Infuriating as that was, he could not touch her. One of the many benefits of being the shahzadi of another Sultanate. They would rain down hell if something happened to her, an attack the Sultanate, which he had no other choice than to admit to himself, could not parry at the moment. Not while there was so much turmoil. Very well, he would bide his time. This would all change once he became Sultan.

"You think she might know about..." he let the question trail off unfinished. He knew Dabur understood.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Shahzadeh. But there is no way to ask without arousing suspicion. My advice is to wait. Let matters play out. The truth has its own way of coming to light."



Sultana Khajista raised the cup to her lips, taking a small sip. The tea had already gone cold though she didn't really care. It didn't matter.

"Would you like me to have it reheated?"

A servant girl had already started to move in her direction. She gave the woman who had spoken a polite grin with a shake of her head. "It's fine."

Qasida nodded and delicately waved the girl back. To the average person, she was the perfect poise of regality. Her legs were tucked under a billowing skirt fit only for the richest, her hands folded in her lap. She was staring out into the gardens. Though at what, Khajista wasn't sure.

When her husband had been alive, the gardens had been

a sight to behold. He had a multitude of gardeners working tirelessly to fill the green void with more colours than she could count. She could almost hear his bold voice in her ears.

“I want to wake up to Allah’s (swt) beautiful creation! I want to start the day with Subhanallah!”

She forced down her tears. Oh how she missed him. In the years following his death, her husband’s pride and joy had been withered away to bare stones and vacant gardens. The once bustling paths were serving just a single lone walker.

Qasida dismissed the servants leaving the two of them alone.

“Do you still think of him?” she asked Khajista.

The Sultana did not turn away but responded with a whisper.

“Everyday.”

“I confess, I did not solely invite you to tea,” she swallowed at Khajista’s delicately arched brow.

“Then why have you called me?”

She shrunk a little under Khajista’s gaze. Royalty she may be, but she could have never held a candle to the Sultana. The woman’s very aura was like that of the great Sultans and Sultanas of the stories she had heard as a child. Her father had not thought twice before handing his daughter off to that monster of a man. Especially with the hefty dowry that she never saw.

Khajista’s eyes searched her.

“Do you regret your decision?”

It was a question she had often asked herself. To be separated from the one meager joy of this horrible marriage.

“I regret that it was necessary,” she responded diplomatically. That night came flooding back to her. Did she regret it? If she had a chance to go back, would she have done differently? Nazar had been furious when he found out. There was no doubt that she was not a brave woman. But maybe, this time, she had done the right thing.

She looked up at Khajista’s serene face. Time had been kind to her with the sole sign of her age being the creases by her eyes.

Qasida struggled to find the right words. “Have you...Have you heard anything?”

“I’m afraid not.”



The moment Dabur left Nazar's room, he headed straight out of the palace. He knew exactly where he needed to be. And it wasn't pandering to the Shahzadah's anger.

He walked with quick brisk steps, barely glimpsing at the saluting guards that let him out into the withered remains of the castle gardens. His boots smacked smartly on the cracking stone and he crossed without raising his eyes to the yellowed grass.

As always, he was thinking and calculating. For him, this was no different to a game of chess.

The board had been set the very moment the previous Sultan had drawn his last breath. The Sultana and Agha Soleimani had played the first move by smuggling the children out. He was still a little curious how they knew. Regardless.

Now it was their turn. And he knew just the piece to play.

His feet carried him to a large complex using a private tunnel from the palace. It was nowhere near as grand as the castle. In fact, it could be described almost bland in comparison. That didn't matter. It suited its purpose. He crossed a large training ground where soldiers battled in the blistering heat. Grunts and yells echoed across the yard. Around him, soldiers nodded their heads in respect.

"Send them up.=", he told a by-standing soldier. The man hurried away to do his bidding.

He continued through the arched walls and up a set of stairs to one of the towers. It was a large room. One wall hosted two large windows from where he could oversee the rest of the complex. The others were lined with tall shelves brimming with maps and old tomes hoarding information long forgotten. It was a far cry from Nazar's throned chamber, but it suited his means better. Vanity was distracting.

Closing the door, he unbuckled his sword and removed his outer robe. Even with the windows open, it was extremely warm.

"You summoned us?"

He managed to not flinch, turning to meet his guests. In all honesty, he shouldn't have been surprised to see the five masked figures blocking the entrance.

The biggest stood taller than Dabur. His face was concealed by a black mask except for his eyes. Cold, hard icy grey irises with a piercing glare. He had unruly black hair that swept across half of his face. The soldier was clad in black leathery armour that lit up in the light, beneath a flowing cape falling dramatically from his shoulder. A silver and black sheath shined from his side.

He took a step closer, his actions smooth and graceful.

Dabur smiled internally. One of the pinnacle results of his training regimen was standing right in front of him. He did not bother with niceties.

“There is rumour that the heir has resurfaced.”

There was no reaction from his company.

“Shahzadah Nazar is putting a prize on his head and alerting all bounty hunters in the kingdom. I want you to be there first.”

Dabur tossed a scroll at the young man. He adeptly plucked it out of the air with surprising speed. “This has all the details. Bring them to me alive.”

His response was a tight nod. “Yes, Commander.”

There was a clatter outside that caught his attention. When Dabur looked back, they were already gone. Like they had never been there in the first place.



Agha Soleimani almost dropped his pen in surprise. Earnest knocking rapidly echoed from his front door ringing throughout the little house. He put down his writing utensils and hurried to answer, wiping his inky hands with a rag. Well, hurrying as fast as his old bones would let him. His visitor was a very familiar face.

“Asalaam Alaikum Agha! May I come in?”

“Walaikum Salam Jafar. But of course dear boy.”

He closed the door behind him. The moment the bolt was drawn, the childish smile dropped from Jafar’s face. His deadpanned expression looked out of place on his youthful features. Jafar was about to speak when Agha suddenly frowned and raised a finger to his lips. He gestured to the boy to follow him.

“This is the new Quran I have been working on...” Agha

prattled as he lead them down into the basement.

“Okay,” Agha whispered, his eyes flickering to the doors warily. “Now you can speak.”

Jafar raised an eyebrow. “Are you in danger Agha?”

Agha looked at the child who could barely have been ten years old and shook his head. The statement would have been precocious from any one else, but there was a ghostly haunt in Jafar’s eyes. This boy actually knew what danger was. Something he wished no child would ever know.

“No, my boy. They are just listening a little closer. I believe something has set Nazar on edge.”

He didn’t bother to use the Shahzadah’s title. In Agha Soleimani’s opinion, he didn’t deserve it.

“You are correct, Agha,” Jafar informed him. “There is talk amongst Nazar’s ranks. It is believed that the heir has arisen.”

Agha Soleimani’s head shot up. It was the first he had heard of the children since Khanum’s last letter.

“Where?” he urged.

Jafar shook his head. “I don’t know. I came to inform you that they are gathering at the Hawza this evening.”

Agha Soleimani’s eyes flickered to the door. He would have to find a way around the secret guards Nazar had placed to watch him.

“You will need this.”

Jafar pressed a coin into Agha’s hand. It was embossed with a symbol of two Dhulfiqars crossing each other. Agha Soleimani smiled. He already knew who this was.

“Tell them I’ll be there.”

The boy nodded with a ghost of a grin. “Do you have any message for them?”

Agha nodded, albeit slightly grimly. “Tell them to prepare their ranks. The dawn of war is upon us.”

11

Haunting History

“How long will it take?”

Haroon’s eyes furrowed. “If you help me out, we can be ready to move before Dhuhr.”

Hashu nodded. It turns out their little scrape with those beasts, since Maya refused to call them wolves, had done more damage than he thought.

Barring the scrapes and claw marks that had shredded the back of the wagons flaps and frame, the wheels were in a terrible state of disrepair. Hashu was surprised they even made it out the valley and past the dune.

The round frames were cracked, barely holding together. Haroon had pulled off all eight and was working on building it back. Fati and Maya were tending to the horses that were understandably a little skittish. Hashu himself felt a little wary. It was not a pleasant feeling being a potential meal.

Rafay was lying on his back, soaking up the sun. Oddly enough, Nomi was nowhere to be found.

“He said he was going to take a look around,” Haroon answered his unasked question. “Here.”

He handed Hashu one of the wheels and two began work. It was tricky. They grabbed handfuls of sand and moulded it into the wooden spokes the wheel was missing.

By the time they were done, all dredges of the night had faded.

The sun hadn't even risen to its full blaring heat and Hashu could already feel a trickle of sweat down his back. His hands were sore and stiff.

"Last wheel done. Alhumdulillah," he declared, giving it a resounding smack. Seeing that it held strong, he added it to the pile.

He called Rafay over. "We need to lift the wagon."

The boy nodded and gathered a handful of sand. It was a very interesting entry in his journal about how sand worked equally well as stone. It was harder to hold though. With one hand clenched tight, Rafay hoisted the entire wagon in the other.

His twin ignored his smirk and fastened the wheel on. Soon enough, the wagon was ready and the horses were saddled.

"Hey!" Nomi's voice carried over a nearby dune. "I found something."

Hashu shared a look with Fati, but she just shrugged her shoulders. He grabbed one of the horses' reins, his sister grabbing the other. The met Nomi at the peak of the dune.

"Follow me," he told them.

"What did you find?" Hashu tried to ask, but the boy shook his head.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. There it is."

He led them to a flat path that seemed to enter a town.

'*What was so odd about that?*' He didn't realise until he got closer.

The entire city was burnt. Every where they looked, blackened grotesque hallow carcasses of stone and wood stared back, gaping holes littering the walls and roofs. The sand below their feet crunched noisily, carpeted by greyed ash and black soot.

"What happened here?" Rafay whispered.

Hashu didn't have an answer.

"Maya," he called the young girl to hold the horse. Fati had a similar idea.

"Haroon, Rafay, stay here with her." For once, the boys didn't complain.

The three older siblings tentatively edged forward. He wasn't sure why. Honestly, they should have turned around and left.

Nothing about this entire village felt right. But there was something, a strange feeling, that he should explore. That was pushing him to stay.

'Just a quick look around.' He told himself.

"What is that?" He followed Nomi's gaze. The boy was frowning at something in the ground.

Hashu squinted. It was a dirty cream colour, tainted with soot and dirt, protruding stubbornly from beneath some fallen stone.

Fati gasped, her hands flying to her mouth. Hashu was about to ask her, but he finally understood.

Fighting down the bile in his throat, he took a step closer, hoping he was wrong. He wasn't. He had seen dead bodies, but there was something extremely unsettling in the way the bone peeked out of the ground.

"Come on." Hashu urged the others on, tearing his gaze away from the half buried skeleton. He was glad the younger children stayed with the horses.

As they got deeper, the buildings thinned out. He could see the stretches of black where there would have been crops. It felt surreal, eerie. A house to their right caught his eye. Being on the outskirts, it was the least harmed by the fire, only half of the building reduced to ash. The rest was scorched. Hashu peeled off and headed to it. He could hear Nomi and Fati following him. As they got closer, he could make out the gaping hole where the door would have been. Hashu warily entered. It was dusty, the smell making his eyes water. There was also an uncanny feeling to the whole place.

"I don't like this. Let's leave," Fati told them. He couldn't agree more.

Hashu turned to leave. He had just taken a step when the whole world vanished. He yelled as the floor caved beneath him. Reflexively, Hashu crouched and rolled on the ground that flew up, ignoring the sting in his ankles. A cloud of dust swallowed him.

It stung his eyes and it took a serious bout of coughing and sneezing before he could see. Dusting the filth off his clothes, he gazed around. He had fallen into some sort of basement.

There were discarded boxes and scrolls lying around. Apparently, whatever inferno devoured the village, it had not reached this room.

“Hashu?” a voice called above him.

“I’m fine, Alhumdulillah. The floor gave way. I’m in some sort of basement. ”

He looked up. Nomi and Fati were peering worriedly over the edge.

“There’s a door here. I’m going to take a look.”

“Be careful!” Fati warned.

Curiosity rearing, Hashu crossed over forward to take a look, leaping over fallen wood and chunks of floor, weaving around the scrolls and boxes.

The door had a small handle. He gripped it in his fingers, barely fitting, grimacing at the scrapes of rust against his hand. Hashu gave it a tug. It didn’t budge. He tried again, but the door was steadfast. Once more, he leaned back with all his weight. The hinges didn’t so much as creak.

Hashu stepped back and took a breath. He spied something in the corner. It was a part of the stone debris from his tumble through the floor. His eyes lit up and he picked it up in his left hand. Squeezing it tight, he ignored the pokes in his fingers and felt a satisfying rush of warmth. With a mighty wrench, the door sprung free, the rusted hinges screaming horribly.

“What was that?” Nomi’s voice called, worry evident in his tone.

“Just the door.”

“It’s gloomy in here.”

Hashu started as the voice spoke right into his ear. A hand flew to his racing heart.

“Nomi! How did you get down here?”

The boy simply waved his hands. Of course, Hashu wanted to facepalm. Nomi could climb anything.

“Be careful,” Hashu cautioned. “The whole house is barely standing.”

Nomi nodded. The room behind the door was black as night, but the hole in the floor let in some of the sun’s rays. Both boys

froze.

It was an entire skeleton. Clad in full armour, sitting at a table. A grand metal helmet slumped pitifully on a vacant skull, empty eye holes watching the two boys. Large leather armour, frayed, but still intact, hung loosely from the bones. But Hashu's eyes were drawn to the table. Clasped in its bony hand was a beautiful scabbard. It had intricate gold laces with black. The pommel was a gold plate too.

Nomi's eyes widened.

"What is it?" Hashu asked.

"That is no ordinary sword."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at it! The sheath, the hilt, the handle. It's a masterpiece..." He marvelled.

Beside the sword was a book that upon closer inspection, Hashu realized was the Quran. Miraculously, it was untouched and a single verse had been circled.

And say, "Truth has come and falsehood has vanished. Falsehood is surely bound to vanish." (17:81)

"Whoever this man was, he clearly didn't want this room to be found," Nomi quipped.

"How do you know that?"

He gently tugged out a scrap of parchment under the Quran and handed it to Hashu. It was yellowed and worn. He felt like it would turn to dust in his hand. Hastily scrawled, it read:

And even if this duty demands my life, Oh Allah(swt) let this only be found by the one who deserves it.

"What do we do?" Nomi asked.

Hashu himself was confused. A clatter behind them caused both of them to turn.

"You were taking quite some time, so I thought I'd join you."

They shuffled aside to allow Fati to see, explaining what they had found.

"What is that hanging around his neck?" she asked.

Hashu found what she was pointing to. Between the leather fold was a large disc glinting silver in the little light. It was too large to be a pendant and too thin to be of tactical use.

Swallowing, he moved forward and plucked it out, gently unwinding the neck chain without so much as jostling a bone.

The disc had a simple engraving of two Dhulfiqars crossing each other. Hashu's mind instantly went to the seal. While the signs were different, the use of the Dhulfiqar in both couldn't be a coincidence.

"We should take the sword too."

Both boys whipped to look at their sister. She was unperturbed by their surprise.

"He didn't want this room to be found, but now it has been. Would you rather some raiders or thieves grab it?"

Hashu sighed, as usual, she was right. They would not disrespect it. In fact, they could take it to town and ensure it was delivered to its true owner. Whoever this man had been referring to.

He pulled the sword out from under the man's hand, or rather what was left of it, bristling as his finger brushed against the bones' smooth side. Rubbing the sensation off his hand, he pocketed the disc and buckled the sheath. The strap seemed to hold fine though Hashu felt a little off balance with the weight on one side.

"Let's leave."

They clambered over the debris. Nomi first to give the others a hand. Once they were out, and brushing themselves off, Fati pulled them further to the back of the village.

"While you were inside the basement I went a little further. Look at that."

It took Hashu a second to realize what he was looking at. The ground, a bows length from where they were standing, plunged into a round cavernous passage. The soil was harder, cracked and jagged.

'This must have been a river.'

The oddest sight to behold was a fine layer of white powder. It was sprinkled thinly in wave like patterns over the cracks and

dirt.

“What is the powder?” Nomi frowned. “It can’t be ash, it’s too light and it wouldn’t have carried this far.”

Fati nodded in agreement. “You’re right. I tested it. Agha Hussain gave me some healing supplies before we left,” she explained at their confused looks.

“So what it is?” Hashu asked. His eyes travelled the length of the bending river bed.

“Poison.”

“What!” he knew Fati wasn’t jesting, but the look on her face only proved that.

“The entire village was poisoned. And whoever did this, burned it down so no one would find out.”



The walk back to the wagons was silent. No longer enraptured by the burnt surroundings, Hashu noticed much more. As they passed by homes, he could see many skeletons inside the homes. Some were sitting against the wall. Many were laying on handwoven thatch beds.

His stomach lurched at the sight of a smaller one, lying outside in the sun. He couldn’t even look towards the baby bassinets.

These people had gone to bed, wishing their loved ones goodnight, tucking their children to sleep. And had never woken up. Then their entire existence was set aflame.

He had no doubt that the wolves from earlier must have been native to this place. It would explain their irrational behaviour. Not to mention that they wouldn’t go close.

“We should leave while it’s daylight. We don’t want to risk another run in.”

He didn’t have to tell them that not a word was to be mentioned to the younger children. They had enough to deal with without adding this scarring sight to that.

“You took so long!” Rafay groaned. He was fanning himself with the hem of his shirt.

“Let’s go,” Nomi told him.

Sensing their older siblings were not in a talkative mood, none of them spoke. Silently, the horses were aligned and the wagons

boarded.

As they pulled away, Hashu couldn't help the sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Who was capable of such cruelty?"



"No, I said to put the peacocks by the fountain! That drape is not silk! Toss it out!" Nazar ordered. No one was standing close enough to notice the slight flush in his cheeks. Well, except Dabur. That man did always seem to be oddly close by. But Nazar would not have even a leaf out of place.

"Sir," a guard came up to him. "There is a party in one of the rooms that requests your presence."

"Excellent" Nazar rubbed his hands in glee. "Fetch my ... pet."

It was an entertaining sight to watch the guard blanch at his request, but nod and rush off nonetheless. Nazar closed his eyes relishing in the sensation. Fear was intoxicating.

With brisk steps, he exited the ridiculously embellished throne room. He found a guard waiting outside the desired room and entered, ignoring the salute he was given.

There were three men inside. One of them was on his knees, held down by a guard. He was wheezing softly, like it hurt to breath. His face was a bloody mess with a gash above his eye, a split lip and a nose that was definitely not where it should have been. Nazar wrinkled his nose in displeasure at the bloodstains on the floor.

"This is the man who let the children escape. Captain Uzair, Shahzadah," the guard told him.

"Well done. Your name, soldier?"

The third man bowed low, his one good eye swivelling to the floor. "Gohar, sir."

Nazar handed Gohar a scroll. "Give this to the guard outside. Ten thousand pieces for handing this scum over."

"Curse you, Gohar! Curse your - agh!"

The guard slapped Uzair across the face.

Uzair looked at Nazar. "I have spent my entire life serving

this Sultanate.”

Nazar nodded, “I understand. Mistakes happen. Let him go. Here.”

He offered Uzair a worn rag. The beaten up man accepted it and began to wipe away the crusting blood.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Nazar told him. Uzair nodded, wearily standing up. He missed Nazar’s smirk as the Shahzadah left the room. Outside, there was a wide eyed guard who was clutching a thick whip in one hand. In the other, were three leashes.

On the ground in front of him, were three giant dogs. Massive towering bodies of muscle with bared canines. Orange flecks of light glinted off the hellish hounds from the hallway torches. They were growling surreptitiously, black pools fixated on the door. Nazar’s smirk got larger. If only Uzair had known, he wouldn’t have touched that rag with a ten foot pole.

“What is that?” Gohar asked. He was plastered against the wall as far from the muzzles as he could be.

“Azaab,” Nazar answered. “For those who fail me deserve only calamity. Let them in.”

The guard swung open the door and released the leashes, slamming the wood shut with a resounding thud.

Gut-wrenching yells filled the air. Nazar sighed. It was almost beautiful, a symphony to his ears. The pained screams that tore through the walls. Squelching and gurgling in horror. The dying gasps of defeat. Then the silence. He frowned. It always ended so soon.

When he turned around, Gohar was long gone. The other guards were looking positively green.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Nazar snapped. “Get this room clean. I have a coronation to prepare for.”

12

Bastion of Babahud

“Please enter,” the guard told them.

They had managed to reach the city gates just as the sun was dipping into the sea of sand. If Hashu was being honest, he was absolutely exhausted. Ever since the burnt village, they had ridden nonstop. Whether it was to get away or not was irrelevant, they had made it to Babahud.

If Akbarabad had been overwhelming, then Hashu was thanking Allah(swt) that they hadn’t come to Babahud first.

The city was huge. Hashu’s eyes trailed over people, houses, stalls, horses, stores, caravans and - was that an alim riding a donkey? Not wanting to repeat their mistake from last time, he hurriedly clicked the horses forward. Unused to the noise and bustle the equines were a little angsty and so Hashu maintained a firm grip on the reins.

“It might help if someone led them.” Maya whispered from the wagon flap. She made sure to keep her face hidden. “They don’t like all the noise.”

Nomi nodded and leapt off, gesturing to Haroon on the other wagon to do the same. Both boys made sure their face cloths were securely tied around their lower face leaving only their eyes, ears and hair visible.

Maya had been right. With the two boys in front, the horses resisted less. Though they were still quite skittish. Hashu didn’t

blame them. He felt as though their little party was being swallowed by the throngs of people and animals.

“Where do we go?” Nomi yelled. Hashu had to strain his ears to hear it. His voice barely made it over the thrumming ambience of the market.

“Let’s get out of here first!”

It was a struggle. Despite the wide roads, the marketplace was teeming with people. Add in the slight complication that they were lugging two wagons and horses made for frustratingly slow progress.

“I’ve never seen so many people,” Fati marvelled. She was in Rafay’s wagon and kept peeking through the crack in the tent flaps.

“I thought Akbarabad was big,” Rafay’s jaw might as well have been dragging on the ground, his hands tightly clasping the reins. Surprisingly, he felt like a fish out of water. It felt like the walls of people were closing in around him.

“Breathe Rafay,” his sister’s voice rang in his head. Not knowing what else to do, he took a shaky breath.

“I don’t like this,” he muttered.

Haroon suddenly veered to the left, tugging the horses behind him. Rafay felt relief wash over him as the crowd dwindled. It was still busy with pairs of people rushing back and forth, but paled in comparison to the stampeding wave of merchants.

Rafay couldn’t see ahead, courtesy of the wagon in front of him, but it was a pleasant sight to watch the buildings thin out. He did, however, notice the tall date tree quickly growing larger. Grass sprung up on the side and he could almost feel the horses relax as they stopped struggling against the reins.

“Let’s stop here,” Nomi told them. They pulled the wagons aside as this road was not as wide as the one in town. The stall owners around them ignored the little caravan after a brief glimpse. Such sights were normal.

They drew the wagons together and congregated behind them, hidden from the passing people. The boys had their face cloths firmly in place, the girls donning face veils.

“What did Agha Hussain tell you?” Hashu turned to Fati.

Through the slit of cloth, he saw he her brows furrow as she fished a scrap of parchment from her packed satchel.

In Agha Hussain's neat writing were two lines.

Agha Bahauddin
Tib-e-Imamia Healing Academy

“Well, that solves where to go,” Nomi remarked.

“I don't think all of us should go.” At the questioning looks, Fati elaborated. “Did you see the streets? It will take too long to make our way to the academy with the wagons.”

She could see Hashu agreed with her.

“Very well,” he replied, handing her back the parchment. “Fati, you and I will go.”

“Why don't you all go?” Haroon suggested to all the older children. “I'm sure we are more than capable of not drawing attention to ourselves. Besides, Nomi Bhai will spend the whole time brooding anyway.”

Nomi shrugged, non affronted. Haroon wasn't wrong. He hated being away from his older brother.

Hashu seemed to struggle with the idea. He and Fati shared a look. Haroon had always marvelled at their ability to hold entire conversations without so much as flinching. Finally, the older boy relented.

“Fine, but stay out of sight. And keep your faces covered.”

Haroon, Rafay and Maya nodded diligently. Hesitantly, Hashu turned to leave, his two siblings in tow. Unaware of the eyes that followed them down the path.



Once again, Fati had been correct. Hashu found it hard enough to squeeze past the crowd that hadn't wavered since they had entered. He could feel Fati's firm grip on the back of his robe so she didn't lose him. Behind her, Nomi held her sleeve.

They weaved like a winding snake through whatever space they found. Around the disgruntled stall owner, past the overburdened housewoman, in front of a very pleased man holding

a less than pleased chicken under his arm. Hashu's mind whirled at the smells and voices, but he forced himself to stay on task.

They had to stop several times to ask for directions, more than once having to double back. It seemed that everything in this city had been built on top of the other. When they turned into a wrong alley for the fourth time, Hashu threw his hands up in exasperation.

"Allah(swt) knows where this academy is. At this rate, we'll be lucky to make it back to the others before Maghrib."

Fati sighed. "Inshallah, we'll find it. We just need to ask for directions."

Nomi shook his head. "We tried that. It doesn't seem to be working."

Fati raised a hand to quell his objection, "Actually, let me rephrase that. We need to ask for directions *from the right person*. Most academies are in the same place, so look for an alim or a student."

It took them a few moments, but soon enough, Hashu caught sight of a white turban in between the sellers.

"I found one." He plunged into the crowd and hastily made his way over. Luckily, the man hadn't moved and was buying several flatbreads. He was old, with a beard as long as Hashu's hand peppered with gray, but there was a youthful, smiling look in his eyes as they crinkled in happiness.

The smell of the bread was amazing and Hashu caught himself salivating.

'If it's not too expensive, maybe we can get some for the others.'

Waving the thought aside for the moment, he approached the elderly man.

"Asalaam Alaikum Agha."

The scholar looked up, not expecting to be approached.

"Walaikum salam my boy. May Allah (swt) bless you, is there anything I can help you with?"

Hashu's breath hitched in his throat. The way the man spoke reminded him of his mentor. He felt a surge of guilt in his stomach. Whilst he recited Fatiha every night for them, it felt so long since he actually had something remind him of them.

Forcing down his emotions, Hashu smiled.
 “Actually Agha, there is.”



Nomi and Fati had been a little surprised when Hashu had run off but they waited patiently. Sure enough, Nomi spotted his masked figure coming towards them, his face cover down and his hands filled with...bread?

“Fahima! Nabeel!” Hashu called them over with their pseudonyms. He gestured to an old man beside him. “This is Agha Kaghani.”

Nomi lowered his mask at Hashu’s nod and shook his hand and Fati bowed in respect.

“He has offered to show us the way to the academy.”

“It is not far from here. Follow me.”

As they walked, the group lapsed into a bit of an awkward silence.

“Agha, do you teach in the Academy?”

The old man chuckled. “Actually my boy, I am a student in the seminary beside it.”

He grinned widely at their surprised looks. “Don’t look so amazed, I know I could pass as your brother,” he told Hashu.

As intended, that made the others laugh. The Agha, they soon found out, had a very interesting sense of humour.

“What do you study?” Fati asked.

“I am specialising in the theological sciences.”

“What is that?” Nomi asked, curious.

“It is the science of proving Allah(swt)’s existence.”

“I never understand how people doubt that,” Hashu confessed.
 “Do they honestly believe humanity and the perfection of the world just came about by chance?”

Agha’s face grew serious for a moment. “My dear boy, if there is one thing I have learned, it is that when people have the choice between what is easy and what is right, many will pick the former. History has done nothing but proven that. Man’s arrogance and refusal to believe in Allah(swt), be it the Pharaohs, or the Meccans, or anyone else, is only because it is easier to live a

life ruled by desire than a powerful being who wants better. It is the easy choice. Now enough of such serious topics. What brings you to the Academy? Are you joining?"

Fati shook her head. "Actually we're looking for someone. Would you happen to know Agha Bahauddin?"

Agha Kaghani frowned. "Yes. I think I do. He had been a teacher at the academy for several decades."

"Had been?"

"Yes young lady, he retired a few years ago."

The three of them shared a look. "Would you know where we could find him?"

Hashu felt a sinking feeling as Agha Kaghani shook his head. "I'm sorry my boy, I didn't know him very well. But I'm sure someone at the academy will know, Inshallah."



Beautiful. Clearly whoever built this place had spared no expense.

Hashu couldn't help but marvel at the sight before him. Several beautiful masjid-style buildings arranged neatly in ornate gardens. Unbeknownst to the trio, Agha Kaghani was smiling at their reaction. He couldn't blame them.

They could no longer hear the hustle bustle of the market. It had almost faded away. Instead, there was the low thrum of whispers. The garden they entered was paved, bordered with marble bound grassy patches. Flowers abounded from every corner with shade provided by several overhanging trees. He saw small clusters of students pacing the grounds, their arms filled with heavy books and conversing in rushed whispers.

Agha led them to one of the masjid-like buildings. It was...amazing. Tall arched doorways guarded by teal and gold pillars towered above their heads, icy cool marble beneath their feet. Agha had them remove their shoes before they entered.

The hall was no less impressive. Ornate plush rugs cushioned the ground, stretching to the marble walls. The marble itself was a jade like green, large polished slabs winking in the late afternoon sun. Every few slabs there was a pillar that looked like

the stone was twisting in a meticulous pattern. His eyes followed the intricate design to the ceiling where it caved into a dome. He could see the beautiful calligraphic names of Allah(swt) winding around the circular structure.

A young man in long robes came to meet them, greetings spilling from his lips.

“Asalaam Alaikum Agha Kaghani! I didn’t expect to see you here.”

Agha Kaghani returned his greeting and then introduced them to each other.

“This is Hamza, Fahima and Nabeel. Children, this is Ilyas. He is one of the senior students at the academy. His father is a philosophy professor. In fact, he is my teacher.”

Ilyas gave them a large grin.

“Welcome to the Academy. Please, join us for some tea.”

Hashu returned his smile, but politely declined his offer.

“Maybe another time. Actually we wanted to ask if you knew Agha Bahauddin.”

Ilyas nodded. “He used to be a teacher here. But he retired a few years ago.”

“Would you happen to know where he lives?” Hashu mentally prayed that he did. It would be impossible to find the man otherwise. His hope was dashed when Ilyas shook his head.

“I’m sorry I don’t. But I know who might. If you wait here, I’ll be back in a moment.”

He guided them to a cool room with a few seats before dashing off.

“That boy,” Agha shook his head fondly. “Been hanging around the academy grounds since he could walk. Knows them better than the men who built it.”

“Who built this place?” Nomi asked. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. But whoever it is has earned more Sadqa-e-Jaria than I thought possible. Speaking of thoughts, why are you looking for Agha Bahauddin?”

“We have a message from an old student of his,” Fati told the man. It was technically true. Just not the entire truth.

They sat in a comfortable silence, the only sound being Agha's Dhikr. That is, until the door opened to reveal Ilyas.

"I have an address," he announced.



"They're taking a long time," Maya grumbled. She was sitting in the shade of the wagon. Being blocked off from the road, she had removed her face veil. For what seemed like an eternity, she had been sitting in a patch of grass plucking the stems.

"Well, it is a big city. Oi!" Rafay exclaimed. He was lying down in one of wagon's driver seats and did not expect the smack in the face from the horse's tail. It tittered uninterested, returning to eating grass within reach.

"I don't know how you stand it, Maya. They're so annoying."

She giggled, offering her finger to a passing sparrow. The tiny plume of feathers swooped down landing delicately on her finger. It tilted its head, chirping softly. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Rafay gaping.

"They're not annoying," she whispered, watching it fly off. "They just need calm."

Haroon was humming to himself, whittling away at a block of wood he had materialized from somewhere. "Maya, do you remember who you're speaking too?"

"Hey!" Rafay wore a hurt look. "I can be calm."

Haroon gave a characteristic eye roll. "And that is your first mistake. Saying you can be calm, is like saying Maya would pound us to pulp."

His sister shot them a mischievous grin. "Technically, I could. After all, I doubt you two could battle a lion, or a bear."

"Or one of those crazy wolves. Wait, I think I see Hashu Bhaiya."

Rafay almost called out, but then remembered his surroundings. He settled for a wave that his older brother returned.

"We found Agha Bahauddin," Nomi announced.



"Why would a scholar of healing choose to live out here?" Haroon asked. They were heading to a forest on the city outskirts.

“Maybe he doesn’t like the city,” Maya offered. “I know I don’t. It’s too much.”

“Too much of what?”

“Of everything. Too many people, too many shops, too many animals.” she sighed. “I miss home.”

Haroon and Rafay shared a look. For the first time the boys realised how long they had been away. In fact, their old life felt more like a memory. Waking up to a freezing morning. Doing Wudhu in a creek that left everyone shivering. Well, everyone but Agha. Haroon felt a pang of pain he could have sworn was physical. How could he have forgotten about his parental figures? Agha’s patient tone as he helped Haroon learn to fight. Correcting him over and over without the slightest hint of agitation. Or the marvel in Khanum’s face when he showed her some ridiculous tool he managed to conjure. Spending days doing chores, bantering with his siblings. Where their greatest worry was not getting found in a game of hide and seek.

To Haroon, it felt like an eternity had passed between now and then. They had been cheated, chased and faced the possibility of one of them in peril more times than he wanted to count. He looked back at the wagon and noticed Rafay doing the same, probably having the same thought. He would give anything to never see his sister in that state again.

Maya frowned. “Is everything alright? Shouldn’t you be looking forward?”

Haroon snapped to attention and focused on the road.



The forest was a scenic sight. Points of green tearing into the sky, nestling a whole world amongst their twining twigs. The leaves rippled with the breath of the wind, shattering the rays of the dipping sun. There were several houses, spaced apart. Clearly, there were more people who shared Maya’s sentiment and preferred the peaceful surroundings.

Every home they passed, Hashu’s eyes hunted for the one sign Ilyas had told him.

“There it is!” he called. One of the homes had a large well in

front, large enough for a horse to fall down.

They pulled to a stop. It was a quaint home made of stone bricks held together with dried mud. Long palm leaves had been woven together for the roof. The house wasn't large, but looked comfortable enough for a family.

Hashu was so focused on his surroundings, he almost didn't notice the figure who strolled out from behind the house. The man, however, had noticed them and was making his way closer, shouldering a wood-chopping axe. As he got closer, Hashu could see he looked displeased. Agha Kaghani may not have been exaggerating when he said the man was grouchy.

After a gruff greeting, he eyed them warily. "What do you want?"

Hashu made his way to the front. "We were sent by Agha Hussain. He said he was a student of yours."

He panicked for a moment when there was no look of recognition on the man's face. Maybe they looked too unfriendly?

In the spur of a moment, Hashu yanked down his face cover.

"He said you could help us."

Agha raised an eyebrow, and Hashu could have sworn he paled a little. But it could have been a trick of the light. The man was warily running his eyes over everyone.

"Follow me," he gruffed.

Hashu let out a breath he didn't realize he had been holding. They shuffled along behind him obediently. He had a very strong feeling the man didn't take well to dawdling. Agha had them park their wagons behind the house, leading them into a sitting room and told them to wait inside.

It was not the home of a poor man, but not that of a rich one either. A servant boy, no older than Rafay, offered them drinks that they accepted graciously.

Hashu managed a sip, when Agha returned. This time, he got a good look at the man.

He was around the same height as Hashu, but a good deal wider. Quite unlike any healer Hashu had seen. He couldn't imagine those large calloused hands delicately brewing remedies or wrapping wounds. Especially with the displeased expression he

wore. That was bound to scare off more people than heal them. He couldn't imagine how someone like Agha Hussain had studied with this man.

"Agha Hussain sent this for you," Hashu handed him a letter. Hussain had given it to him when he left Sarwad, but he had not opened it. He could not help the curiosity rearing as Agha Bahauddin all but ripped apart the leather wrapping.

"Stay here," he told them, retreating into the kitchen.

Hashu watched the man go and resumed his seat behind Nomi.

"Isn't it rude to leave guests unattended?" Rafay whispered, his eyes watching for any signs of Agha's return.

"Do *you* want to tell him that?" Haroon retorted. "He looks like he would bury you before you finished."

Hashu didn't disagree. They all went silent as the door opened and light footsteps filled the hall. He could hear Agha conversing with someone before he reentered the room. A small figure peeking behind him.

"This is my wife, Rubab. She will show you to your room."

She was about the same height as Fati, if not a little taller, wearing a long black dress that pooled a little at her feet. The lines on her face were creased in a no-nonsense expression, but there was a softness in her eyes. She greeted the children politely.

"Follow me, please."

She led them to the far side of the house and into a large room. There were six simple beds neatly laid out against the walls.

"Abu Dhar will provide you with blankets. Let him know if you need anything."

She turned and left, Fati hurried after wanting a quick discussion with her. Just as Rubab had mentioned, the same servant boy turned up with a pile of folded blankets.

"You are Abu Dhar?" the boy looked a little surprised, but nodded. He was an odd little thing with a spindly, lanky body and long arms and legs. His face was round with a wide nose, large mouth and small eyes that vanished when he smiled.

Hashu had to admit, he was a little puzzled why someone Abu Dhar's age would be working as a servant.

"Dhar, go prepare some fruit downstairs. Make sure you make

yourself a plate.” The boy gave Rubab a dazzling smile and all but ran out of the room.

“Don’t feel offended if he doesn’t reply,” she told Hashu. He could see Fati standing behind her. “He’s mute.”

“Khanum and I have agreed that we will stay here only if we help out.”

The woman didn’t look happy, but Hashu smiled at the thought of Fati talking around her stern attitude. He would ask her later for the details.

She then left, allowing the children to settle in.

Rafay laid down, audibly sighing as he snuggled into one of the beds, pulling the blanket to his chin.

“See you all in the morning!” he announced.

Haroon rolled his eyes and yanked the blanket off, eliciting an annoyed yelp.

“They’re waiting for us downstairs.”

“That’s right. So everyone wash up and change,” Fati ordered. She had already begun to put out fresh clothes from one of the bags they had in the wagon.

Hashu was not opposed to that. Whether it was the heat of the desert or the effort of travel, it always left him a sweaty mess.

Each child was washed, changed, the dirty clothes stored in another bag. Hopefully, they could ask Khanum for wash supplies.

Hashu led the little troop down and found Agha Bahauddin and his wife in the sitting room. There was a large tray of fruit in front of them, and the man was plucking green grapes and popping them in his mouth. Whatever Khanum Rubab was telling him, made him smile widely.

He noticed the children in the hall and the smile dropped to a stiff grin.

“Please have some fruit,” Khanum Rubab offered, handing each a bowl. The group lapsed into an awkward silence only interrupted by the sedated munches of edible delectables.

“Thank you for letting us stay here,” Hashu told the couple.

Agha Bahauddin’s face wasn’t as sharp as before.

“You’re welcome..?”

“Hamza.”

“Well Hamza, it’s no problem for us. Rubab tells me you offered to help out. I assure you that isn’t necessary.”

“We insist Agha,” Fati interjected. “We do not wish to be a burden.”

“Guests aren’t a burden, young Khanum.”

“And six additional sets of hands are a great help.”

Agha considered her point before he relented. “Fine, you get your way. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” he wagged a finger in their direction.



Agha Bahauddin woke up the next morning with the crack of dawn, right before Fajr. He and his wife got dressed in silence. Smiling to himself, he was looking forward to jolting four sleepy headed boys awake. It reminded him of his days as a teacher. While most would call him grim and harsh, he had turned out some of the best healers the Sultanate had ever seen, Hussain included. It was nice to finally hear back from one of his prized pupils, not that he would ever admit it.

Bahauddin rapped his knuckles sharply on the door. There was no response, so he called his wife.

“They’re still asleep.”

She nodded and opened the door. He was about to protest when she opened it all the way, but the words died on his lips.

The room was empty. Six beds, neatly made, blankets folded in a pile in the corner. Their bags were piled in a tidy heap in the corner.

Both Rubab and Bahauddin shared a confused look. Where were the children?

A noise caught their attention. Stealthily, they tiptoed to the sitting room, peeking around the door. What they saw left them stunned.

Across the sitting room floor, the children had arranged themselves in neat rows and were praying jamaat. Considering it was too early to be Fajr, it must be Salat-ul-Layl.

Agha Bahauddin wasn’t sure what surprised him more. That they remembered the directions to the qibla? That they were praying before Fajr?

The oldest boy was at the head, behind him were two boys, one of whom looked suspiciously like Abu Dhar. That was strange. Most children considered themselves above those that were servants. And here these children were praying side by side with each other. The couple entered just as the children did their last takbeer.

The older girl, Fahima, turned and gave them a sweet smile, though Agha could see the victorious glint in her brown eyes.

‘*Well played, young Khanum,*’ he thought to himself with a smile. ‘*Well played.*’



The charade, if it was that, continued after Fajr. The boys followed Bahauddin outside. They didn’t so much as flinch when he called out orders.

He took a deep whiff of the air. Pine and grass. He closed his eyes allowing himself a moment.

Hashu watched the man mumble, “Subhanallah.”

Clearly Agha Bahauddin liked the forest surroundings. Hashu shifted the axe on his shoulder as he spied Haroon and Rafay returning from the forest. Each of them were precariously balancing a stack of wood.

“That boy isn’t going to leave your side, is he?” Agha huffed. His eyes were watching Nomi pulling an axe out of a stray piece of wood.

Hashu shook his head fondly, not noticing the wide smile on his face. “He never has, Agha.”



Inside, the girls were not seeing any mercy from Khanum Rubab. The woman had them sweep, mop, wash clothes, prepare ingredients, dust and fold. Every task was done with a smile and a polite nod. The woman confessed herself a little nonplussed at their behaviour.



“Alright. Take a break for salat and lunch. Meet me out here when the sun starts setting.”

The axe slid from Hashu’s hand, embedding itself in the block of wood. To say he was exhausted was an understatement. He was

pretty sure that the only way he was standing was by pure will. From the corner of eye, he saw his siblings lower their burdens but still stubbornly remain standing up. It wasn't as though they had something to prove to Agha, but there was that feeling in the back of his mind that he did not want to come across as lazy or weak.

Hashu also welcomed the mundane work in a way. It reminded him of home. Of helping Agha Luqman with the fires. Tending to the tents.

It didn't help that they were in a forest. The place was serene. Warm sun, the sweet smell of pine and the sandy taste of saw dust. Not to mention the blanket of evergreen that called to the sun.

Whilst it was beautiful, it wasn't home. It wasn't his home. There was no whispering amongst the trees when he woke up in the morning. The birds didn't whistle outside waking him for Fajr. No sign of a babbling creek that beckoned to them with icy droplets dancing in the broken sunlight. He missed the sand pit where he had sparred with his siblings, Agha's humble library that was more or less occupied by Fati majority of the time.

At the notion of his sister, Hashu cast a glimpse at the house. Did she think about home? About their parents? He had never seen anything to suggest that. He resolved to ask her tonight.

Following his worn siblings, he stumbled to the house. A cold glass of water would not be unpleasant at this time.



The next morning, they repeated their same actions. Each and every one of them were determined to not give the couple any reason of complaint.

Hashu glared at the sun. Whilst he didn't mind the labour work, he did not appreciate the wave of heat. One look at his siblings told him they could use some encouragement.

"I'm going to get some cold water for everyone."

The response was three weary cheers. Deigning that they were responsible enough to work without minute supervision, Agha was nowhere to be found. No matter. Hashu strolled up, humming under his breath. He was fidgeting with a small stone and almost

thought of giving Rafay's ability a try.

'It would make all that chopping a lot easier.'

He was still a few bow's length from the house. Hashu looked up and felt his feet turn to stone.

There was a horse tied up on the side of the house. It would have been out of view had Hashu not decided to come closer. He felt calm drain out of him. Hashu recognized the horse. Glossy brown coat with extremely short cropped black hair.

'That's the same horse as the rider he had seen in the desert.'

Hashu dropped down into a crouch so he couldn't be seen from the windows. He ignored the ache in his knees as he crawled across the ground below the window.

Slowly, he peeked inside. He paled at the sight before him. Agha Bahauddin and Khanum Rubab were furtively whispering with a man. The figure, just like the horse, was familiar. Brown overcoat, green tunic and a dark brown turban that wrapped around to conceal his face.

Hashu quickly ducked as Rubab came to the window.

"What do we do?" he heard her whisper.

"I've already alerted the Shamsheer," an unfamiliar voice replied.

'That must be the mystery rider.'

"They have no idea," Agha grunted.

'No idea about what?' Hashu thought.

"I'll call them in. We'll see what we can do."

That spurred Hashu to move. He hurriedly ran back to his siblings. He could see their confused looks when he returned empty handed.

"What happened?" Nomi questioned. Hashu's look was torn between worry and calculating.

"Just pretend we've all been here the whole time," he told the others.

"Boys!" He barely managed to not flinch as Agha's voice sounded behind them. "Finish up and come in for lunch."

Satisfied with their nods, he headed back to the house.

Hashu's mind was rushing faster than he thought possible.

“Okay,” he whispered to himself. “Two goals. Get the girls. Get out of here.”

“Nomi, get the boys and meet me at the side of the house. Saddle the horses. Don’t bother loading the wagon, we don’t have time.”

Nomi nodded immediately, but his brows knitted in confusion.

“Okay, but what happened?”

“I’ll explain later.”

Nomi then peeled off, loudly calling to the boys to wash up. Luckily the outside bucket where Agha usually had them wash off was right by the stables.

Hashu on the other hand, was heading straight for the house.

“Fahimal!” he called loudly. Fati poked her head out of the window to the children’s room.

Hashu dropped his voice to a whisper. “Pretend to pass me a cloth. Grab Maya. Meet us at the stables. We have to make a run for it.”

The change of emotions on her face would have been comical if the situation wasn’t so dire. She passed him a cloth, nodded firmly and disappeared from the window.

Hashu found the other boys crouching behind the house wall. The horses were stepping back and forth as if sensing the nervousness of the group.

“Easy,” Hashu whispered, petting its long nose.

A series of soft footsteps drew his attention. Fati swerved around the corner, Maya on her heels. She handed the bag of their possessions to the boys. Hashu mentally face palmed that he hadn’t thought of that himself.

“Sorry, I ran into Abu Dhar on the way. Let’s go.”

Each boy took a horse to themselves. Hashu offered a hand and pulled his sister up. She settled in the saddle behind him. Rafay did the same with Maya, easily hoisting her small figure up with one arm.

“Hey!”

Hashu didn’t bother to turn. Digging his heels into the horse’s sides, he grasped the rein tightly as he was thrown forward. With a loud neigh, it reared and took off heading straight for the forest.

“Hashu Bhai!” Nomi called.

“What is it, Fati?” he gritted, his eyes not leaving the forest ground.

“There are two men chasing us.”

Hashu went silent, his heart thundering with the pounding of the horses hooves.

“They have the advantage, they know the land,” he breathed. He felt a hand squeeze his shoulder.

“Then let’s change that.”

Hashu risked a glimpse over his shoulder. Behind the last of their fleeing group, the forest flora obscured their pursuers. Tangling bushes sprung from the soft ground, the boughs of the trees groaned as they swung low.

A loud *oof* told him one of the riders had been knocked off. There was a crash and a series of snaps and crackles. He hazarded a guess that the other riders horse had taken a tumble.

In front of him, the forest greenery shrunk away, opening a path for them to ride through. Without warning, they burst out of the other side of the forest. Hashu yanked on the reins until the horse slowed to a halt. Nomi’s horse was the last out.

He watched in a morbid fascination as the tree branches and ground bushes intertwined in a painful blockade ridden with thorns and poisonous leaves. No one was leaving through that exit.

Hashu was almost thrown against the saddle, when a weight slumped against his back.

“Fati! Are you-”

“I’m fine,” she responded before he had a chance to ask. “I just need a moment,” she panted.

Hashu too found himself drawing a much needed shaky breath. That had been too close.



“I can’t believe Agha Hussain would send us into a trap,” Haroon whispered in disbelief.

“I don’t think he knew Haroon,” Fati replied, her eyes closed.

The four of them had taken refuge right by the forest border. Hashu did not want to risk being close to anyone and if he was being entirely honest, it was a useful means of escape. Fati was

slumped on the grass against a large tree. All that effort during their escape left her tired.

Hashu sat opposite her, his head in his hands. He almost got his siblings kidnapped *again*. He just couldn't understand. Why were people after them?

His gaze fixated on the bag holding the seal and the ring, As of recently, it also housed the strange sword and the pendant they found.

"I have an idea," he told the others.



Agha Bahauddin drew a sharp breath as his wife wrapped the cloth around his shoulder. She looked displeased as some of the balm she had slathered him in, was wiped on his clothes. In a way, he didn't mind. The horrible puce coloured paste made his skin feel like it was being slow roasted in a cold fire. If that made any sense.

"They must have recognised me," The man across from him sighed, his head bowed in disappointment.

"I think Qamar, you should be more concerned that we were out smarted by a group of children."

Qamar threw Bahauddin a serious look. "Those are no ordinary children. I swear the very forest was working against us."

"Lie down both of you," Rubab scolded. Both men obeyed begrudgingly, not wanting to test the bite in her tone.

A rapid knocking pulled her away from them.

"What is it Abu Dhar?"

Qamar shared an incredulous look at how nice her tone was. The boy handed Rubab a letter.

"Someone dropped this off? Okay, thank you."

She shut the door behind him.

"Why can't you be that nice to us?" Qamar grumbled.

Rubab delicately arched an eyebrow. "He wasn't foolish enough to run his horse into a tree."

Qamar had the decency to look abashed. "I swear it came out of nowhere."

She just rolled her eyes and shoved a bowl of ointment into

his hand.

“Of course it did. Put this on your leg. It’ll make you feel better.”

“Alright Rubab, leave Qamar alone. What’s the letter?”

She handed it over. Bahauddin unfolded the parchment. The other two occupants of the room watched as his bushy eyebrows soared up his large forehead.

“Tell us what it says!” Qamar exclaimed, not entirely comfortable with the suspense.

“It’s from the children,” Bahauddin all but whispered. “The older boy wants to talk to me, alone, in the forest.”

“Absolutely not!” Rubab refused. “One of us will go with you.”

“He says if anyone else appears, they’ll vanish. Just like they did earlier.”

Qamar crossed his arms indignantly. “Cheeky brat. So what’s your decision?”

“I don’t think he has left me any other option.”



Bahauddin was not sure what he had been expecting.

Perhaps the kind, but wary boy who obediently entered his home head bowed. Or maybe the hardworking, determined young man who was stubbornly trying to prove himself to be good enough.

Hashu had set the meeting place deep in the forest. Fati and the others were nearby. Close enough that he could draw on her ability if he had to run or was ambushed. Far enough for them to make a getaway.

The clearing was small, enough for the two men to stand at least two bow lengths apart. Bahauddin winced slightly as his shoulder knocked a branch. What did set him on edge was that the clearing was empty. He was here at the time the boy suggested. Well before sundown. Bahauddin didn’t think he would be the type to be late.

“Drop your weapon,” a cold voice whispered behind him. He could feel something pointed digging into his back. Slowly, he

released the arm length dagger. It landed with a soft thud on the forest floor and vanished out of sight.

Bahauddin didn't move as Hashu circled into view. He would never admit it, but the young man he saw left an uneasy lurch in his stomach. Gone was the warm, welcoming gaze. His eyes met the icy glare of a warrior.

"Why was your friend following us?"

"Straight to the point, boy. Very well." He debated for a moment. "Because we were ordered to."

"By who?"

"Not who you think."

Hashu frowned deeper at his answer.

"Explain."

The boy's posture was vigilant, a gleaming blade aiming in Bahauddin's direction.

"We're not soldiers. We're not working for the Sultanate, well not for the Shahzadah at least."

"Why are they after us?"

Bahauddin frowned. It struck him that the children genuinely didn't know. Suddenly, the boy's actions made sense.



Bahauddin was about to respond. Hashu felt his breath hitch in his throat. Finally, the answer they had been seeking.

But it never came. There was an eerie whistle. The old man fell to his knees and onto his side. A thin wooden shaft stuck out of his chest.

Hashu whirled around, clutching both daggers in hand. In front of him was a boy no older than himself. He was clothed head to toe in black with silver armour, a black cloak billowing behind him. He couldn't see the boy's face, but between the locks of hair, he could tell he was smiling.

"Hello *Hisham*,"



Usually Fati found it comical how restless Nomi got without Hashu. This time though, she was joining him in sending nervous looks to the forest. Normally, she wouldn't worry, but she could

almost sense that something wasn't right. Finally, her resolve wore thin.

"I am going to find him."

Nomi leapt up, eager to join her. The sound of someone clearing their throat made them freeze. The five heads whipped around so fast they were seeing stars.

A young girl was leaning on one of the trees. She was clothed in black with armour strapped across her arms and torso. Upon her finger, she carelessly balanced a dagger by its tip.

"You'll be much too busy *Fatima*."

It took every fibre of her being to not flinch at the girl knowing her name.

"Who are you?" Fati demanded.

The girl gave a cold laugh as two figures emerged behind her.

"I'm your worst nightmare."

Without warning, she leapt at Fati. The older girl threw herself aside, rolling with practiced ease. Two chain whips emerged in the hands of her mystery attacker. Fati barely had a moment before she threw herself to the floor. Splinters tumbled over her head as the blade tips of the whips embedded in the tree behind her. She took the chance to gain some distance. Slipping out her dagger, just as the female managed to pull free.

"Where do you think you're going?" the girl taunted in a sickly sweet voice.

Fati clenched her jaw and settled into a defensive stance.

"Your move," she muttered.

Further down, Haroon was struggling to parry the shots of the boy in front of him. He was about the same height and as thin as a stick but devilishly fast. Grunting under the frontal assault on his head, the weight suddenly disappeared. Haroon didn't get a chance to relax. His feet flew out beneath him, his ankles stinging with the contact. Winded, he looked up gasping to find the end of a spear in his face.

He didn't need to see the boy's full face to know he was smirking.

"Get away from him!"

Rafay ran towards the boy, but he leapt back at the last

moment. His twin's fists hit the ground where he had been standing with a resounding thud. Annoyed, Rafay gave a yell and threw a punch. The boy slid beneath it. Somehow, he ended up behind Rafay, kicking him in the back and sending him tumbling into the dirt.

Nomi was about to help Rafay when a small giggle caught his attention. In front of him was a small girl, in a miniature suit of armour. He actually would have found it adorable if it weren't for the disturbing giggle, like the whole fight was some great show.

"Watch out!" Maya collided with his legs, sending them tumbling to the ground. Just in time too. Behind him, the tree exploded. Nomi watched with wide eyes as the little girl continued to giggle. What was wrong with this child? She pulled out a small capsule from a belt around her waist, her eyes narrowing menacingly.

Nomi sucked in a breath. "Run!" he yelled as the small ball was launched in their direction.

They barely managed to scramble out of the way as the ground was thrown in the air, a ring of scorched black marring the dirt.

He eyed the little figure. She was clapping her hands in glee. "Boom!" she yelled, again giggling.

Nomi swallowed. Something was seriously wrong with this child. He and Maya clambered to their feet. They circled, but she didn't look concerned. He watched warily as she fished something out of her pouch and before he could move, she flung it at her feet.

Pungent smoke exploded around them, forcing tears into his eyes. He could hear Maya coughing horribly.

"Catch me if you can!" Her voice rang in his ears. What in the name of Allah(swt) were they dealing with?



The most vicious fight was taking place deep in the woods between two boys.

The boy in front of him had long since tossed his bow aside in favour of two arm-length daggers. Hashu swept away his strikes with his own set.

“You could just surrender,” the boy whispered, his voice low and cold. He thrust the dagger towards Hashu’s ribs. “It would save us a lot of trouble.”

Hashu caught him by the wrist, flinging it aside. He tried to sweep the boy’s leg but he stepped back.

“Why are you doing this?” Hashu flung himself out of the way of a flying kick.

The boy turned. “You let me worry about that.”

“You should worry about how you’re so ashamed to show your face.”

His mystery attacker raised an eyebrow. In a swift motion, he yanked down his mask.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” the boy whispered. He leapt in the air and brought his arms down with all his might.

Hashu was knocked to the ground, but managed to bring his hands up. They caught the boy’s arms right before the blade could pierce his eye.



Nomi had had quite enough of this...monster. He had taken refuge behind the treeline. His tormentor had resorted to blowing every branch and trunk around him with whatever concocted capsules she was flinging.

“Come out and play!” she pouted. He didn’t dare peek as the branch beside him was blown apart.

He heard a gasp and a punch. Nomi hazarded a look. Maya was glaring down at the girl, rubbing her fist.

“Leave him alone, you beast!”

The girl gave a war cry and flung herself at Maya, the two of them tumbling into the dirt.

“Nomi Bhaiya!”

He hurried over and was shocked to find Haroon and Rafay tied up.

“Watch out!” they cried.

Nomi tumbled out of the way, just as a boy dropped out of the tree. He landed right where Nomi had been standing. The older boy smirked.

“So you like to climb, then let’s climb.”

Nomi scrambled up the tree beside him, the boy doing the same. This, he could handle. The trees, the cliffs, they were his territory.

The boy swung like a monkey with one hand. With the other, he lunged the spear at Nomi. The older boy slid aside, teetering precariously, before he jumped towards his opponent’s tree. Since he was wearing shoes, he had to keep one hand on the tree. Using the other, he grasped the boy’s spear.

His lanky form was no match for Nomi’s stretch and it was wrenched from his grip. Nomi tossed it aside. Seeing that he had lost his advantage, the boy shimmied down and scampered out of view like a rabbit.

Nomi slid down, landing on his feet in front of the tied twins. He moved to untie them when something pinched his arm.

In surprise he looked down and saw a dart, the needle buried in his skin. He only heard Haroon shout his name when his feet gave way and the world turned black.

“Nomi!” Fati saw her brother fall from the corner of her eye.

Pushing with a strength she didn’t know she possessed, Fati tossed the girl away and rushed to his side. He lay limp on the ground. That’s when she noticed a dart in his arm.

A gasp came behind her. The girl she was fighting with collapsed, clutching her thigh. She didn’t have time to react as the boy Nomi had been fighting fell limp, and slumped on the ground. She ducked as a dart flew over her head, embedding in the tree behind her. She stood up to move. Around her, the children lay still. Her worry was only partially quelled by the soft rise and fall of their bodies. She was surrounded by several hooded figures, dart guns in their hands. There was no way to escape.



Hashu gasped and jumped back. A hand flew to his side. It came away bloodied. He grimaced. The wound wasn’t deep but it still stung.

“Well, look at that. It appears that you’re just as human as the rest of us.”

With a menacing smirk, he stalked forward.

Crack!

The boy slumped down in a dead faint. Hashu felt his jaw drop. Rubab was standing behind the boy, spinning away the butt of the sword she had clobbered his attacker with.

“Qamar,” she called out sharply. “Get these fools inside.”

The man that had followed them in the desert emerged. He slung an arm of the knocked out boy over his shoulders.

“I suppose a please is too much to ask for,” he muttered. He instantly went silent at Rubab’s dark look.

“Let’s get that cut looked at,” Hashu hesitated, backing away. He had to get to his siblings. He turned to leave when a rope lassoed his torso.

Rubab watched him warily. “Don’t be a fool Hisham. Besides, they’re not there.”

Hashu froze. “What do you mean?” he asked, praying that it wasn’t what he feared.

“Your siblings. They were kidnapped.”

13

Truces and Turmoil

Hashu followed Qamar quietly to the room where he had been staying before they fled. Agha Bahauddin was lying asleep on one of the beds. His entire torso was wrapped in bandages, especially his chest. He felt a twinge of guilt seeing that. If he hadn't called Agha to the forest, they wouldn't have ambushed.

"You can stop loitering at the door."

Hashu jumped. This couple would send him to the grave.

"I thought you were asleep."

Agha's eyes cracked open. "I don't sleep around people I don't know. Who's your friend?"

He gestured to where Qamar had not so gently deposited their attacker.

"He's no friend of mine."

"Well you both attacked me. In my eyes, that makes you friends."

"Enough talking!" Rubab trooped in, her arms overflowing with healing supplies. Abu Dhar stumbled behind her carrying a myriads of herbs. He plopped them down on an awaiting table.

"Thank you Abu Dhar," Rubab said sweetly, the boy left giving her a soft smile.

Hashu stared in surprise. She never spoke that way with any of them! Hashu didn't know she could talk without the clipped tone.

“I know,” Qamar grumbled from behind Hashu. “Don’t bother complaining.”



Fati tugged the chains for the hundredth time. They didn’t budge.

“You do know that repeating the same actions and expecting different results is a sign of insanity?”

She rolled her eyes. Across the cell, was the same girl she had been fighting earlier. Their captors had removed her mask. Fati had been surprised to wake up and see her watching.

Tanned skin that had seen plenty of sun with an ostensibly innocent face. Above her soft features, was a pair of cold grey eyes that seemed to pierce straight through her. Just like Fati, her hands were bound behind her back.

Fati wasn’t sure where they were, but it appeared to be some kind of dungeon. There was a grill covered window as large as her face, so they must be above ground.

Both of them whipped their heads to the door. A loud screeching ricocheted through the hall outside.

“The man said there were five. We’ve got more than that,” a man’s voice echoed. Fati had to strain her ears to hear him.

“So we find the ones we need, dispose of the ones we don’t.”

The voices faded as they travelled further down the hall.

‘*Who are these people?*’ she thought to herself.

“Bounty hunters,” her cell mate’s sharp voice bounced off the grimy walls.

“And you would know that, how?” Fati replied, her face a mask of indifference.

“They have the insignia. Silver ring, left hand.”

Fati frowned at her.

“You’re wearing one too.”

The girl scoffed. “No need to be rude. I’m no bounty hunter.”

“But you did attack us.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “If I wanted to attack you, you wouldn’t be breathing.”

Fati smirked. “Somehow, I doubt that. You weren’t able to

kidnap us when you had the advantage. Now Allah(swt) knows the truth, but that doesn't speak well to our skill."

She was rewarded with a scowl. "We'll see how much you blabber when these cuffs are off."

"Don't threaten me," Fati responded, her tone soft but firm. "These people didn't come looking for you. What would they do if they found out you were here to pilfer their bounty? I doubt they'd take that very well."

She didn't expect the eyeroll response. "Alright amateur, if you are going to threaten someone, at least choose something you will follow through on."

Fati was a little surprised. "What makes you so sure I won't do it?"

Her reply was a sarcastic shrug. "You heard what they said. You wouldn't condemn us to that fate."

"Why not? You don't know me."

"Ah my dear Fatima, but I do. You're the saviours, the good people. You don't harm people, you help them."

The words were ridden with as much mockery and sarcasm as possible. But they weren't wrong.



"Get off of me or I-" Hashu's attacker struggled against his bonds.

"Finish that sentence. I dare you," Rubab stood over him, the tip of a dagger pressed against his cheek. "I have no qualms against turning you into my new pincushion, especially since you shot my husband."

The boy went quiet, his eyes skimming the room. Agha Bahauddin was glaring at him, a hand over the spot where the arrow had impaled him. The armour he wore under his shirt had borne the brunt, but it still made it through.

Hashu's own wound was apparently not as shallow as he had thought. Qamar had bandaged him tight enough to stop his lungs.

The said man was watching from the doorway with a smirk on his face.

"Stop smiling, Qamar!" The smirk instantly dropped.

Hashu was lost in his thoughts, he grabbed the wall for support and pushed himself out of bed. His siblings needed him.

“And where do *you* think you’re going?”

“As thankful as I am Khanum, I must go.”

She scoffed and folded her arms across her torso. “Go? Go where? You wouldn’t know the first place to start looking. Besides, your siblings weren’t the only ones taken.”

That caught the attention of their attacker.

Rubab pretended not to notice. “Eight children were sedated and taken to a fortified location not far from here.”

The mystery boy strained against his bonds. “Release me!” he ordered curtly.

Rubab’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I will, when you prove that you are not a threat.”

“You don’t understand. Those children are my siblings. If what you say is true, they’ll be killed.” There was an uncharacteristic plea in his voice, and for the first time since they met, Hashu saw actual worry in his eyes.

“What I understand is that you came to my home, attacked my husband with an intent to kill and got my former guests kidnapped.”

He could see the hope dimming in his eyes. Hashu addressed Rubab.

“If what he says is true, then we have to help them.” He swallowed as the woman raised an eyebrow. “It is not ideal, but I doubt he will try anything being out numbered three to one. And if he does, you can put him to sleep a second time.”

She frowned considering his words.

“You make a good argument. I’ll listen, but if you even think about trying to undercut me, the next time you’ll be in bed will be as a corpse.” Her tone made it very clear that she was not exaggerating.

He hesitated, but seeing no way out, he nodded. Rubab clapped her hands together making everyone in the room jump. “Calm down. No need to be skittish. First, what is your name, boy? Don’t give me that look, unless you want me to keep calling you boy? Speak up, I didn’t hear that.”

“Aslan.”

“Now Aslan, I’m going to open these ropes. Don’t give me a reason to tie you back up.”

Hashu watched warily as the boy sat up, rubbing his wrists. He noted the boy was bandaged as well, though not as much as Hashu.

One eye on Aslan, he turned again to Rubab. “Do you have any idea where they are?”

She gave him a sharp nod. “Follow me. You first.”

With the sheathed tip of her dagger, she prompted Aslan up and through the the door, Hashu behind her and Qamar behind him.

They were led into the sitting room where Abu Dhar had set up a large table with some water.

Without lowering the point from Aslan’s back, she fished into a pouch strung around her waist. “Thank you Abu Dhar. Now why don’t you take these five coins and buy yourself something nice from the market. I heard a new shipment of mangoes have come in.”

The boy’s face lit up and he nodded earnestly, saluting the woman.

Aslan’s eyes widened at the motherly tone he did not expect from the woman behind him.

“We know,” Hashu and Qamar’s voices interjected in unison. “Don’t bother complaining.”

Rubab ignored their comment and had them sit around the table. She unfurled a detailed map of Babahud that outlined even the houses and shops.

“This is our home,” her finger was on a circle surrounded by a forest. “This is where your siblings are being held.”

It was past the forest, back in the desert.

Hashu stood up, his eyes catching a glimpse of the dying daylight outside. “I have to get them back. May I borrow your map?”

“There is no possible way you walk out of here with that map.” Aslan flew to his feet.

Hashu frowned. "You shouldn't even be a part of this conversation."

"My siblings are trapped there too."

"And you think I would leave them to die?"

"Forgive me for not trusting the very person I was capturing."

"Ouch!" Both boys yelped as Qamar smacked them upside on the back of their heads. When they turned to him, he innocently pointed to Rubab.

"Now that you two fools are finished, let me be clear. None of you will be able to get their siblings alone. The only way you can save them is by working together."



Nomi's head slumped back against the wall. He couldn't see the window but from the fading light, he knew that night would soon be upon them.

There cell was not very large, hosting the four boys. He had no idea where Hashu or the girls were. Inshallah, they were fine.

Beside him, was the boy that Nomi had chased from the tree tops. He was smaller than he had seemed then, with lanky limbs that were as slim as twigs.

"What's your name?" He asked.

Grey eyes turned to him. He was a little surprised at how guarded they were.

Nomi gave him a smile. "I can hardly do any harm by knowing your name."

That seemed to convince the boy and he relented. "Qasim," he rasped.

Across the wall Haroon and Rafay were glaring at him. Qasim pointedly ignored them with a serenity that, if Nomi was being honest, he found slightly humorous.

"What's your name?"

Nomi smiled. "Noman. The others call me Nomi for short."

Qasim mouthed 'Noman' looking a little confused.

The all started at a low whistle echoing down the hall. Nomi watched with interest as Qasim perked up and responded with a whistle of his own. He scrunched his eyes. Before Nomi could

blink, one of Qasim's arms came free. All three boys watched in shock as his other arm was liberated moments later.

He ignored their gaping expressions and strolled up to the door. Nomi couldn't exactly see what he was doing but there were small clicks coming from the cell door. Just like the chains, it flew open after a few moments.

"Qasim, wait!" the boy froze, grey meeting brown. "You're outnumbered and surrounded. You heard them. If you free your friends and try to run, they will know you're not who they're looking for."

The boy looked conflicted. From down the hall, came three sharp whistles. Qasim nodded and ran inside. He fumbled with Nomi's locks and they sprung open. Albeit grudgingly, he repeated it for the twins.

"Everyone, stop." He could see the flaring anger in the twins glare and Qasim was not exactly giving them a friendly look either. "We can make it out if we work together. If we fight, we'll be back where we started."

"Fine," Rafay huffed. "Only until we're out."

Qasim didn't deign his comment with a response and rushed to where the whistles came from.

Nomi turned to his siblings. "Let's find the girls."



"What are you doing?" Fati queried.

The girl finished her third whistle and titled her head as if she was addressing a child. "Doesn't the little girlie want to go home to her mommy?"

Fati glared.

Her cellmate rolled her eyes, "Relax, I'm bored so I have called for an escape."

"And just how are we supposed to get out of these?" she shook her wrist, the chain jostled noisily.

"Oh, we can't. But he can." Fati hadn't noticed the small boy who was fiddling with the cell door.

"Where's Amna?"

"Down the hall, Pari Baji."

Fati raised an eyebrow, "Pari Baji?"

"Pariza. Pari for you," her cellmate smiled, rubbing her sore wrists.

Fati was surprised when the boy came over and opened her chains too.

"What?" Pari smirked. "Didn't you hear your brother. The only way we're getting out is if we work together. Guess that makes us *sisters*."

Her smirk grew at Fati's grimace. "Come on *Fatima*. Let's get our baby sisters."



Hashu squinted at the stone formations. What Rubab hadn't told them was that this land was riddled with ruins. Around them, rubble lay in discarded heaps desecrated by the elements. There were few buildings that still stood. He and Aslan had already scouted the others. He had no idea how they were still standing.

He jolted the map aside just as Aslan's hand lunged for it.

"You should let me find a way in. Clearly subtlety and stealth isn't your forte or we wouldn't have found you."

Hashu rolled his eyes. "Well, we're obviously not that incompetent or you would have had us carted off to whatever commander you serve."

Aslan gave him an affronted look. "I am not a soldier."

"Mhm," Hashu hummed. "And you found that armour in an alley. Clearly you have someone with a lot of power at your helm."

"I serve no one."

"Then why are you here? Why come after us?"

Aslan didn't respond. Hashu felt a little guilty about snapping and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, you heard what Khanum Rubab said. Now our siblings need us and the only way we will get to them is if we work together. Inshallah. Good, now how should we enter?"

He threw Hashu a confused look.

"You weren't wrong, stealth is your strength."

Aslan smirked.



“Pari Baji!” the child squealed at the sight of her sister.

For the first time, Fati got a look at the little girl. She was incredibly small, probably younger than Maya.

“Don’t be fooled,” her sister warned as she was freed. Rubbing her wrists she cast Amna a dirty look. “That girl is insane.”

“Alright enough with the sappy reunion. Let’s get out of here.” Pari started towards the door.

“I hate to be a damper, but you have several armed individuals with more of the darts that knocked us out. How do you expect to get out?”

Pari whirled around at the sound of Fati’s voice. To be honest, she hadn’t thought of that. But she wasn’t going to show it.

“Boom?” Amna offered innocently. Fati looked at the girls incredulously as Pari shook her head.

“Sorry Amna, no boom.” The girl looked genuinely disappointed.

“Do you have a better idea?” Pari asked, placing a hand on her hip.

Fati simply smiled. “A narrow hall. One entrance. Seems like over here, we have a bit of a tactical advantage.”

Catching on to what she was saying, Pari gave a much more sinister smirk of her own.



“Will you stop eating, you slobbering cow!”

Tanzir smacked the man on the back of his head. Not expecting the assault, he flew forward, smacking his nose into the wooden table.

“Have you sent a message to Zerzura?” he asked one of his men, ignoring the groans from the corner. At his nod, Tanzir smirked.

This bounty was enough to set them up for life. Well, obviously, him the most. He was in charge after all. He could just imagine it. A large mansion filled with servants. Trays upon trays of mangoes and sherbets. Silk pillows stuffed with swan feathers.

Tanzir sighed. It would be perfect.

“Uh...Sir?” He schooled away the oncoming frustrated expression.

“Yes?” Tanzir spat.

“One of the kids is calling out for something.”

“And what do you want me to do? They’re little kids! Stop being a coward and go find out what it is!”

The man bumbled away, not wanting to deal with his leader’s ire. Tanzir watched his bulking mass vanish from the room. If nothing else, he would be free of these fools.

He lounged with the rest of his men. Tanzir knew bounty hunting was a game of patience. Looking outside into the night, something occurred to him.

“What was wrong with the children?”

“We don’t know, sir. He hasn’t come back.” Tanzir frowned. Nothing justified him disappearing for so long. He pointed to two men.

“Go. Find out what is keeping him.” They nodded and ran into the hall.

This time Tanzir listened closely. He could hear their heavy steps, dull thuds on the smooth stone. Suddenly they stopped. There were muffled grunts before silence. An eerie unsettling silence.

“You five follow me. The rest of you, watch the door. No one comes in or out until I say so.”

Tanzir let two of his men walk in front. He was the leader, so he needed to know what was coming. They entered into the hall lined with jail cells. The sight stopped them in their tracks. Gagged and pulling against their restraints in one of the cells, were the three men he had sent down earlier.

“They’re gone!” one of his comrades announced. He wasn’t wrong. All cells were vacant, the shackles hanging unattended.

“Not yet.”

Tanzir whipped around. From behind his guard’s body, the hall was only wide enough for them to move in a line, he noticed a small girl pushing the door shut.

Something about her sneer unsettled him but he wasn’t about to be shown up by a child, much less a little girl.

“Get them!” he yelled.

The next few moments were chaos. More children appeared

like smoke, dropping down from the ceiling and darting out of corners. He jolted back as the man behind him was yanked away by a boy. He watched incredulously as the child slammed his guard's face into the grill, leaving a sizeable dent. The man clattered uselessly to the ground .

Tanzir swore, drawing his sword. He usually left the fighting to his men, but having a blade offered a little comfort. Around him, the echoes of grunts and yells of pain did nothing to assure him.

'I might be able to sneak out.'

He flattened himself against the wall as another man was thrown out of his path. He did not look at the man's screaming face as he was pummeled into the dirt. Tanzir also pointedly ignored the sagging frame he passed. It was leaning limply on the wall.

'Almost there.'

He was a bow's length away when he abandoned all subtlety and made a dash for the door.

He was only a step away when something yanked his ankle. Tanzir tumbled painfully into the dirt. He spat out stones and dirt, looking around for his attacker. He was facing another girl. She furrowed her eyes and tutted.

"Going somewhere?"

Tanzir yelled for backup.



Upstairs, the bounty hunters heard Tanzir calling for them, but they were a little preoccupied themselves.

"So this-" Hashu ducked to avoid a stool. "-is your-" A blade skimmed past his stomach, "-idea of stealth? Woah!"

He hit the floor as the sword whistled over his head. Spinning out a leg, he swept his offender's feet, sending him crashing to the ground.

Aslan grunted as he grabbed a low hanging beam, using it to kick a charging man in the chest with both feet. His opponent flew crashing against the wall.

"Sometimes you need a more direct approach. Hey!"

He dodged a dagger thrust, slamming the person's hand and knocking the dagger away with practiced motion. Swiping it up from the floor, he brought it down on the man's neck. Right before it impaled, his wrist was tightly gripped mid-air.

Aslan looked confused as Hashu hit the back of the man's head, making him fall limp. He gave Aslan a heavy look.

"Don't kill unless you have to."

He yanked his wrists away.

"You fight your way, I'll fight mine!"

"Aslan!"

Hashu watched as his unruly companion visibly relaxed. Behind a girl he didn't know, Fati and his siblings climbed out. There was another boy and girl he didn't recognize.

"We need to get out of here. Grab what's yours," Hashu commanded.

They didn't argue and everyone fetched their pilfered supplies. Turns out their bounty hunters had gathered them in a sack at the back of the room. Leaping over the fallen bodies, Aslan and Hashu led them out and they didn't stop until they were deep in the woods by Rubab and Bahauddin's home.

Hashu and Fati shared a smile. They were safe.

Aslan came up to him. "Not bad. There's hope for you yet."

He looked surprised when Hashu offered him a handshake. Not wanting to be rude, he grasped it firmly. Rubbing a hand on his neck, Aslan awkwardly admitted, "You do realize I still have a mission to capture you."

"You're still following orders?"

"Hisham, I'm sorry I—"

Hashu shook his head cutting the boy off. "No Aslan, I'm sorry."

Without warning, Hashu plunged a dart into the hand that he was still holding. At that same moment, Fati pegged Pari and the twins handled the younger siblings. They dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes, Hashu having to wrench his hand away so he wouldn't be dragged down. Nomi looked down as Qasim's eyes fluttered close, his glare laced with accusation.

"They should be safe here until they wake up. Come on."

Hashu took off at a run. They needed to put as much distance between themselves and Aslan's family as they could.

"Where are we going!" Fati yelled.

He smiled and exclaimed, "Zerzura!"



"Well?! Did they have them?!" Nazar grabbed the front of the guard's armour, yanking him forward. As the day of the coronation got closer, Nazar got more on edge. "And they let them escape?!"

The guard swallowed, every self-preservation instinct in his body screaming to not say a word. He tried to answer, but it came out as more of a squeak. Disgusted, Nazar flung him aside.

"Get out!"

Nazar placed a hand on his temple. These miscreants were proving to be quite an annoying thorn in his side.

"Sir, if I may..."

"It better be a solution to this eternally damned problem or so help me Dabur, I will have your head as a chandelier."

"It is, my liege. I have a contingent, the Mahjoor, they have been preparing for your service since they could walk. In fact, they are the ones that had found the children and would have had them in your dungeons had those oaf-brain bounty hunters not intervened."

Nazar felt a flare of anger.

"Arrange a meeting with these soldiers of mine. Also," he added with a menacing smirk, "Make sure those bounty hunters are introduced to my little....pet."

A Story Untold

Hashu gathered the sand in his hand and let it dribble through his fingers. The grainy granules slipped through the creases in his skin. His horse, however, had other intentions and lowered its long head, nuzzling its nose into the palm of his hand.

“Hey girl.”

Warm breath hit his fingers, and she dug her nose deeper into his side. Over her long neck, he could see the silhouette of the famed Zerzura, the capital of the Sultanate. Since the sun had long abandoned the sky, Hashu could only just make out the peaks. To be seen from this far away, they must be absolutely massive.

They were waiting for Agha Bahauddin’s man. The man had marked a position far from even the outskirts of the city. It was for the best, another wild chase was the last thing Hashu wanted.

He was roused from his thoughts by the hand that appeared on his shoulder. Fati gave him an apologetic smile.

“There’s a rider approaching from the east.”

Hashu gave the horse a final pat and stood up, brushing his clothes. It sent a puff of sand and dust into the air.

Following Fati’s gaze, he spotted a growing black dot against the pale sand of the desert. It was initially barely visible in the inky darkness, but was steadily growing larger.

“Everyone, make sure your faces are covered.”

Hashu had little comfort in how much he was trusting Khanum

Rubab and Agha Bahauddin, but he did not have many other options.

Last night...

Hashu's heart was racing as he unwound the horse's bridle. The map was stuffed firmly in his belt. Already the sun had started to dip behind the trees, and he could see the tendrils of darkness raking across the sky.

Aslan had already slipped out of the stable, Hashu following him. He didn't quite trust the boy to show him his back yet. Outside, he found Agha Bahauddin. He was leaning heavily on Qamar and in one hand, he had a bag. Qamar helped him limp close enough so he could talk to Hashu without being overheard.

"Now I know we're not exactly friends-"

'The understatement of the century' Hashu thought to himself.

"-but I have to warn you. That ain't no boy you're working with. He's trained and trained good. And he's been sent after you. I know the moment he has his little gang back, they'll take a go at you."

Hashu frowned. He had considered that. He was not unaware of Aslan's intentions, but Agha Bahauddin was right. Expecting anything honourable was walking into a trap.

"I may not say it often, but you're smart. Figure out how to get him before he gets you. Secondly, I got friends in Zerzura. Friends who want to help you."

"Like you?" Hashu asked.

Bahuddin frowned. "I may be rough around the edges, but all of us, even Qamar, have only been looking out for you. Whoever sent that boy, is not playing games. They want you and your siblings. Say the word, and I can stop that from happening."

Hashu was not entirely convinced. However, there was a niggling thought at the back of his mind. Agha wasn't wrong in his assessment.

'Sometimes, you just have to trust Allah(swt)' he told himself.

The man rode closer, jumping off his horse when he was a bow's length away. He was wearing a brown tunic and pants with a green waistband. He was about as tall as Hashu, and there was a

sword poking the thin fabric of his brown outer robes. The man's head was wrapped in a sand-coloured turban, the end covering his face.

"Asalaam Alaikum children, I was sent by Agha Bahauddin," he spoke with a deep voice. "I am looking for Hisham."

This had to be the help Agha Bahauddin was talking about. Hashu stepped forward. "Walaikum Salam. That would be me."

"Is this everyone?"

"Yes."

"Very well, Follow me."

Hashu leapt into his saddle, Fati behind him and followed the man. He rode straight towards Zerzura.

As they got closer, the spikes turned into spires, the silhouettes morphed into a castle and ornate masjids. Even from beyond the city gates, Hashu had to confess he was in awe. They pierced the pale clouds in the sky, shrouded in darkness. The entire city was surrounded by an impressive wall that stood as tall as some of the muezzin towers. Its sheer surface was as smooth as polished stone. Hashu smirked. Nomi could probably climb it.

Along the walls he could see small flecks of light moving in orderly, repeated patterns.

Guards.

The lights spanned the entire wall, even as it wrapped around the city.

Their guide steered them away from the city gates. He kept enough distance from the walls to ensure none of the patrolling guards could see them.

Hashu felt a little concerned with how well they were able to sneak past. They slipped in blind spots and around rocks and boulders that could easily shield their little party from searching eyes.

Soon enough, they stopped at what looked like a large boulder. The man had them disembark from their horses. With a flick of his wrist, he rapped sharply on the stone.

For a few moments, nothing happened. Hashu was about to ask the man if they had made to right spot, when it shifted. They backed away as a concealed trap door slid open. Hashu rubbed his

eyes, how did he not see it? He didn't get a chance to look further as he was ushered in, his horse clopping behind him. There was a concealed man who closed the door behind them.

Immediately, the children were enveloped in a harrowing darkness but it only took a few moments for Hashu's eyes to adjust. He could see a long hallway, its gaping mouth awaiting them. Along the wall, small torches had been hung. One of which was clutched firmly in the hand of their guide.

"Follow me," he told them in a low voice.

"As if we have any other option." Hashu hear Rafay mumble.

The tunnel was large, wide enough for two horses to move side by side but not high enough for riders. It didn't matter. Hashu had a firm hold on his horse's bridle. The equine had initially been a little skittish, but seeing her owner was calm, she followed suit. Right now, the mischievous creature kept trying to nibble his hand.

"I don't have anything for you," He scolded fondly. She stared back with big mournful black eyes. "Don't look at me like that. I have no treats."

"I do." Maya had managed to wriggle her way up front. She pulled out an apple and opened her hand flat. That did the trick and Hashu's horse swiped it up, leaving her fingers a slimey gift.

Maya looked between the horse and her hand in disgust. "Ew."

They walked in silence, the only noise being the loud clipping of the horses hooves on stone.

Their guide suddenly stopped. Not expecting it, Hashu stumbled as the horse's head pushed against his back.

Their way was blocked by a large wooden door. Their guide, however, was nonplussed and simply knocked.

A small part of the door was promptly pulled back, revealing a pair of frowning eyes. Their guide wasn't concerned with the wary look he was receiving.

"Surah Isra, Ayat eighty one," he whispered.

The eyes turned to him for a moment before the peephole was slammed shut. That response seemed satisfactory and the door opened with a painful groan.

"Welcome children, to the Shamsheer."



Nazar sniffed. Of all the things he expected Dabur to parade in front of him, these minuscule humans were not one of them. To be fair, the oldest was only a few inches shorter than the Shahzadah himself. But that was beside the point.

“And these are?”

“The soldiers I spoke of earlier.”

“I think you need to see a healer, Dabur.” Nazar sniffed. “These are children.”

“The same children who were about to solve your problem. They would have had them, had the bounty hunters not intervened.”

Nazar frowned.

“Very well. Boy!”

The oldest moved forward with a crisp step.

‘Maybe Dabur was right...’

“Find them. Lead me to them. If you can do so, you will receive whatever your heart desires.”

To his surprise, the boy did not so much as blink at the generous offer. He didn’t know that what Aslan wanted could never be given, no matter how wealthy he may be.

“I am gratefully for your generosity,” came Aslan’s cordial reply.

“Excellent,” Nazar. “Finally, every piece will fall in place.”

But Aslan didn’t hear him. His argument with Hashu was repeating in his mind.

Hashu rolled his eyes. “Well, we’re obviously not that incompetent or you would have had us carted off to whatever commander you serve.”

Aslan gave him an affronted look. “I am not a soldier.”

“Mhm.” Hashu hummed. “And you found that armour in an alley. Clearly you have someone with a lot of power at your helm.”

“I serve no one.”

No matter what he had said to Hisham, it was true. They were nothing more than soldiers, servants to a pampered prince

and slaves to his merciless vizier.

'He was right...' Aslan thought to himself.



“You can rest and wash up here. Someone will be along to fetch you in a moment.” Their guide bid them farewell and left them to settle in.

Fati and Hashu shared a look. She knew she was thinking about what their guide had said. The man had introduced their location as Shamsheer - which meant hidden swords. He could almost feel the pendant burning in his bag.

Not-so-subtle glances from Nomi told him his younger brother had also come to the same conclusion. Whoever the pendant and sword belonged to, he had worked here, with these people. But who were they?

He paid no mind to the younger children rushing to claim one of the squashy beds.

“I don’t think it’s a trap,” Fati whispered. Only Hashu and Nomi heard her.

“How do you know?” Nomi replied.

She gave a shrug, “I can’t say I’m certain, but the fact that we are not in shackles is a promising indication.”

They watched the twins argue over a bed and smiled as Maya claimed it for herself, forcing them to pick one on either side of her. In a way, Hashu was glad. Even after everything, they still laughed and fought like it was life as normal.

He wondered what their new normal would be. It was impossible to go back to the life they had known. All speculation aside, he did intend to visit the graves of the man and woman he regarded as his parental figures. He hoped the growing sickness of the jungle had not disturbed their burial site.

Disturbed from his thoughts by rapid knocking, Hashu answered it to come face to face with his guide.

“I hope the accommodation is to your liking.”

Hashu nodded. Considering they had spent the last day between dungeon cells and riding on horseback, anything would have been considered an improvement.

“There are some men who would like to meet you.”

He felt like a horse had sat on his chest. Was this it? Were they finally going to get the answers they had been seeking?

“May my siblings come with me?” Hashu had no intention of separating from them. The last experience was harrowing enough.

“That won’t be a problem. But I would recommend you let the young ones rest. You have my word they’ll be safe here and my life be forfeited if that is not the case.”

Hashu’s eyes widened at the serious vow. “Very well, we will be ready in a moment.”

He closed the door and turned to Fati and Nomi. They clearly intended to come.

“I’m not letting you out of my sight,” Nomi told him.

Fati smiled. “Like you do already?”

“So where are we going?” Rafay asked.

He looked pleadingly to Fati who backed away, her hands raised defensively. Nomi followed suit, leaving Hashu to fend for himself.

Shaking his head, he took a seat on Maya’s bed, the young girl leaning into his side.

“Fati, Nomi and I are going to talk to some of the people here. Hopefully, we can find some answers about everything that has been going on.”

“Like why we were being chased?”

“Or why those crazy kids came after us?”

Hashu raised his hands to quell their suggestions. “Hopefully, yes. We’ll be safe here for a while. I think you guys should get some rest while you can.”

They didn’t seem happy but complied nonetheless.

“Let’s go,” he told the older children. Dropping his voice to a whisper, Hashu pointed to one of the satchels. “Let’s take this with us.”

Fati frowned in confusion, but if she had any concerns she did not voice them.

They left the room, their guide leading them down a twisted set of tunnels to a wooden door.

“This is where I leave you,” he wished them goodnight and left.

Something stopped Hashu from immediately opening it. There was an inkling of dread in his mind.

‘*What if we’re not ready?*’ he thought to himself.

“We have nothing to gain by standing here,” Fati said softly. With a gentle push, she nudged Hashu to open the door.

Hashu wasn’t sure what to expect.

It was a large office. In the corner was a roaring fire, he could feel the warmth from the doorway. It licked the walls and floors in dancing rays of orange. There was an assortment of soft pillows arranged neatly in low chair frames. On the other side, was a fancy desk surrounded by shelves that were overflowing with parchment and books.

They took a seat in one the chairs by the fire, sinking heavily into the plump cushions. Hashu himself had his back to the door and was watching the fire intently, lost in thought.

There were so many question flowing through his mind that he was struggling to not feel overwhelmed. Was he finally going to get the answers they had been seeking? He had brought with the satchel, the sword, the seal and the ring. The pendant was in his pocket too.

He knew Fati was curious about his earlier decision. The only reason he dared to was because he saw a sliver of a similar one around his guide’s neck, but he did not want to risk mentioning it. Not to mention that all the thoughts were starting to give him a headache.

Both of his siblings had yet to speak and so they sat in the silence with nothing but the crackling cacophony of the fire and the thoughts whirling in their head.

Before he could descend further, the door behind him swung open.



Agha Soleimani was muttering dhikr non-stop. Maesum found it a little amusing but he couldn’t lie that there was a sliver of concern slithering through his thoughts.

What if the boy resented them? What if he refused to accept? This entire encounter could go very wrong and his military mind was charting out the possibilities, each as wild or grim as the next.

With nerves honed by battle, he gestured to the door. "Come Agha, there is no benefit in delaying the inevitable."



The three children sprung to their feet, watching the door swing open to reveal the strangest pair. One was an old man, leaning heavily on a wooden cane. His face was pale and wrinkled with more lines than on the pages of a book. His hair fell limply making him look thinner and smaller. But it was his face that made Hashu's breath hitch in his throat.

Not that he noticed, but beside him, both Nomi and Fati had gone pale.

He had seen those eyes, those features. He had seen the frown, smiles and laugh his entire life. Even the way the man moved, with a strange grace, reared a pain in his chest. But it wasn't possible. Their father figure was dead.

"Asalaam Alaikum," Hashu swallowed. His siblings managed some sort of a greeting.

"Walaikum salam."

Even his voice sounded familiar. Hashu just noticed the figure beside the old man. He was tall and built with broad shoulders, padded with armour. A wide torso thinned into a thick neck and a large head covered by trimmed black beard.

They repeated their greetings, a little more sure of themselves.



Hashu may not have noticed, but neither man had moved from the doorway. They couldn't believe their eyes. His slender muscled frame, kind brown eyes and map of black hair. Neither could tear their eyes away from Hashu's face.

"Who are you?" Hashu asked, attempting to appear unruffled by their staring.

The armour ridden man was the first to recover. Slamming a fist to his chest he declared, "My name is Qayidun Maesum, commander of the Zavar Sultanate. This is Agha Soleimani.

Esteemed member of the Judicial Council and renowned scholar.”

To Maesum, it was painful to see the familiar brown eyes so wary.

“My name is Hisham. This is my sister, Fatima and our brother, Noman.”

Both men shared a knowing look.

“I think it would be wise to have a seat,” Agha Soleimani suggested.

They shuffled around until the two men were facing the three children.

“I suppose you have many questions,” Agha Soleimani began. Hashu looked to his sister, expecting her to be brimming with queries. He was surprised to see that she was silent. “I suppose the question is where to begin.”

An awkward silence descended on the group.

“Who are the Shamsheer?” Hashu’s voice cut through the tension.

Maesum took a breath. “The Shamsheer is a secret organization working to empower the Sultanate and the promise of the sultans to rule Bi’idnillah. For decades, we have been regrouping and targeting schemes that threaten our Sultanate and our faith.”

“Why are you helping us?” Hashu couldn’t help but ask.

Both men hesitated.

“Does it have to do with the Zavar Sultanate?” Fati asked. She may look innocent, but Hashu could almost tell she was probing.

Soleimani looked curious. “What do you know about the Sultanate?”

Fati shook her head. “Not much, the last resource I checked did not have any information after the Sultan that died more than forty years ago.”

Soleimani took over. “Astute young Khanum. Perhaps this will explain everything.”

Before his death forty years ago, Sultan Abbas of the Zavar Sultanate was famous throughout the eastern lands. Under his reign the Sultanate ended the era of famine and poverty and the

entire empire was rolling in prosperity and happiness. During those years, he married a woman from a tribe that resided near Zorzura. For many years, the couple ruled with justice and peace was established.

However, on the night of his son's birth, Sultan Abbas's wife passed away. Many saw this as an opportunity to seize the Sultanate, but the Sultan was too smart. He was forced to accept a marriage contract with a kingdom east of the empire. She too, bore him a son, Syed Nazar Farooq. Unlike his first wife, Nazar's mother was a cruel and jealous woman. She tried everything in her power from corruption to assassination to ensure her son would be the successor. But this could not be while the first born, Hamza, was alive.

Allah(swt) works in mysterious ways and she died before she could be successful. And so, the two brothers were raised as the future leaders of the Sultanate. Hamza grew into a skilled young man whose prowess dominated the court and the battlefield alike. Nazar however, fueled by the jealousy of his mother, became a cruel and vindictive person. No one would know how much until it was too late.

Hamza married a young Shahzadi from a neighbouring Sultanate, Sultana Syeda Khajista Zavar. She was a force to rival with in the academic arena and has published many books as well as providing paramount support for the institutions of learning. The couple were well matched and pious. They led their nation with the guidance of the Quran and teachings of the Ahlebait(as).

There came a day when Nazar had decided that it was time to steal the Sultanate for himself. He bribed a healer to concoct a slow poison. With access to the castle, he ensured it was in every bite of food Sultan Hamza ate. By the time the Sultan realised, it was too late. With the grace of Allah(swt) he managed to pass one last decree before he died. That the Sultanate was to pass to his son on his twenty first birthday. If the boy were to pass away before, or reject it when he came of age, then it would be given to the eldest male of the family. This would be Nazar.

When Nazar heard the decree, he was furious. On the night the Sultan passed away, before his brother's body was cold, Nazar

set out to remove the final obstacle to his plan. Hamza's first born. It was, however, not to be. The news of Nazar's intentions reached the Shamsheers, and a plan was devised. A plan to take his children far away where they would be safe until it was time to claim their legacy.

Agha Soleimani's eyes began to tear up. "I handed the children over to my son, Luqman. He promised they would never feel the lack of a parent."

"Agha Luqman..." Hashu whispered in disbelief. "He was your son. So that means..."

"Yes my boy. You are Syed Hisham Zawar, son of Sultan Hamza and Sultana Khajista, heir to the Zawar Sultanate."



Hashu couldn't believe it. The world around him slowed, his breaths coming in rapid pants. It took him a few seconds to calm his racing heart.

"This explains everything," Fati whispered. "Why the guards were after us. Pariza and her family."

"Pariza?" Maesum asked.

Fati explained about the four children. She made sure to mention how skilled and trained they were.

Maesum and Soleimani shared a look.

"You're worried," Hashu observed. "I'm presuming neither of you have heard of them."

Soleimani shook his head. "Unfortunately we haven't. But we will look into this." Despite his concern, he smiled.

Hashu motioned to Nomi. The boy handed him a small bundle.

"There is something we want to ask you. We found these amongst Khanum Nazia's possessions."

Soleimani drew a sharp breath, but his eyes smiled.

Fati's eyes widened. "You're the person she was writing to!"

Both men grinned.

"Just like her mother," Maesum commented. "Never missed a hint."

Fati's cheeks coloured a little at the praise.

"Yes, young Khanum," Agha replied. "My son and

daughter-in-law would write to me with information about you. Your personalities. Your training. Your abilities.”

Three sets of eyes snapped to him. Agha Soleimani knew?

“Oh, yes. You should be very proud. These are not gifts that are granted lightly.” He turned to Hashu. “It is a long kept secret of the Zawar dynasty, unbeknownst to all but their closest allies.”

Fati was the first to get over her shock. “There is one other thing Agha.”

Nomi handed her the pendant and the sword. She laid it on the table in front of the two men.

Maesum’s jaw dropped, “How did you find it?”

Hashu’s brows knitted. “Find what?”

“That pendant, it is the mark of the Shamsheers. But the sword? That is none other than the sword of Sultan Hamza. I would recognize it anywhere. How did you get it?”

Hashu explained the tale. The burnt village, the poison and the cellar.

Throughout the tale, he noticed Maesum blanch and rub a hand over his face. When he was finished, Hashu could have sworn he saw a tear.

“That man was one of us, we thought he had betrayed and left...”

“There was a Quran in the room. It was opened to a verse, *And say, “Truth has come and falsehood has vanished-”*

“Falsehood is surely bound to vanish. Surah Al-Isra. Ayat 81.” Maesum finished. It is the code at the very core of the Shamsheer. He was loyal to the end.”

Maesum went quiet as he recited a quick Fatiha for his fallen comrade.

Hashu ran a hand reverently over the embossed sheath. This was the sword of his father.

“What happened to the Sultana? Did this man-” Nomi asked but Soleimani shook his head.

“As the princess of another Sultanate, he could not harm her without risking a war. That and the Sultana had protected herself by having private servants and maids from her former Sultanate.”

“So that means...our mother is alive?” Fati asked, an almost imperceptible plea in her tone.

“She is,” Maesum replied but he looked a little uncomfortable. “There is something else you should know.”

Hashu listened closely but he couldn't stop the butterflies in his stomach. His mother, she was alive! While Khanum would always have a place in his heart, he couldn't help but feel excited.

Maesum was struggling, so Agha Soleimani took over.

“That fateful night, fifteen years ago, when the Sultana learned of this horrible plot, she had Maesum and I smuggle her children out of the castle.”

Something in his tone made Hashu uneasy.

“The Sultan and Sultana had five children, but six were smuggled out of the castle.”

Maesum decided to continue from there. “When I had taken Hisham to Agha, I was on my way back when someone stopped me. It was Shahzadi Qasida Yasmin, the wife of Nazar. She passed me a bundle and begged me to take it and leave, to get it far away from the castle. Ever since that day, Nazar has relentlessly searched for the location of Sultan Hamza's heir. That and...his own. Shahzadi Qasida had given me their son, Noman Ali.”



Hashu couldn't move. He couldn't breath. He couldn't even think.

Agha Soleimani watched them, trying to judge their reaction.

“I know this must be difficult. I think it might be best if you take some time to absorb this.”

He and Maesum stood up and made to leave. Neither of the children followed. They remained lost in thought where they sat.

“Come Maesum,” Soleimani whispered. “This is a matter they must sort amongst themselves.”

Nomi was the first to be roused by his stupor. He looked down at his hands. He was the son of a murderer, of an oppressor. His stomach lurched, tears filled his eyes. His ...father. He killed Hashu's father! He was the reason Agha Soleimani lost his son.

Nomi's breaths got shorter and shorter. His head was spinning.

The walls of the room were closing in on him. Someone's voice was calling his name. He didn't hear. A hand reached out, but he flinched away. They shouldn't touch him. Nomi felt *filthy*.

Hashu's face flashed a look of hurt when Nomi flinched away.

"Nomi!, Nomi please!" But it didn't work. He couldn't hear them. Suddenly without warning, Nomi stood up and bolted.

Hashu didn't waste a moment in running after him. Fati didn't bother calling Hashu back, and headed out after him.

Nomi didn't care where his feet carried him. He was running blindly, tears blurring his vision. He was a tainted child. He didn't deserve his siblings - no. They weren't his siblings. Before he turned down a hall, a figure crashed into his side. The two of them tumbled heavily to the ground in a heap of arms and legs.

"Let go!" Nomi cried out. Strong arms wrapped around his torso, pinning his own to his side. The boy thrashed about but the hold was unrelenting.

"Leave me! I don't deserve you!"

"No!" Hashu roared.

Nomi instantly froze. Hashu had never shouted at him.

Seeing that Nomi had stilled, Hashu released his grip and put a hand on Nomi's shoulders, turning the boy to face him. Hashu's heart ached at the broken expression on his face.

"Every moment I can remember, you have been by my side. We have slept in the same tent, grown together, fought together, learnt together....we made it here together! And you want to throw all that away? For what two strangers said?"

"My father is a bad man, he kill-"

"I heard what he did. But you are not him. You were not raised by him and you certainly weren't responsible for what happened. As far as I'm concerned, he isn't your father.

"Hashu Bhai, you don't understand-"

"No Nomi, *you* don't understand. I don't care who is responsible for bringing you to me. I don't care who they say your father was. You will always be Agha Luqman and Khanum Nazia's son. And you will always be my brother."

"And mine," Fati was leaning on the wall, watching them with teary eyes. "You go around lecturing the twins on what it means

to be brothers. And then you run off?"

Her voice broke a little. Nomi looked down, but she forced him to look up. "You were going to run off and leave us? Leave me? Because someone said so? I don't care what anyone says. You are Noman, son of Luqman and Nazia, and proud brother of Hisham and Fatima."

Nomi threw his arms around his older siblings. He had no words. When he pulled back, he felt foolish seeing their smiles.

He had been afraid they would cast him out. But who was he kidding? This was his Hashu Bhai and Fati Baji. He wasn't going anywhere.

"Ouch!" his head flew forward as Fati smacked him upside. He looked at her incredulously. Fati had never hit him outside of training.

"That was for running away."



The three of them were a little embarrassed to find their two companions from earlier waiting in the room.

Agha Soleimani waved aside their apologies.

"What you have had thrust upon is more than what most would face in a lifetime. It is with the great bond you have with each other and the purity in your hearts that hold you together."



Dabur snatched the parchment rudely and turned away. The soldier scowled at his back, returning to the pigeon roost.

Dabur didn't care. He rushed to the chambers, knowing Nazar spent most nights there anyway.

"What is it, Dabur?" he scowled but the effect was ruined by his half awake demeanour.

"I have news, Sir." Something in his voice must have piqued Nazar's curiosity. The Shahzadah sat up and shook the remnants of sleep.

"What is it?" he spat but it lacked any bite. Nazar was more curious at the moment.

"It is the news you have been waiting for my liege. They found the children."

15

“...To Him (swt) we shall return”

Surah Baqarah - Ayat 156

When Hashu woke up the next morning, it was with a smile. All around him, his siblings slumbered peacefully. Of course, habitually, Nomi was stirring a few moments later.

“Asalaam Alaikum Hashu Bhai,” the words were mumbled blearily but that didn’t stop Hashu’s heart from skipping a beat.

Last night had been extremely difficult and it was no easier to explain to the younger siblings. The older children had told them everything Maesum and Solemani had revealed. When the topic shifted to Nomi, Hashu was beaming thinking of the mere memory. How Maya shrugged and wrapped her small arms around him, claiming he will always be their ‘Nomi Bhaiya’. How nonplussed Haroon was, he simply didn’t seem to care and Rafay threatening to pummel anyone who claimed he wasn’t their brother.

“You’re happy,” he didn’t have to look up at the voice to know who was talking.

“I can’t stop thanking Allah(swt).”

“Neither can I.”

They watch Nomi sleepily move into a sitting position, his hair standing up in all directions.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking at both siblings.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”



They had the chance to wash and dress before they were led to a prayer room. Hashu caught the eye of their guide as they were lining up for salat and gave the man a wave.

Once salat was over, Nomi noticed his brother hadn't stood up.

“Go ahead,” he told Fati. “I'll stay with him.”

She nodded and herded the others out the door.

Hashu didn't notice that the others had disappeared. He was immersed in another world. This was the first time he had a chance to pray without looking over his shoulder, and he was taking full advantage of it.

Nomi didn't mind and leaned against the wall, his lips whispering a dhikr. There was no value in sitting idly. He didn't have to wait long till Hashu stood up.

“All done? What were you doing?”

“Shukr. Sometimes I can't believe how lucky we are. How far we've come.”

Nomi nodded, a faraway look in his eye.

“Don't go wandering now,” Hashu jolted him from his thoughts.



Hashu found his way to the room from yesterday. Rapping on the door, a voice he recognized as Agha Soleimani called him inside.

He was seated at the desk, scribbling on parchment. The look on his face was so familiar that Hashu had to remind himself that this was his mentor's father.

He greeted him warmly.

“Please have a seat.” He led them to a spot in front of the fireplace, though there was no fire right now.

“I know this has been a tumultuous time for yourself and your siblings, but I'm afraid I have no choice. As I mentioned earlier, the condition for Nazar to not take the Sultanate is for the heir of Sultan Hamza to present himself before the eve of the day he turns twenty-one. Hashu, there is only a few days until then.”

Hashu's eyes widened. He couldn't be suggesting...

"You must take your place as Sultan."

"I don't understand...I'm not a leader, I'm just a boy raised in the jungle. I don't know the first thing about being a Sultan."

"Quite the contrary. I have heard you are quite the leader. Did you not travel across the Sultanate with no knowledge or resources?"

"Yes, but we mostly had help."

"And how did you know where to look for help? There may be some powerful and intelligent people in your group Hisham, but they all look to you for guidance. Whether you realise it or not. And as far as not knowing how to be a Sultan, if Allah(swt) wills I'll still be around. I've seen a fair few. Not to mention Maesum, or your mother."

Hashu's stomach did a flip at the word 'mother'.

"Hisham, Nazar is not only a cruel man. He is greedy, conniving and craves the glory he saw in his brother's life. He will ravage what your ancestors have spent centuries building and overrun our pure intentions with oppression and corruption."

Hashu remembered the poisoned village. If he could destroy an entire village without an ounce of remorse, then there was little hope for the Sultanate if he was to assume power. No, there wasn't any choice for Hashu.

'*Ya Allah(swt), give me strength,*' he prayed.

"What do I do?"



"It's a simple plan," Maesum told them. He pointed to two marked sections on the map.

"That is the Shamsheer military barrack. This location is more of a reconnaissance point. There, we will find the men and the weapons we need to get Hisham to the castle before Nazar claims the Sultanate."

Hashu focused on the map, ignoring the stares he received. Agha Soleimani had already explained that for him to counter Nazar's claim, he had to be presented to the judicial council, *alive*.

“Now the barrack is around the back of the city. At the half point between Fajr and Dhuhur, the guards make a detailed patrol. We have a safe house in the middle where we can stay hidden, rest and replenish during that time. Any questions? No? Good. You manage these Abdurrahman.” He pushed the parchment into the hands of the guide that led them earlier. The man gave Maesum a sharp salute.

“I would recommend that you rest. We ride soon,” he told the older children. Hashu nodded, acknowledging the advice.

Everyone was silent on the way back to their room. Of course they would be fine. Maesum’s plan wasn’t complicated.

No matter how much he convinced himself, Hashu felt a little doubtful.

‘Inshallah. Everything will be alright.’

The window of time found Hashu idling between the salat room and watching his younger siblings blissfully unaware of the mounting tension.

“It’s going to be fine, right?” Nomi’s voice only held a sliver of hesitation.

“Inshallah.”

With their departure rapidly approaching, he made sure they had packed all of their belongings. Hashu was shoving the last of his clothes in his bag when his fingers knocked against something hard.

He smiled and pulled out the sheathed sword. Ever since Qayidun Maesum had told him what it was, Hashu felt a little awed. This was his father’s sword. A sultan’s sword. The fact that it was amazing in design and as a weapon, didn’t hurt.

“You should wear it,” Hashu turned and was surprised to see Nomi strapping in his clawed arm guards.

At Hashu’s surprised look, he simply shrugged. “We’re not hiding who we are anymore.”

“He’s right,” Fati crossed her arms over her body. He caught a glint on her right hand. It dawned on him, the ring.

Well, who was he to refuse? Hashu wound the belt around his waist. It was surprisingly light and a comfortable weight against his hip.

They gathered at the door where they had entered from only a night ago. Entering as six children from the desert, and leaving as the heirs and descendants of the Sultanate.

Hashu looked around and noticed Maesum was absent. There were three men aside from Abdurrahman who were preparing their rides.

“Someone missed you,” Abdurrahman commented with a grin.

He didn’t have to explain as a large black horse clip-clopped out of the stable. She headed straight for Hashu at a leisurely pace.

“Hey girl,” he whispered softly, one of his hand rubbing her neck. She snorted and nuzzled his chest, forcing him to take a step back.

“She really likes you,” Maya commented. Hashu smiled, not taking his eyes off the equine.

“I really like her too.”H turned to their guide and asked where Maesum was.

“I’m not sure, but this happens really often. Maesum can’t stay long because someone in the palace might get suspicious. He said he will meet us at our destination.”

Hashu nodded but that tidbit of information just set off his nerves once more. He liked Maesum. He was reliable and more importantly, Hashu felt that he could keep his siblings safe. It was an understatement to say he was worried about the journey.

Abdurrahman didn’t give him a chance to delve further by opening the door and having everyone following him out.

No matter how safe their underground premises may be, Hashu relished the taste of fresh air. He had been brought up amongst nature and was once more in its grasp. He could feel the worry leaving his body.

“Someone’s happy...” Nomi murmured loud enough for his brother to hear.

He was riding his black steed, his shoulders back and head high. Not to mention the embellished sword strapped to his side. Hisham looked like the warrior his siblings knew him to be.

Gazing down at the dunes ahead, unaware of the stares of awe, Hashu whispered under his breath, “Bismillah...”

They reached the safe house by the time the sun was high in the sky.

Abdurrahman pulled on his reins, coming to a stop at the front of the group.

“Lead the horses round back. We can pray inside.”

Hashu slipped his foot out of the stirrup and slid off the saddle. His horse pawed the sand irritably with a hoof.

“What’s wrong?” Hashu asked. He checked the bridle and the saddle to make sure nothing was hurting her. They were fine.

“Don’t worry about it.” Abdurrahman assured him.

“Sometimes they get a little skittish.”

Hashu nodded a little unsure but handed his reins over and followed his siblings inside.

The safe house was nestled amongst several boulders and out of view of the city. It wasn’t very large, but enough for the ten people to sit without knocking elbows.

“Hisham, could I have a word with you?” Abdurrahman whispered to him.

Hashu nodded and stood up, following the man out. He didn’t need to turn to know Nomi was right behind him.

Rafay’s eyes followed the two older boys. The men that accompanied them had taken a seat outside, leaving only the children in the house. He felt a little chided that they hadn’t considered taking him too.

Fati noticed her brother frowning. “Is everything alright, Rafay?”

He rolled his eyes. “Of course, Fati Baji.”

Haroon and Maya shared a look at the edge in his tone.

“Somehow I’m having a little trouble believing that.”

“It’s nothing,” he grumbled.

She gestured around. “Well, we don’t have much else to do.”

“Just leave it.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Haroon snapped. He was already indisposed to Rafay’s attention seeking antics.

“Mind your own business!”

“Then stop being annoying!”

“Both of you calm down,” Fati did not raise her voice but there was a warning in her voice.

Both went silent, but Rafay huffed and rolled his eyes.

“I’m going to get some fresh air.”

He glared at Haroon who simply rolled his eyes and looked away. Fati looked like she was about to object, but reconsidered. They were all a little tightly wound, it might be good to keep the twins separate. There were guards outside so she resigned herself to her tasbih and running over all the possible things Abdurrahman was discussing with her brothers.



Rafay had never lied in his life, but this time he may not have been telling the entire truth.

He had actually wanted to leave, if nothing else than to get some space. What he was actually looking for were the two boys. The guards paid him no mind, in fact they were furiously conversing amongst themselves.

Not to be digressed, he wandered past the boulder, looking for his brothers. Whilst he respected Hashu’s decisions, he felt that if he showed his older brother he was so much more responsible than he thought, maybe he would take Rafay with him and Nomi on their excursions. It was safe to say the boy did not like to be left behind.

A head caught his attention. Someone was behind that boulder!

“Hashu Bhaiya! Nomi Bhaiya!” he called out, waving his arms for extra effect.

The head moved and rose to reveal a face. Not a face Rafay recognized.

Tall and lean, but instead of swords, two rugged scythes hung from his belt, glistening menacingly in the sunlight. A scar ran from his hair to the bottom of his ear over a cloudy white eye.

The boy blanched as Gohar’s features twisted into a nightmarish grin.

“Well, well, well. What do we have here?”

Fati tucked away her rosary, twisting the ring on her finger. Something wasn't right. Abdurrahman should have been back with Nomi and Hashu by now, and Rafay had wandered off.

"I'm going to go look for him."

She made her way to the door when a soldier blocked her path. His sarcastic smile set her on edge. Now she knew something was wrong.

"Get out of my way," Fati warned him, clenching her jaw.

He smirked rolling his eyes. "Yes, Shahzadi." But continued to block her way.

"She's getting away!" a voice yelled behind him.

Not wasting the distraction, Fati brought the butt of her dagger up and straight into the man's chest. He wheezed and doubled over. She used the chance to smash the back of his head. Leaping over the body, between her and Haroon, they made quick work of the last two guards.

"Where's Maya?" Fati turned to Haroon.

The boy answered between pants. "When the man wouldn't let you through, she jumped out the window to escape."

They wouldn't have known, but Maya was sprinting as fast as her legs could carry her. She didn't get a chance to tell Fati, but she knew which way her brother went.

"I can take you down!" Rafay shouted. He may not be showing it, but his confidence was crumbling by the moment, his mind stinging with regret. He wished his siblings were here. Regardless, the man was alone. That much, Rafay could probably handle.

At his threat, Gohar simply shrugged his shoulders. "It's not me you need to worry about."

Rafay felt his heart plummet. Three distinct growls came from the boulder. His eyes widened as dogs, as large as him, leapt out, circling him.

"Attack!"

Without warning the three of them lunged in Rafay's direction.

Hashu stopped walking. Nomi did too, giving him a worried look. Abdurrahman had led them out of the house and close to a river. It sliced through the sand like a glittering blue blade adorned by the hanging palm trees. High sand dunes towered around them.

“What are you doing, Hisham?” Abdurrahman asked him.

“We’re not going any further. Why did you bring us out here?”

To his surprise, Abdurrahman rolled his eyes. “No point in delaying. I brought you here to discuss something very important. There is someone you need to meet. Actually, I think you’ve already met.”

Hashu had a bad feeling about this. He heard a whistle to his right. Out of instinct, he unsheathed the sword. He felt it vibrate, a high pitched ping ringing in his ears as a dart clattered uselessly to the ground.

There at the top of the sand dune was Aslan, his cape flapping in the wind.



All niceties and formalities had been tossed to the wind. Hashu’s face was eerily stoic as he parried Aslan’s shots with practised ease. There was a simmering rage brewing inside the heir. He had given this foolish person a chance. Squandered in servitude.

As both boys battled, Nomi got glimpses of why Hashu had never been defeated in their sparring back home. He had already disposed of Abdurrahman. The traitor lay curled in a groaning heap in the sand.

The seriousness of the situation was setting in.

“Hashu Bhai we need to get out of here!”

As if on cue, Hashu kicked Aslan in the chest, sending him sprawling backwards. Nomi whipped out his leg, kicking the falling boy in the back. Aslan staggered back, stumbling into the sand.

Aslan was heavily winded and they used that chance to flee into the foliage by the riverbed. He ignored the pricking from the spiky plants and raced after his older brother. At one point, Hashu grabbed an outstretched low lying branch to swing over to

the other side of the river. Following suit, Nomi did the same.

His feet had barely landed on the ground when Hashu violently yanked him aside. He gasped as a dart whistled past his head, embedding itself in Hashu's chest. The boy wrenched it out, tossing the offending object to the floor.

"Let's get out of here!"

They ran into the plants, tree branches smacking their faces and flora pricking their legs. They had most likely left their pursuers behind, but that was little consolation.

The foliage had enveloped them in layers of green and in the clearing there was a smattering of sunlight peeking through. The air was musty, smelling like moisture. Nomi noticed Hashu was slowing down.

"Keep going," he panted. "I'll catch up with you."

"I'm not going to leave you behind."

He rushed forward as Hashu's legs gave out beneath him. Whatever they had in that dart, it acted quickly. Nomi guessed it was some sort of paralyzing agent since Hashu was still awake but couldn't speak.

Nomi grabbed Hashu under his arms and hoisted him up with great difficulty, pulling him behind some plants and trees. There was enough cover to hide both of them.

"I saw them come here, Shahzadah Nazar." The blood in Nomi's veins turned cold.



It was impossible. The Shahzadah wouldn't come all this way...

The moment the man stepped into the clearing, all of Nomi's doubts were dispelled. Apart from similarly coloured eyes, they shared nothing in common. Nazar was tall and lean with an imposing posture. The worst was the twisted sneer on his face, like he enjoyed the terror he invoked.

"Well then, if you want that head to stay on your shoulders, you better hope that you're right."

Nomi was crouching down. His upper body covered Hashu. From between the leaves, he watched Nazar. Prayers flew from

his heart. It was pounding loudly against his chest. Blood rushing to his head.

The soldier simply skimmed over them, but Nomi felt his breath hitch. Nazar was looking in their direction, his grin growing larger.

“Come now, Hisham. Don’t you want to play with your uncle?” His voice was sickeningly sweet and Nomi wanted nothing more than to run. But he couldn’t

Hashu was as stiff as a board, there was no possibility of the serum wearing out in time. Nazar was too close to make a run for it. Nomi knew what he had to do.

He looked away from Hashu’s worried eyes, slowly unbuckling the strap that held the sword, trying to avoid scratching him with his claws. Hashu may not have been able to move but Nomi saw comprehension in those brown irises. Comprehension that begged him to stop.

‘*I’m sorry Hashu Bhai,*’ as he disobeyed his brother for the second time.

Fastening the sword around his waist, Nomi sprung up, one hand on the handle.

“Here I am.”



Nazar looked the boy up and down.

“So this is the famed Hisham, heir of Sultan Hamza,” the last part was spat out with contempt.

“Do not sully my father’s name with your foul tongue.” Nomi sincerely hoped Nazar believed his act. Hashu’s survival relied on it.

Nazar laughed. A cold, cruel laugh that set his nerves on edge.

“You are brave boy, I’ll give you that. Brave....and foolish.”

Nomi barely got the sword out in time to stop the strike at his neck.

“Now let us see if you are worthy of your destiny.”

He struck at Nomi again, the two swords grinding against each other.

“Come on boy! Live up to your father’s name!”

Nomi clumsily swept away a shot while blocking a kick. Nazar was very fast. Nomi leapt as the sword swung for his knees and flipped back into a defensive position.

Back and forth, the two traded blows. Nazar was a perfect embodiment of calm and maybe even boredom.

Nazar tutted, batting away a swing to his side. “How would your father feel if he saw you now, hm? Attacking your own flesh and blood?”

Nomi clenched his jaw, an inferno of anger and shame roaring in him. Nazar saw him grimace and smiled. Seeing his smirk, Nomi felt disgusted.

This was his father? *This* infernal, pathetic cruel being?

‘No.’ he told himself.

“You are *not* my family. You never were and you never will be!”

Nazar’s face dropped into a frown. “So be it, *boy*.”

This time Nomi charged, his sword aiming straight. But Nazar expected this. A sidestep and flick of his wrist sent Nomi’s sword crashing to the ground. Before the boy could respond, Nazar whirled him around and grabbed him in a headlock.

From his position, Nomi could see Hashu’s eyes peering at him through the bush.

Nazar leaned down to Nomi’s ear.

“Long live the Sultan,” he muttered. Nomi gasped.

The tip of Nazar’s sword poked through his chest, a flower of red rapidly blooming. The boy wheezed as Nazar yanked it back out, collapsing to the floor.



Hashu screamed. He screamed as loud as he could, but no one could hear. His own body held him prisoner as Nomi lay still on the ground.

He was counting down the moments as sensation returned to him. First his fingers, then his feet. Nazar had long since left, but Hashu wouldn’t have cared if he hadn’t.

His legs refused to hold him so he clawed his way across the soil. The sand and dirt dug into his nails, scraping against his

chest. He didn't care. He had to get to Nomi. Only when he got close was he able to clamber on his knees.

"Nomi!"

He pulled the boy's head into his lap.

"Wake up...Nomi! Please wake up!"

Allah(swt) answered his prayers. Nomi's beloved eyes fluttered open. As always, they gazed with reverence and love at Hashu.

"Hashu Bhai..." he coughed, blood dribbling down the side of his mouth.

"Hush now...we'll find Fati...She'll fix you..."

"No." Nomi managed to place a hand on Hashu's. "It's okay."

"No...no, no it's not." Hashu's breath was short and panicked. "Don't you dare do this. We have to fight together, we have to take the Sultanate, you have to see me become sultan..."

By now, tears were rolling down Hashu's face. Nomi gave him a smile.

"You have always been a Sultan to me."

He managed to gasp the kalma, the final vow of his faith, before his eyes closed and he fell limp in the arms of his brother.



16

The Rise of an Heir

Rafay was quiet. Very quiet. With an uncharacteristic blank look, he watched the healers as they flitted from bed to bed. He was not sure where he was. On his left, Maya lay fast asleep, unharmed but exhausted. In her sleep, he saw the worry lines on her face eased into a more peaceful expression. It was still more haggard than the carefree youthfulness he was used to seeing. But then again, who could blame her?

A few hours ago...

“I’m not going down without a fight.” He grabbed some sand and with the familiar burning in his palm, felt some of his bravado returning.

It seemed that the hounds thought they had waited enough and lunged at him. Rafay was able to knock the first one away, it flew in the air and struck the sand with a resounding thud. He didn’t have time to celebrate and rolled to avoid being pinned by the other two. They growled so loud that he could feel the vibration in his skin.

“Come on you mangy mutt.” he gritted out. One of the dogs lunged for his foot. Rafay whipped it back on the last second. He threw out a hand to balance himself.

Rafay never saw the third dog leap from behind him and latch on to his arm. A scream tore from his throat as he felt teeth

sink into his skin. He tried to punch it, but it dodged, its teeth sinking deeper. He did manage to bat away one of its brethren, his knuckles hitting its nose. He could hear Gohar's laugh as a warm liquid trickled from his punctured forearm, staining the dog's mouth with blood.

Out of breath and in pain, Rafay waited for the dog snarling in his face. It poised ready to lunge for his throat.

"No!" Maya's yell tore across the desert. She started...glowing? There was an eerie ethereal light surrounding her, swallowing her brown irises. White eyes focused on Rafay and he felt the dog drop his arm.

It rushed to stand in line with its pack.

The blood loss blurred his vision but even in his dizzy state he saw Gohar's face had turned a ghostly white.

"Tha-That's i-i-impossible." All pretense of joy vanished. His eyes widened in horror as the dogs turned to him and began to paw their way in his direction.

The last thing he heard was Gohar's scream, before the world turned black.

Haroon said that he and Fati found the two unconscious in the sand. His twin was sitting on a bed on the other side of the room, twiddling a rock in his hand. A lump settled in his stomach at the blatant absence of his older siblings.



Maesum watched the pair of them. Neither of the older children had said a word since their return to base. He didn't bother to hide the concern on his face.

"You should be in the infirmary." Agha Soleimani's voice echoed from behind him.

Maesum sighed. Agha wasn't wrong. His entire upper body was littered with wounds. He was bound in so many bandages that he had to opt for a loose tunic instead of his armour.

"What happened?"

"I was called to the palace." The words felt sour on his tongue. "They pulled me into some sort of meeting."

Maesum shook his head. "I knew something was wrong from

the moment I entered. There were no other generals. No other commanders. I tried to leave, but they sealed the doors. They fought like animals.”

He rolled his shoulder, a pained look on his face.

“I made it out and knew it meant someone had betrayed us. I moved to the Sultana’s room. When it was empty, I thought the worst.”

Maesum swallowed. Protecting the Sultana and her children had been his Sultan’s, his friend’s dying wish. He gave Agha Soleimani a small smile. “But she had left me a note. She was already gone.”

Soleimani shared a grin. “Nazar could never outsmart Sultana Khajista, she was always a step ahead. Does she know of this base? Good, then we should see her soon.”

He noticed Maesum drop his head in shame.

“There was nothing you could have done, my boy.”



Earlier that day...

Maesum had never ridden that fast before.

His horse’s hooves pounded like an elephant on the sand, but Maesum pushed it on. In the distance, he could see a familiar royal horse riding away.

“No...” he whispered shakily under his breath.

“Ya Allah(swt)...please no...”

He didn’t chase them. Instead, he changed course to where they were leaving from. His heart pounding like a drum in his ears, the blood rushing to his head.

Their trail was as clear as the sun. His horse nearly trampled Abdurrahman’s fallen body. He was still alive, his breathing a little uneven. For good measure, Maesum whipped him across the back of his head with a dagger handle. He wouldn’t wake up for a while.

Following the destruction of trees and branches past the river, he made his way to a clearing.

That’s where he found them.

Maesum had to confess that he was hypnotized. Drawing deep breaths, black hair sticking to his skin. Brown eyes wandering

the fallen corpses, daring them to get up. Maesum had seen this face before, followed this face into battle. It took every ounce of his fraying senses to accept this wasn't his friend.

"Hisham?"

The world was painfully silent, save for Hashu's breathing.

"They tried to take him," the boy whispered. His voice was hard and gravelly like he had been crying. There were two corpses of soldiers lying around who had likely been sent back to deal with the body.

Maesum didn't need to ask who had given the order.

"Has he said anything?" Maesum asked.

Agha Soleimani's downcast expression was enough for him to know.

"Not a word."

Hashu sat stoically, staring over one of the drops in the tunnel floor, kicking his legs aimlessly. Fati was sitting behind him, not knowing what to say or do.



Khajista hopped off the horse with enviable ease despite her dress.

"Take me to see Agha Soleimani." she asked the guard, handing over her horse.

"No need."

"Agha! Qayidun Maesum! Alhumdulilah, I am glad you're alright."

Maesum and Agha smiled.

"Alhumdulilah Sultana, I cannot describe how happy we are to know that you're unharmed. Follow me."

Agha Soleimani led her to the room. She daintily sat down, her skirt folded neatly around her. Maesum slumped a little heavily into the seat, not meeting Khajista's worried look.

"What happened at the castle?" Agha Soleimani asked, taking a seat across the fire.

"Nazar was extraordinarily jubilant. That was my first suspicion that all was not well. He and his vizier Dabur had been escaping attention all day. I tried to have Maryam, my personal

servant, wheedle it out of one of the other servant girls. She was unsuccessful. No one knew what was happening. A little after the morning, I received word that he had left the palace with his demonic pet. Dabur was still at the castle overlooking arrangements for his coronation. I was in my room when Shahzadi Qasida requested entry. She was worried and warned me that she had overheard Nazar telling Dabur that he received word that he was to kill me. They would wax it as some outlandish tale of a bitter widow who couldn't stand to see someone else take my husband's place and made an attempt on the Shahzadah's life. "

Soleimani's expression darkened. "Is he mad?! He would have sent the Zavar Sultanate to war with the Crescent empire!"

Khajista nodded grimly. "My father is a peaceful man and desires no struggle, but he is fiercely protective of myself. Should he even suspect that I was so much as nicked, he would be storming down the castle gates himself. Of course, hearing Qasida's warning, I made arrangements to leave."

Maesum frowned. "Where is the Shahzadi?"

Khajista's eyes dropped to the floor. Her voice was laced with regret. "One of the stable boys arranged for two horses on the far side of the garden. We were about to mount our rides. Qasida hesitated. She was scared. I tried to grab her hand from the back of my horse. Convince her to come."

"Please Qasida...you know if Nazar finds out, he will not spare you." Khajista was relentless.

The woman's eyes swivelled heavily between the castle and her Sultana. Finally, she straightened her back and nodded. "Very well."

She reached for her horse reign.

"Look out!" Khajista yelled.

Qasida wrenched her hand back, just as an arrow flew through the air. It slid into the hedge, right where her hand had just been.

"Stop! In the name of the Shahzadah!"

Khajista's eyes widened as Qasida turned to her with tears pooling in her eyes.

"Give the Sultan my salam."

Before Khajista could blink, she spanked the horse making it

rear and gallop forward. The Sultana gripped on tightly to its neck, watching in dismay as Qasida's shrinking figure was led away.

"I'm sorry, Sultana."

Khajista gave Soleimani a thankful nod. It was a solemn thought at the fate that awaited her.

"You weren't followed?" Maesum asked.

Khajista shook her head. "I was too far into the desert by the time they could mobilise the horse troops. I saw them looking for me."

"Qasida's sacrifice will not be in vain. For her sake and for everyone else who has been lost or who has lost in this struggle."

He saw Khajista hesitate, the unsure expression out of place on her sharp features.

"Are they....are they here?"

Agha Soleimani smiled at her concern. "They are. But there is something you should know before you meet them."

He then narrated the whole tale. Khajista's hands flew to her mouth. It was only with practiced effort that tears did not fall down her cheeks.

"He saved him....He saved my son."

Maesum nodded. "If I may Khanum, he might as well have been Hisham's brother. You never saw them apart. Even after they learned the truth of his parentage."

"It shows..." Agha Soleimani added. "That who a person will become is not determined by who they are and where they come from. But by them as a person. They may not share a father, but those two boys shared more love and loyalty than any blood brothers I know."

"How is he?" Khajista asked.

Both men shared a look. "I think it would be best if you were to see that for yourself."



Fati had left some time ago. Most likely to check on the younger siblings.

It was just him and the chasm. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the darkness in front of him. It stretched out of view.

Empty. Vacant. Much like himself.

There was an ache in Hashu's heart, like a part of him had been wrenched away. And he couldn't stop it.

Everywhere he looked, he saw Nomi's face. Brown twinkling eyes and laughing smile. His voice calling 'Hashu Bhai!' ringing in his ears.

'I don't deserve that title. I didn't deserve Nomi. I let him down. I let my siblings down.'

Safely hidden in the solitude of the tunnel, Hashu let the wave of sorrow finally overwhelm him.

His head fell into his hands. Sobs wracked his entire body. Blood pounding in his ears. Painful thudding in his chest. His hands were shaking.

"I failed him..." Hashu gasped.

Tears blurred his vision, hot streams rolling down his face. He couldn't look up. He didn't dare to stop the sound of his cries. He couldn't bear to see *him*. Think of *him*. Hear *him*.

His hands gripped the chasm edge so tight that his knuckles turned white. The rocks dug into his skin.

"I'm sorry..." Hashu sobbed to the darkness. His chest got tighter, his breaths shorter.

"Ahlebait."

Hashu whipped his head around. A woman was standing there.

"Ahlebait. They are five in Islam." She continued before he had a chance to ask. "Name them."

Her voice was gentle, like a zephyr, but there was command woven in her tone.

"Uhhh..." Hashu wiped his tears with the back of his hand. "P-Prophet Muhammad..." he stammered, his voice raspy.

She nodded. "And?"

"Imam Ali, Bibi Fatima, Imam Hasan, Imam Hussain."

Hashu felt air flood his lungs, the dizzying pain in his head, vanishing. He had realized what she did.

"Thank you."



When Khajista saw the boy panicking on the chasm edge, she felt a familiar pang in her chest. This guilt was something she was all too familiar with. When she attempted to use the same calming technique Agha Soleimani had taught her, he turned around.

The sheer force of will was the only way Khajista was still standing. She barely noticed the boy replying to her words, managing not more than a soft prompt.

His eyes, his face, the way he spoke. There was no doubt about who this was.

“Hisham?”



Hashu finally felt calm enough to get a good look at the woman in front of him. Her eyes travelled his face, pain and happiness conflicting in her expression.

She was tall and dressed in a lilac garment that swept the floor. Her hands were delicately clasped across her torso. Soft features gazed at him with fondness barring her eyes. They were sharp and alert in a very familiar way. Belonging to another face, but Hashu could have sworn it was his twin’s eyes watching him.

“Are you...” he began, swallowing to give his voice some solace. “Are you, my mother?”

He watched in alarm as her eyes filled with tears.

‘Did I say something wrong?’ Hashu panicked.

The woman composed herself, “Yes. My name is Sultana Syeda Khajista Zawar, wife of Sultan Syed Hamza Zawar and...” she took a breath. “...mother of Shahzadah Syed Hisham Ali Zawar.”



“I heard about what happened to Noman. I wish to convey my condolences.”

Hashu nodded numbly. “We called him Nomi. He was a brother to us. Always by my side.”

Khajista smiled. “I remember.”

Hashu looked up at her in surprise.

“When Noman was born, his mother, Shahzadi Qasida, became

very ill. I nursed you, Nomi and Fati. Even as a baby, he could not bear to be without you.” She looked out over the chasm. “He would cry incessantly until he was laid down in your crib, right beside you.”

Hashu shook his head. “Nomi was my shadow. Everywhere I went. Everything I did, he was always there.”

Both of them went silent.

“Do you remember the night your father died?”

Hashu looked up. She didn’t meet his gaze, her eyes not lifting from the ground.

“Maybe not, you were only a child after all. It was a night like any other. All of you were ready to sleep. I had just finished tucking you in. Qasida arrived with Noman in her arms. He would not stop crying and she was at her wit’s end. I remember...” Khajista sighed.

“You may have barely been more than a toddler, but you lifted your blanket and told Noman to lie beside you. He didn’t wait for you to finish. We weren’t surprised. This happened more often than not. Qayidun Maesum, I suppose you have met him?”

Hashu nodded.

“He arrived at the door and told me to come to the Sultan’s chambers immediately.” Her voice grew hard. “I knew something was wrong. Why summon me to my room when I would be there soon? Why send a commander instead of a servant to deliver a message? Something was not right and so, I made haste.”

She steeled herself against a shudder. “Hamza had been sick the last few days, but that night, it had taken a turn for the worst.” Her expression softened. “Even then, he was determined to do what ever it took.”

“To do what?”

“To protect you. Your sisters. Your brothers.”

“He told me to give you all to Maesum. It was the hardest decision of my life. Watching him run off with you...”

She took a calming breath.

“Could you take me to him?”

Hashu sat there stunned. “T-To who?”

“Noman,” Khajista smiled. “I want to see the boy that meant so much to you, to my children.”

Hashu looked down bashfully.

Khajista’s brow knitted in confusion. “Is everything alright?”

“I...I haven’t been to the *grave*.” He forced down the bile in his throat.

Khajista’s eyes widened in understanding in a manner that was eerily similar to Fati. “You’re afraid.”

He was about to protest, but she raised a hand to quell his response. “What I mean, is that you are afraid of believing it. That he’s gone. You see Hisham, I was no different. The first few days after your father died, I didn’t enter my chambers. I was distraught. My children, my husband, my Sultan were all gone in a day. All that I was left with, was this bitter excuse of a brother.”

“What did you do?”

She held his hand. Her palm was radiating warmth and comfort, a familiar feeling that niggled a memory somewhere in the back of his mind.

“I ran out of strength. So I asked the one being who can give it to me.”



“What happened?”

Maesum and Agha Soleimani were leaning on the edge of their seats. Khajista, however, was staring into the fire, her face unreadable.

“He is recovering. The loss of Noman has cost him his strength. He will need time.”

“Sultana,” Maesum whispered. “As much as I wish this was not the case, we do not have time. Nazar’s coronation is upon us, if Hisham does not accept-”

“He will.”

Soleimani listened with great attention. “You are sure of this Sultana?”

Khajista nodded confidently. “The blood of warriors, leaders and piety flows in his veins. He will not shirk from his duty.”



Dabur was smiling. It was a rare and unsettling sight for all those around him. Everything was proceeding precisely as planned. The heir was dead. They had weeded out that traitorous commander. The morn a few days from now, Nazar would be the Sultan.

All the carefully laid pieces were finally joining together in perfect harmony. He passed a waiting soldier.

“Send them up,” he ordered. The soldier’s expression was marred with confusion.

“Sir?”

“Did I stutter? Do not make me repeat myself. Send them up.”

The man didn’t move.

“Sir, they never reported back to base.”



“He is more likely to kill you than listen to anything you have to say.”

Aslan’s jaw was clenched ever so slightly, but enough for Pariza to notice.

“I have to try.”

“Why?” she moved around to force him to face her. “We’re in the middle of the desert. We could go anywhere. No one would find us.”

Aslan shook his head. “We do not run Pari.”

His voice was tight and his expression stoic.

“Stay here. If I’m not back by morning, take the kids and head to the Crescent Empire.”

“By yourself? Let me come as backup.”

Aslan shook his head firmly. “I have to do this alone.”



Hashu’s knees had gone sore on the hard ground. Unlike Agha Soleimani’s room, this prayer area looked every bit the secret headquarters the location was.

A small space was carved into the jagged rock. There was a small lamp illuminating the entire room. He was kneeling on one of the many prayer mats, woven by thread, reed and wool.

Prayer had always been a constant in Hashu's life. A time of peace from the bustling atmosphere of his home. A continuous symbol of normality for him to cling to when on the run. And now, a private solace.

He could almost feel his brother beckoning from the room he had been buried. Nomi didn't deserve this.

He had spent his entire life laughing and smiling, seeing good where others couldn't. Hashu couldn't help but run his mind over the memories. Treasuring each and every one.

His eyes stung. That's all he had. Memories. Sleepily stumbling in the cold jungle's morning. Reassuring smiles in their rickety tents in the desert. Nomi's warm hugs that squeezed his ribs.

'I miss you so much...'

His hand touched the ice cold stone of the mohar. Hashu's breath hitched. He could almost feel it. The warmth leaving Nomi's body. The pained gasps as those soldiers dropped to the ground. That was the first time Hashu had fought to kill. The first time he had taken a life. Seeing the light fade from their eyes, their expression contorted in pain, had awoken a morbid resilience.

A part of him felt a sliver of guilt, but there was the roaring argument that quashed any regret. They were taking Nomi. *His* Nomi. He would not let his little brother be masqueraded as his own corpse.

Gripping the sajdiga tightly in his hand, Hashu felt the pricks of the stone in his palm.

Nazar would pay. By Allah(swt) Hashu would not rest until that man was six lengths under the dirt.

"Hisham?"



Aslan didn't have the chance to blink. He was shoved straight into a wall, his back and head smacking soundly against the stone. He gasped as the air flew from his lungs. Before he could take a breath, a hand gripped his shoulder and a cool icy blade was placed on the bulge of his neck.

"Why did you come here?"

The boy in front of him was no more than a shadow in the flickering lamp light, but Aslan could see the pure unadulterated rage brewing in his eyes. Not to mention the steely edge in his tone.

Aslan raised his hands slowly. He knew if he made a wrong move, Hisham would have no qualms about drenching the floor with his blood.

“I need your help.”

The blade pressed harder against his skin. Aslan didn’t dare to do so much as swallow.

“Why would I help you?” Hisham’s voice was hard and empty of emotion.

Aslan met his glare unflinchingly. “Because I can help you.”

The blade didn’t move.

“Your family-”

He stopped as the blade dug into his flesh.

“Do not speak of my family,” Hashu gritted out from between blenched teeth.

Aslan felt a warm trickle down his neck.

“Why shouldn’t I bury you where you stand?”

“You have all the right to do so.” Aslan’s eyes dropped to the floor. “I wouldn’t try to stop you. I deserve it. But if you’re going to kill me, at least hear me out.”

He watched the Shahzadah’s face warily, but there wasn’t an inkling of what he would do. Aslan was about to speak when Hisham’s blade rose in the air.

As he promised, he made no move to stop the boy. Closing his eyes, Aslan awaited the strike.

It never came.

Hesitantly, he opened his eyes. Hisham was lowering his blade, no emotion on his face.

“Sit down.”

He hurriedly obeyed. If Hisham had been morose or furious, Aslan would have felt more at ease. Something about the absolute calm set him on edge. It didn’t matter now, though.

Aslan had barely sat down when something grabbed his ankle. He tried to spring up, but something like a thick rope wrapped

around his wrist.

‘*Snakes?*’ he exclaimed mentally.

His nerves frayed as he saw no head. Aslan thrashed, pulling with all his might. It was hopeless.

He crashed painfully to the ground and watched in horror as his bounds *grew* on him. His arms, legs and wrist were tightly pinned. He couldn’t so much as wriggle.

Looking up at Hisham, Aslan felt his heart drop. There was a flickering glow in the boy’s eyes. His jaw fell to the floor as the light faded back to brown irises.

Hisham, however, hadn’t so much as flinched. In fact, he slowly sheathed his sword, crossing both arms over his torso. He looked at Aslan expectantly.

“I’m not sure if you believe me but, I had no intention of killing you or any of your siblings. My orders were to find you. I didn’t know the Shahzadah was involved. I didn’t know what he was going to do.” Aslan was not used to rambling and the unfamiliar brewing nervousness in his gut did not quell his nerves.

“Who gave the order?”

“They call him Dabur. He’s Nazar’s vizier and right hand man.”

Hashu nodded without reacting.

“Are you a soldier?”

Aslan shook his head. “I’m a Mahjoor.”

Hashu raised an eyebrow.

“It means ‘abandoned’. The Mahjoor was Dabur’s special project. He abducted children from all over the Sultanate. Children without families from orphanages and the streets. He had them brought to the cities under the guise of being put in indentured, manual or slave work. They were actually inducted into this army. Since childhood, my siblings and I were trained in combat and espionage.”

Aslan looked down in shame.

“I swear on my siblings that I did not know what the Shahzadah was going to do. Even when I joined the Mahjoor, I made a vow to never harm a woman or child. It’s one of the conditions I made when I joined.”

Hashu frowned, Aslan felt his heart sink a bit.

“You don’t look like someone who cares about that. You certainly didn’t when you came after us.”

It was Aslan’s turn to frown. “I never harmed your sisters. I would never break my word.”

“Why?”

He hesitated. Aslan had never told anyone and he certainly did not think that the first time he did would be at sword point.

His silence caused Hisham’s brow to knit.

“You want to help me? Then tell me why.”

“Hashu!”

A girl’s voice called from the door to the room. Hisham’s sister, Fatima shuffled in.

Aslan’s heart leapt into his throat. She was holding a blade against Pariza’s throat. His sister’s arms were pinned to her side with bonds eerily similar to his own and she stumbled at a sedate pace.

‘*They found us,*’ Pariza mouthed before she was yanked aside. Behind Fatima was a large man filling most of the doorway. One meaty arm held Qasim in a choke hold, the boy stood no chance of moving the man’s limb. In the other, he held Amna by the back of her armour and headscarf. His little sister was screaming a riot, thrashing maniacally and futilely scratching at the man’s hands.

The children were deposited beside Aslan and bound up till they couldn’t move, Amna being gagged for extra measure.

Fatima was running her thumb down the side of her gleaming dagger.

“I suppose you have a reason for not bathing him in blood.”

He could feel his sister shudder beside him, Pariza had the good sense to keep her sarcasm to herself. If Hashu looked terrifying, his twin was no less furious.

“They said they didn’t know what would happen.”

“You believe them?” The large man directed the question at Hisham.

“I haven’t decided. He asked me to hear him out. So I am, although, he said nothing of backup.”

“We’re not backup.” Pariza’s voice was steady. “Aslan Bhai told me that if he didn’t return by morning, we were to flee.”

Fatima shook her head. “Forgive us for having a little trouble believing you. Considering that you set us up to die.”

“We didn’t know!” Pari insisted. “We’re a secret army for the Shahzadah’s right hand man. We are given orders and we follow. No questions. No answers. It’s how we’ve always operated.”

Hisham, however, was looking directly at Aslan.

“You said you didn’t know what they were going to do to Noman. You swear that you vowed to never harm a woman or child. Why should I believe you?”

Aslan’s eyes flickered to his younger siblings, his breath halting in his throat. Hisham caught his gaze.

“Qayidun, could the younger children be placed in another room?”

“Certainly, Shahzadah.” He moved towards them.

“No need.” Fati stopped him. With a swish of her wrist, their rope bonds slithered. All of them looked towards Aslan in fear.

“What are you doing!”

“Calm yourself.” Fatima’s tone was more commanding than placating. “They will not be harmed.”

The bounds rose up, carrying the children who exclaimed in surprise. They slithered across the ground, vanishing into the soil as it followed Fati out the door, Maesum leading the way.

Once more Hisham and Aslan were alone.

“H-How is she-”

“I’ll ask the questions. Again, why should I believe you?”

“We’re not that different, Hisham.” Aslan felt a little braver, he knew they wouldn’t harm his siblings without due cause.

“I don’t gallivant around the Sultanate serving up others like meat.”

“And I wasn’t born for that either. Like you, I was left as the sole protector of my siblings. Only I didn’t have a Sultana and army commander to help save us.”

Hisham’s patience was thinning. “What do you mean?”



“Aslan! Aslan!”

The boy groaned. He had just found the perfect spot to lie down when his mother’s call came ringing through the trees.

“Coming Ami!” he called back.

Soaking in a few more moments, he scrambled to his feet and took off running. Aslan loved the forest. Even in the sweltering heat, it was cool and showered his grassy and moss ridden path with freckles of beaming sunlight.

His mother never let him go too far and soon enough, he saw her waiting by the forest edge. He waved to her and she returned it with one hand, the other gripping her full length headscarf.

Aslan felt his grin slip away. She may have been smiling, but she looked extremely worried. In fact, he had never seen her that concerned.

“Is evewything alwight?” he asked, scowling at his lisp.

She gave him a shakey smile. “Of course, now come in for breakfast.”

Aslan frowned. His mother had never been a good liar, but he didn’t question it, taking her outstretched hand.

She led them in through the back door into their small cottage. There was barely any room to move around, but Aslan managed to squeeze into a chair beside his sister, Pariza. Beside her, Qasim was bouncing a very young Amna on his knee like a horse. She was gurgling and giggling loudly in pure joy.

“Do you want to hold him?” Pariza held out the newborn baby in her arms. Aslan practically snatched him.

Mohsen gazed up at his older brother with large grey eyes, his nose scrunched up. Aslan ran his small finger over the baby’s face.

“Good mowning Mohsen.” He was rewarded with the smallest toothless grin he had ever seen. A tiny set of fingers wrapped around his index, trapping it in a tight grip.

“Oh no, you have Bhaiya’s fingew!” The baby cooed at Aslan’s voice and the silly face he made.

Aslan smiled and snuggled him, inhaling the sweet baby smell.

His mother entered the room and placed a heavy bowl on the table. Aslan handed her the baby.

“Go call your father please.”

Nodding, he pushed himself out and squeezed past his other siblings, ruffling Amna's hair as he went. His father was in the small front yard, hauling large crates into a pile.

"There's my lion!" Aslan tried to run away but two large arms grabbed him. He laughed as he was pulled into a wet shirt.

"Baba!" the boy giggled. "You're all sweaty!"

His father gave a booming laugh. "So I am, cub. Is breakfast ready?"

Aslan nodded taking deep breaths. "Ami said to call you."

He peered around his father's large frame. "What's in the box?"

Smiling, his father shifted Aslan onto his shoulder. "That is blast powder. Now it's quite dangerous," he cautioned wagging a large finger in Aslan's direction. "But people really want it because it makes things go boom!"

Fingers dug into his side and Aslan laughed, wriggling to get away from them.

"Aslan! Come on, it's time for breakfast."

Both males stopped. Balancing a baby adeptly on her hip, her silver eyes frowned with a fond exasperation. Aslan landed on the ground and ran over to her. Even with her hastily tied scarf with strands of brown hair peeking out, and her sweaty flushed expression, Aslan was convinced he had the most beautiful mother in the world.

He followed his parents inside, responsibly shutting the door behind him. He was the oldest brother after all. His mother served him a soft mound of bread with a large helping of cheese and some yogurt.

He gave her a toothy thanks and dug in with gusto. In the midst of his meal, he didn't miss the looks his parents shared or the hushed whispers he couldn't hear.

A knock resounded on the door, echoing throughout the house. Aslan ran to open it, his father right behind him.

"Asalaam Alaikum Najib Uncle!"

His father's friend shook Aslan's hand and greeted the boy with a smile. Aslan watched them head to the sitting room before going back to the kitchen.

“What are they talking about?” Pariza asked through a mouthful of bread.

He scrunched his nose in distaste. “Ew Pari. Chew your food. And I didn’t hear. They went to the sitting room.”

His sister frowned. “Ami left here really worried. She didn’t even notice Qasim taking extra cheese.”

“Hey, you said you wouldn’t tell!”

Aslan ignored them. With the other siblings occupied, he slipped out of the room. No one called out behind him, so they hadn’t noticed he had left. With practiced ease, he tiptoed over the floorboards, avoiding the one by the stairs that always creaked. Pressing himself close to the wall, he could barely hear their voices.

“...I received the message myself...” Najib’s deep voice said.

“I can’t believe it.” His father was barely loud enough for him to hear. “We can’t just sit aside and do nothing.”

“What can we do?” Ami sounded nervous.

“There’s a group of us going to the capital, to protest. We’re gathering in the Zaidi’s farm after Maghrib, and will ride from there.”

‘Go where? What happened?’ Aslan’s brows knitted.

Aslan didn’t meet Hisham’s gaze. “I didn’t know it then. But it appears that after the Sultan died, a message was sent to all the Sultanate. That Shahzadah Nazar would be regent until the heir could be found. My father and his friends had planned to ride to the capital to offer their assistance.”

He watched as Aslan’s eyes dropped to the floor, he was surprised to hear his voice waver. “I couldn’t have predicted what happened next.”

“I want to come!” Aslan stomped his foot stubbornly. His father pinched the bridge of his nose. They had been arguing the entire day and he really did need to leave.

“This is not up for discussion, Aslan. I need you here with your sisters and brothers.”

Aslan was blind with rage. He could help! He helped his parents all the time around the house and in the farm. Even sometimes

at the mine where his father worked.

"I hate you!" Aslan cried, running out of the room. He ignored everyone's shouts and Mohsen's crying. Straight out the door, he didn't stop until he was deep in the woods, farther than he had ever gone before.

"Agh!" he screamed at the trees, tossing a rock into the leaves. Not bothered with the loud chattering of whatever he had disturbed, he started punching a patch of moss.

Of course, his tantrum didn't last long and soon he slumped dejectedly on a rock, sulking.

'That wasn't a nice thing to say. But Baba should let me come. I'm not a baby. Mohsen is a baby. Amna is a baby. I'm not!'

There was an annoying niggling in the back of his mind. His father had said that he wanted him there. To look after his siblings? After Ami?

'I should say I'm sorry.' he pushed himself off the rock and headed back home. Maybe if he asked his father nicely, he might let Aslan come.

'That's what I'll do!' he thought, perking up at the idea.

He had travelled quite deep in his little rampage, but soon enough, he found the path back home. As he got closer, the air got a little dusty. It was scratching his throat.

'Is that smoke?' Every bone in his body pulsated in alarm. Without waiting, he ran.

He flung aside the branches and nearly stumbled as he broke through the trees.

His house was on fire. Orange, demonic strokes of fiery blaze licked the wood, devouring everything.

"Ami!" Aslan screamed. Throwing caution to the wind, he ran as fast as he could. His legs tripped and burned, but he didn't stop.

"Aslan!" a voice shouted from the bedroom window. He ran to the back shed and grabbed his father's pick axe. It was so heavy, he had to drag it to the window.

"I'm coming Ami! Stand back!"

Mustering all the strength he could, he lifted it. It felt like he was holding a cow. Before his arms could give out, he swung. It

impaled the wood, but the plank held firm. The roar of the fire shouted in his ears, the heat throwing waves that were painfully warm in his face. It took two more tries, but it finally gave way.

Pari was the first to stumble out, coughing horribly, Amna's arms wound tightly around her neck. She practically fell into Aslan's arms, her tears soaking his shirt.

Qasim followed moments later, his nose and mouth streaked with black.

"Where's Ami?"

"She was right behind me!"

The house gave a horrible groan. He moved forward watching in horror as the wood snapped and the entire building crumbled.

"Ami!"

"Get back!"

Over the flames and debris he could see the yard. His father was ferociously attacking two men, holding them away from the house. When the building fell, he turned around. Somehow, he managed to spot Aslan.

He mouthed 'I love you.'

Aslan eyes widened and he threw himself over his siblings, forcing them to the ground. Behind him, the world exploded with a horrible boom. The last he heard was a painful ringing in his ears when the black darkness swallowed him.

The boy in front of him looked defeated. Broken.

"My father had lit the powder on fire. It killed him and all the other soldiers. He knew we were far enough to be safe."

Aslan gazed numbly at the wall. He didn't want to see the pity in Hisham's eyes. He didn't even know why he was telling him this. For all Aslan knew, Hisham didn't believe him.

"Someone had revealed their plans. My mother, father and Mohsen were gone. So were many others. I woke up in a wagon with my siblings and five others. We were in an orphanage by the next morning. That's where Dabur's men found us."

"That's it! I've had it!" The man shouted mercilessly at the girl, spittle flying from his mouth. Shards of broken glass littered the floor.

Pari's parents had always taught her to respect elders, but this man didn't deserve it.

"It was an accident!" she shouted back, planting herself between the man and the child. She drew herself to her full height. It wasn't very high, only half way up his belly.

"Don't talk back to me you brat!" he raised a hand to backhand the girl when something barrelled into his legs, toppling him over. Aslan stood protectively in front of Pariza.

"Don't touch her."

Whether it was the cold bite in his voice, or the kitchen knife he brandished, he would never know. The man simply rolled back on to his feet and harrumphed loudly, trouncing into the adjacent room.

That night, Aslan was finishing the last of his never-ending list of chores the orphanage owner was punishing him with. The sack of what felt like rocks was dropped carelessly onto the stone floor of the basement.

"Such a waste of talent..."

He whirled around, the knife he nicked from the kitchen clutched in his palm.

A hooded man stood at the back, balancing an apple on the tip of a knife.

"It was so brave, what you did for your sister."

"Who are you?"

The man ignored his question. Aslan blinked and jolted as the figure popped up in front of him.

"Not a bad grip, but your posture is too close."

Aslan frowned. "What do you want?"

"Why my dear Aslan, I want to help."

"He offered me a chance to leave. Become something more than an orphan and learn to defend myself. I accepted under two conditions, that my siblings came with me and that I would never be asked to harm a woman or child."

He looked up at Hisham, his grey eyes growing stormy and dark. "I didn't have someone who could save me. No one was

going to help smuggle out. No one was coming. So I did what I could to save my sisters and my brother.”

He saw the look on Hisham’s face.

“You don’t believe me. I don’t have any way to prove it, but that is what happened.”

“I know. I believe you. That still doesn’t explain why you want to help. Why now?”

“When Nazar killed Noman, I ... I realized it could have just as easily been Qasim. Today, killing your brother suited his needs. What if tomorrow, it was killing mine? There was a reason I had that condition. I’ve already lost Mohsen.” Aslan’s voice nearly cracked at the mention of his dead brother.

He started as the bonds holding him wriggled away. Aslan rubbed his wrist, massaging the ache out of them.

“Don’t give me a reason to regret this.”



“Can I have a look at your arm?”

Rafay nodded and turned away as the healer removed his bandage. Looking at it again wouldn’t change how the arm past his elbow was nothing more a stump. He had heard the other healers talking earlier when they thought he was asleep. Rafay had been lucky to get away with his life. All because he had been a stupid fool. Because he hadn’t listened and let his big ego take over.

On the bed beside him, Maya was sleeping. She had recovered from the episode, but was beside herself when she saw what happened to Rafay. It took every self deprecating joke he knew to get her to crack a smile.

Rafay watched the healer’s retreating back the fresh bandage scratching his delicate wound.

“I made something for you.”

Haroon handed over a small bag to Rafay, his eyes looking down. Curious, Rafay took the bag. Inside was a lump of metal.

“It’s far from perfect...I mean I don’t have my tools and I only have stone, which isn’t that easy to carve-”

“It’s perfect.”

Haroon looked up in surprise.

“Really?”

Rafay nodded. His hand held a rudimentary metal arm. It was heavy with a leather socket for his stump. The end was, funny enough, a clenched fist.

“I figured this wouldn’t be the last time you got into a fight.”

Haroon was smiling, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. Truth be told, he was holding back a wave of grief. From losing Nomi, to Maya collapsing and Rafay losing a limb and nearly his life. He felt like he would collapse.

Rafay opened his arms to his weary brother. For the first time, Haroon didn’t hesitate and grabbed his brother with every bit of strength he had left.

“Uh, Haroon Bhaiya?” Maya mumbled from the bed beside them. “Rafay Bhaiya still needs to breathe.”



“If it’s alright, what was he like? My father,” Hashu clarified.

A smile lit up Khajista’s face. “He was exactly like you. You have his eyes, his gait, his demeanour. Hamza was a kind man, a caring father, and a just leader. Under his rule, the Sultanate and our home flourished.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

Khajista gave him a knowing look.

“You’re so alike,” she smiled, moving a loose strand off his forehead. “What you did for that boy..”

He shrugged. “It is not my place to judge, he also knows knows the consequences if he is leading us on. Anyways, I actually have something of yours.”

Hashu pulled out the seal and ring from his pocket. “I found these with Agha Luqman. I think they belong to you.”

She looked at the two objects but rather than take them she folded Hashu’s fingers over them. Her touch was soft and warm, comforting. Familiar.

“They are yours to keep...unless you have reached a decision.”

Hashu gave her a confused look.

“There are only two ways Nazar can become Sultan. If you

were killed and your...body,” Khajista forced the word out, “was presented to the judiciary council. Or...you reject the Sultanate.”

“I can refuse.”

Khajista nodded slowly, gauging his response. “You have a choice. Have you chosen what you want to do?”

“What should I do?”

“Unfortunately Shahzadah, that is not for me to tell you. As the upcoming Sultan, the decision must be yours and yours alone. I am not allowed to tell you what you must do. No one can. Know this, if you are to refuse, Nazar will be granted the complete power of the Sultanate.”

He gazed into the fire.

“Then I do not have a choice. I was not raised a coward.”

His determined look created a surge of pride in her heart.

“I will take my father’s place as the next sultan.”

17

“...Surely the unjust will not be successful.”

Surah Al-An'am - Ayat 21

Golden banners lined with maroons and tassels of the finest quality waved from the roof. Beautiful peacocks, their blue and green feathers leaping against the pure white and beige tone of the marble floors and walls. As guests entered, there were elaborate velvet lined seats awaiting, all facing the front of the hall. Every flower in the nearby cities had been collected to make a bouquet whose size could only be rivalled by the gigantic gold throne in the center. Plush red fabric as soft as silk beckoned to Nazar.

He smiled in the mirror, imagining how wonderful the gigantic crown encrusted with emeralds and rubies would glint on his head.

“How much longer?” he snapped at the bustling tailor. The old man was pinning the final touches to his coronation garment. A tunic till his thigh of royal blue, the most expensive colour on the market, lined with silk and embroidered with gold and silver wire. Behind him was a flowing cape, the edges bordered by the white soft fur of the rare Snow fox of the Northern Peaks.

His pants were a dull gold and his shoes glittered with embroidery, the tip curling dramatically in the local style. He

looked like a grand king of old, draped in finery and quite literally in gold.

“Today...” Nazar whispered to himself. “I take back what is mine.”



“The castle has three possible entry points, the northern gate, the eastern gardens and the tunnel under the wall.”

Hashu listened to Maesum with rapt attention.

“The northern gate will be very busy, since it’s the back entrance of the castle. Caterers, florists, servants, essentially anyone who is not a guest, will be there. Someone could sneak in undercover, but they risk being recognized.”

“What about the eastern gardens?” the Sultana asked.

“Out of the way, only visible from the balconies of the private rooms. But minimal entrances and exits. Anyone who goes there has a chance of being trapped. The tunnel under the wall is only known to Agha Soleimani, Sultana and myself. One of us will have to show where it is. While probably the most obscure, it is also the most dangerous. There is only one way in or out and it is barely wide enough for a man or two.”

“Aslan?” Hashu looked at the boy. His eyes flickered to Hashu in surprise, to be honest, he was shocked Hashu was actually allowing him to be here.

“Stealth is your specialty. Assuming you’re not suggesting the front door, what would you do?”

He smiled at the jab and gleaned over the map with intense concentration.

“Hisham and Qayidun,” he nodded towards the man respectfully, “Are the most recognizable. Hence they should take the most obscure route, the tunnel. Since it is so small and vulnerable, the less people, the better. Nazar will be in the process of his coronation. He is going to want to savour the process and be swift. So we will need a distraction. The northern gate. More people means more opportunity for chaos. The more important, the better. Especially if it is an object like the crown. The eastern gardens will be our safest way to get someone into the castle to divert resources away from where the tunnel opens up in Agha

Soleimani's office. There is going to be excitement and chaos and a crowd. Nazar will have extra men, but if we can cause enough chaos on the ground, Hisham will be able to get to the throne room without any problems."

Hashu looked to Maesum. The commander nodded in agreement. "It is a good plan."

"And then what happens?" Fati asked.

"We need to get him in front of at least two members of the judicial council. Agha Soleimani will be there for us, as one of the most esteemed members, Nazar had no choice but to invite him. There are enough honest members to testify when Hisham makes his claim." Maesum explained.

They organized the final few details.

"We will meet outside after Dhuhr. Inshallah, Allah(swt) will grant us success."

Everyone headed to their quarters to prepare.

Hashu however took a detour. Whilst everyone headed to their rooms, he broke off and went out to a small side area. It was off the beaten track and he met no one on his way.

He himself had only been part of the way, but something inside him knew where to go. His feet carried him down a series of turns. Then, he was there.

Steeling himself, Hashu took a breath and pushed open the door. It was a small room, plain, save for a hole in the ceiling where the sunlight flooded in. It fell in a halo around a small mound in the center. The smell of wet soil lingered in the air. Over the grave was a blanket of flowers and petals. At the top was a stone with '*Noman, a brother and a friend. May Allah(swt) be pleased with you.*'

'*Haroon.*' Hashu smiled to himself. He knelt down on one knee, not minding the wetness seeping through his pant leg.

"I wish you were here, Nomi." His hand grasped a handful of soil. He started when a smaller hand settled over his.

"We all wish you were," Fati whispered. Behind her, the younger siblings reached and added their hands on top of the older twins. "We know that even then, you'll be by Hashu's side."

He gazed at her tear-brimmed eyes. "You never were able to

stay away. Watch over him. Pray for him. As you always did.”

“You don’t have to-”

“Yes, we do.” Fati cut him off kindly. “He was our brother. We need this, all of us.”

“But Rafay-”

“Can now fight.” The boy held up his new metal arm. “Nomi may not be here, but we are, Hashu Bhaiya. I made the mistake once of not being where I should have been. I won’t do it again.”

Fati smiled and wrapped an arm around his shoulder.

“Nomi Bhaiya was the best of us,” Rafay declared.

“He’s right,” Haroon added. “It’s about time we proved ourselves worthy to be his brother.”

Hashu’s shoulders slumped and he turned to Maya.

“I don’t suppose I can convince you to stay.”

She shook her head with a watery smile. The five of them wrapped their arms around each other.

‘*This,*’ Hashu realised. ‘*This is what I’m fighting for,*’ he told himself.

“We need to get ready,” Fati told them, pulling away.

“I’ll join you, I need a moment.”

She nodded and ushered the others out.

Once they had left, he shook his head.

“Most people would consider that rude.”

Aslan materialised from the side of the room. He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“I wanted to pay my respects.”

Hashu gestured beside him.

Aslan lowered himself and clutched a handful of dirt.

“He was always by my side. Awake or asleep, Nomi was always there. According to my mother, it was true even as a baby.”

Aslan lowered his head.

“I’ll stay by him, Noman. Someone has to keep him out of trouble.”

There was a pained smile on both boy’s face. Aslan stood and turned to Hashu.

“Hisham I-”

“Don’t.” Hashu stopped him. “If you want to honour Nomi’s sacrifice, you’ll help me take back the Sultanate. He died to save my life. I will honour him by ensuring Nazar does not win.”

Aslan nodded. “You have my blade and that of my family. This, I swear on my honour.”

Hashu shook his head. “I respect that Aslan, but swear nothing to me. Submit not to people. Submit only to the Almighty(swt). Only then, can your blade serve truth.”

The Shahzadah left, leaving the boy much to think about.

Hashu somewhat hesitantly opened the door to his room, swallowing his nervousness. On his bed, an armour had been laid out, a belt for his father’s sword by its side.

Before going close, he grabbed a mohar and quickly prayed two rakats. He couldn’t believe it. He was going to claim a Sultanate, to fight against the Shahzadah and claim a throne. Never in his life would he have thought he would be in this position.

“Do you need help?”

His mother stood at the door. At Hashu’s nod, she entered. He stood still.

She adeptly lowered the armour over his shirt and laced up the side. Her fingers made quick work of the strings. His belt was wrapped tightly around his waist, clinging to the leather belt.

Khajista gazed into her son’s eyes, brushing a strand from his forehead.

“I don’t know if anyone has told you. But you look so much like your father.”

Hashu smiled and held her hand. Slowly, he lowered his head and kissed it out of respect.

“I will live up to his memory, Inshallah.”

“You already have, my brave boy. Promise me something.”

Hashu was surprised. “Anything, Ami.”

Khajista’s breath hitched at the term of endearment. The last she had heard it was from a tearful six year old Hisham. And now, it belonged to the brave young man in front of her. She picked up the Sultan’s sword and placed it in Hashu’s hands.

“Promise me that this sword will only be raised to defend the weak. That it will only bear the blood of the cruel.”

He nodded. "I promise."

She withdrew a pendant from a pouch. "Your father always wore this when going to battle. He would say it was what brought him back."

Khajista placed a small, thin pendant in his hand. On one side was Ayat-ul-Kursi and the other, was the emblem of the Sultana, a soaring dove carrying a rose.

At Hashu's nod she tucked it into his armour, right above his heart.

"With this, you carry my duas and your father's. He would have been proud of the man you've become, Syed Hisham Ali Zawar. Go, with the protection of Allah(swt)."



"No, no, no! The turkey is meant to be served after the appetizer, so it is supposed to go over there!" the man cried out indignantly.

"Excuse me sir, where are the fireworks?"

Without even looking up, the man flung out a hand to point left.

"Thank you."

Aslan wheeled the cart around the workers, plopping it beside crates upon crates of labelled fireworks. When no one was looking, he peeked inside. Two grey eyes stared back, glittering in anticipation.

"It's up to you, Amna. We're waiting on your signal."

He slunk away, mixing with the crowd. Amna herself opened a flap in the box's side and slid out. From her pocket, she fished out her supplies and began to run a fuse line from the box to the crates.

"Hey!" a man's voice called behind her. "Get out of there!"

He stalked up to the little girl with heavy steps.

"What do you think you're doing?" he questioned crossly. He took a step back at the girl's menacing smile.

"Boom," she whispered.



"What did he say the signal was?" Rafay asked.

Fati shrugged, but then remembered he couldn't see her. "He didn't. Aslan said we would know it when we saw it."

"What do you—"

Haroon didn't get to finish his question. They clamped their hands over their ears as a huge explosion erupted from their right. Fati's eyes widened as colours and sparks flew in the air, along with a large amount of wood.

"I guess that's the signal," she muttered.

They raced over the eastern gardens following the path Sultana Khajista had marked on the map.

Fati's footsteps were dull on the concrete. She turned the corner and was forced to skid to a halt, nearly crashing into an old woman.

The maid's eyes widened. "It's a lovely day for a stroll. Of course I wouldn't go this way. Too many people."

Fati nodded, releasing a breath she didn't know she was holding. She nodded a thanks and turned, following a second path.

Maryam watched the child sneak away. The girl may look a little different from her mother, but there was no mistaking Khajista's eyes.

"Talking to yourself again?" a soldier a little way behind her jested.

The old woman smirked, though they couldn't see as she had her back to them. '*You won't be laughing soon,*' she thought.



"I'm beginning to question your friend's definition of stealth," Maesum quipped, swiping away a large cobweb.

Hashu didn't comment, since the man was echoing his own thoughts.

"The last time you were here, I could hold you in one hand," Maesum whispered.

Hashu smiled. "Well in this case Qayidun, you probably still could."

The man chuckled. "We're nearly there. The entrance should be around here."

Maesum shoved the wall. It swiveled open with a loud creak.

Hashu followed Maesum out, one hand on his sword.

Slowly, they tiptoed into the room. It was completely dark and the light from a little window only showed him a worn stone floor.

“Well, look what we have here...” A man clad in uniform stepped out of the shadows. “So that’s where it was. Get them.”

Soldiers began crawling out of every corner. They grabbed Hashu and yanked him out into the room. Pulling himself free, he stood back to back with Maesum.

A soldier leapt for him, blade swinging. Hashu brought his sword up in time. They clanged. Bringing up his leg, he kicked the man in the chest. He went flying. Another uniform came at him from the side. He ducked, swinging out a fist. It caught the soldier in the stomach and he collapsed.

“Duck!”

Hashu hit the floor as a man soared over his head, crashing into another that was creeping up on him.

He didn’t get a chance to thank Maesum, instead, flinging his dagger into an oncoming soldier. It impaled the man’s neck and he fell limp.

“Get them!” the soldier yelled.

Hashu flipped over the table. A sword whistled behind him, crashing into the wood. Another knocked against his blade.

With a yell, he wrenched the sword aside, knocking the offending weapon to the ground. Flinging out his fist, he caught the man squarely in the jaw.

A hand grabbed him back, swinging him around into the book shelf. Hashu’s body smacked into the wood painfully, his sword hand pinned. Using the other, he elbowed his offender. He heard an *oof*. Grabbing a thick tome, he whirled and crashed it on the man’s head. He fell to the ground.

Maesum flung the last man headfirst into the wall with a sickening crunch.

“Come on!”



“Where is it?” Aslan muttered to himself.

“You!” he turned around to face Dabur. Even with his mask in place, he knew the man recognized him. Despite the flare of panic in his chest, he raised an eyebrow and strolled into plain view.

“Why Dabur, we’ve been friends so long, you didn’t even bother to get me an invitation? That’s so rude,” he announced mockingly.

The surrounding soldiers looked shocked at the young boy’s contempt.

“You’ll pay for that, boy!”

Aslan rolled his eyes and pulled out two swords. “Of course, who would like to go first?”

“You can’t take on all of us alone!”

Aslan laughed. “I’m never alone.”

His glinting silver pools were the last thing they saw before the whole yard was enveloped by smoke.

“Hey!” the man called. He heard yells of his men around him. “Fall back!”

A cool blade pressed against his neck.

“Now who’s alone?” a voice whispered in his ear.



“Excuse me! He’s collapsed!” Fati’s hands covered her mouth as she called to the two guards in distress.

“Where is he, Ma’am?”

“Over here!”

Haroon lay limply, face down on the ground. Fati was hysterical. The soldiers kneeled down, their armour clattering noisily on the ground.

“Hey boy.” One of them nudged Haroon onto his back.

“Salam to you too.” Haroon’s eyes snapped open. Before either man could reply, Rafay smashed a fist into the back of their heads. Dust falling from his hand.

“Fati!”

Hashu and Maesum rounded the corner. She took a relieved breath but as they got closer she noticed they were ragged.

“What happened?”

“There were people outside the tunnel.”

“Expected.”

They jumped at the sound of Aslan’s voice.

“We need to get you a bell,” Rafay muttered.

“The hall’s this way if anyone is interested in stopping a megalomaniac with a God complex.”

They all gave Pariza a funny look.

She raised her hands defensively. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“Let’s go.” Hashu ordered. They fell in line behind him.



“What is going on out there!” Nazar all but hissed at the guard. The man stammered pathetically. Dabur had still not returned from discovering what caused the explosion.

“I-I-I don’t know sir!”

Nazar grabbed the front of his shirt, yanking him forward. “Then find out!”

The door to the hall swung open.

For the first time in his life, Nazar was stunned. For a moment, he was staring at his brother.

Brown piercing eyes, dark ruffled hair, his face marred by sweat and blood. In his hand, was an eerily familiar sword.

“Nazar!” Hashu’s voice boomed in the hall. The guests exploded into whispers as everyone shuffled in behind him.

“I challenge your claim to the throne of the Zawar Sultanate.”

“Who dares to?” Nazar asked, a sinking feeling inside him already knowing the answer.

“I am Syed Hisham Ali Zawar, son of Syed Hamza Zawar and I have come on the eve of my twenty first birthday to claim what is rightfully mine. To accept my legacy.”

“There is no mistake!” an old man gasped. “He can be no other!”

Nazar watched in fury as the crowd nodded in agreement.

“Very well, then I shall take the Sultanate along with your head! Guards!”

Screams and yells erupted around the room as armour clad men poured in from every door.

“Come boy. Face your destiny.”



Hashu and the others shoved their way through the fleeing guests.

One soldier ran to him, an axe held high. Hashu spun out of the way. It came down on Haroon's sword, the boy smirked.

“And that was your first mistake.”

Rafay's metal fist flew out and connected with the man's jaw. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. Dust spilled from the crevice of his other hand as he punched a man in the chest. The soldier flew and landed on three more men.

Haroon yanked the helmet of a soldier rushing at Rafay. The man jerked his neck, only to find it had turned to dust. Rafay lunged below his jaw, knocking him into the emptying seats.

The twins shared a smile.

Right behind them, Fati and Pari were creating a storm. Fati ducked, Pariza rolled over her to kick an approaching man in the chest. Fati pressed her hands to the stone. From the stage, the flower bouquets shook and trembled before leaping up like humanoid plants. They crawled across the round, binding every soldier in their path.

Pari ducked as a plant vine shot out from behind her, wrapping around the neck of the soldier in front of her. He was hoisted in the air and thrown. She pulled out two whips and flung one on the vine. It wrapped around and carried her across the hall to where her brother had entered.

Aslan didn't bother to ask what was happening, he had joined the fray. His blades spun so fast, they were a blur. Cutting down soldiers left and right.

“Look out!”

“Pari?” he exclaimed kicking away the soldier in his hand. His sister yanked her whip off the vine and landed straight onto an unsuspecting soldier.

The knocked weapons and stood back to back.

“Remember old times?”

“Now?”

“Better than never,” she smirked. Aslan held out his blade handles and she cracked her whips. They wrapped around the handles. She took a running start. With a grunt, Aslan hoisted her in the air. They spun in a deadly circle; she was practically running on the soldiers faces.

There was a flash of brown from the side of his eyes and he yanked Pariza straight into his arms right as a spear soared over them.

“Get him!” Maya’s yelled echoed from the doorway. A horde of eagles swooped in. With terrifying screeches, they aimed for the spear throwers, talons wide and ready.

The young girl’s eyes were glowing a terrifying white as cries of pain and screams echoed around them.

Fati had blanketed the floor in creepers, they were scaling the walls, carrying unsuspecting soldiers with them.

Haroon had his hands on the entrance floor. Aslan almost stumbled in surprise when he saw it *ripple*. A man charged up the steps only to sink in, like quicksand.

Rafay’s fists were blurs as he flung a man at least four times his size over his shoulder like he weighed nothing.

“Come on!” Qasim yelled from somewhere.



Hashu brought his sword handle down on the back of the man’s head. He fell over. Leaping over the body, he finally stood face to face with Nazar.

“Took you longer than expected.” Nazar struck out like a snake, but Hashu was ready for him.

Their swords clanged loudly. Hashu leapt up and flipped back. A leg swept beneath him. A blade whistled past his ear. He jabbed, but Nazar batted it aside.

“You’re just as bad as that boy,” The man taunted.

Hashu gritted his teeth, swinging his sword down. It screeched down Nazar’s blade.

“That boy,” he gritted, dodging another strike. “Was a better man that you’ll ever be.”

Seeing an opportunity, Hashu struck.

“His name was Noman,” Nazar froze for only a moment, but it was all Hashu needed. His sword was blocked, but his punch caught Nazar squarely in the face.

The man stumbled back, gripping his nose, a stream of red trickling down it..

“He was a better man than you’ll ever be.”

There was a flash of horror across Nazar’s face as realisation dawned on him.

“No...” he breathed, his tone laced with disbelief.

Flashbacks blared in his mind. That boy...It couldn’t be.

Those eyes, that mop of hair. Of course. His son had disappeared the same night. The same boy...the blade...no...

“My son!” he screeched.

Hashu jumped back as Nazar lashed viciously.

In trying to end his brother’s heir, Nazar had finished his own. He let out a bloodthirsty roar.

“You killed him! You killed my son!”

His strikes were faster and Hashu barely parried them in time.

He brought his sword down on Hashu’s head.

Hashu narrowed his eyes, “He was no son of yours. He was my brother!”

Lifting his blade, Hashu grunted and Nazar bore down on him.

“*Fool, you should have crawled back to whatever hole you came from.*”

Still bearing down on Hashu’s sword, Nazar pulled out a dagger. He jabbed it at Hashu’s stomach.

“No!” Aslan leapt from the side and caught the blade with his bare hand. Blood spilled through his fingers as Nazar pushed harder, the blade digging in his skin.

“*Fool!*” he yelled, kicking Aslan in the chest. Hashu was able to free his blade. He managed to swipe upwards, taking a few steps back.

Nazar was losing patience. His attacks were relentless. With a damning strike, he knocked the blade clean from Hashu’s hand. Leaping back, he caught Nazar’s sword with a chair seat. The man yanked it out and struck again, shattering the wood. Hashu closed his eyes and rolled out of the way. He scrambled to his feet.

“Agh!” Nazar’s upward strike caught his shoulder. The blade sliced through his armour. Blood gushed from his shoulder. Hashu pressed his hand against it. He tripped on a fallen soldier and fell onto his back.

Nazar advanced on Hashu’s retreating form. He was crawling across the floor, until his back hit a wall.

The Shahzadah smirked menacingly. “Finally, I will be king.” He raised his sword.

“No!” Maya’s scream echoed through the hall. Hashu watched in surprise as she...glowed?

Haroon followed, his eyes fading to a milky white.

Hashu gasped, arching his back as something hot and fiery coursed through his veins. It got stronger as Rafay and Fati also fell limp.

Slowly the four siblings rose, their bodies pulsating with an ethereal glow. Hashu couldn’t breathe at the surging that tingled his very skin.

“Finish him,” they echoed in unison.

Hashu closed his eyes and let the sensation wash over him. Nazar backed away as the boy glowed. When his eyes opened they were an eerie white.

“What is this sorcery?!”

Without wasting another moment, he swung his blade at Hashu’s neck.

The boy caught it. With his bare hand. Nazar pushed harder, but Hashu didn’t budge. With a clench of his fist, the metal shattered under his fingers.

Nazar threw away the useless pommel. He pulled out a dagger, jabbing it at Hashu’s side. Hashu made no move to stop him. The blade crumpled against Hashu’s skin.

“What!”

He tossed aside the blade, stretching both hands for Hashu’s throat. Nazar never made it.

Two barb-like plants wrapped around his arms, the thorns digging into his skin. With a yell of pain, he was hoisted off the ground. The plant grew higher and higher.

He watched as Hashu clambered up the bare smooth wall without so much as a hand hold.

“This is impossible!” Nazar screamed.

Birds flew past his ear, depositing a large sword in Hashu’s hand. One hand holding the wall, the other gripping his sword, Hashu glared at Nazar.

Everyone had stopped to watch the encounter with wide eyes.

“Nazar!” Hashu growled, his voice echoing loudly. “The fate of the enemies of Allah has and always will be defeat!”

Nazar’s eyes trembled, his face pale.

“No,” he gasped helplessly.

The boy leapt from the wall and swung his arm in a mighty strike. Nazar’s eyes rolled back in his head, a line of red blossoming on his neck.

The last look on his face was the expression of utter disbelief.

Hashu landed on the ground easily and turned. He grabbed Nazar’s head and held it high. Eyes glowing white, he turned to the onlookers.

“This!” he held up Nazar’s head. “Is the fate of every oppressor who shall cross my path. My blade shall be stained with his blood. For this is the Sultanate of Allah(swt) and the Ahlebait. By the sacrifice of Aba Abdillah, let my blood be shed before an oppressor rules these halls!”

His voice echoed in the silent hall. Slowly, his siblings were lowered to the ground. Once they touched the floor, Hashu collapsed, the world turning black.

18

Legacy

“Arise all respected guests to welcome Shahzadah Hisham Ali Zavar.”

Hisham entered the hall. His arm was bandaged in white wraps and cuts littered his face. But he was smiling.

The hall was brimming with people, most of which he didn't know. In the front row, Maesum was sporting a similar sling and gave Hashu a wink. Agha Soleimani bowed his head in respect, Hashu returned the gesture.

His and Aslan's siblings had an entire row, looking haggard but happy. Aslan himself was nowhere to be found. Fati's face was lit up with a smile. Hashu could almost hear her thoughts.

‘We really did it.’

Between her and Rafay, a seat was empty. There was a pang in Hashu's chest. He nodded to the seat. A warm zephyr tickled his ear. He smiled and walked to the stage where his mother was waiting with a Quran in her hand. Hashu placed a hand on it.

“Syed Hisham Ali Zavar, do you in full consciousness and state of mind, accept the responsibility of leading the Zavar Sultanate? Do you promise to rule Bi'idnillah? By the teachings of our Prophets, Imams and the Holy Book?”

Hashu nodded. “I do.”

“Then I ask Agha Soleimani to please join me up here.”

A salawat echoed in the room as an aged man climbed the

stage.

“It is with great pride and honour that I present to you, Shahzadah Hisham, the crown of the Sultans.”

It was a simple ring of gold, not the monstrosity Nazar had created. Agha Soleimani gestured to the simple wooden throne that replaced Nazar’s.

Hashu took a deep breath. He sat down facing the gigantic crowd. Slowly, Agha Soleimani lowered the crown on his head.

“May I present, Sultan Syed Hisham Ali Zawar, son of Sultan Syed Hamza Zawar.”

Everyone stood up and applauded. Hashu’s breath stopped as he looked at all the faces beaming at him.

“We’re so proud of you,” Khajista whispered. “Your father and I both.”

Hashu took her hand and kissed the back, without making the crown fall off.

“And now!” Agha Soleimani announced. “Please proceed outside for the royal feast.”



“So should I curtsy or bow?” Pariza asked teasingly. All of the siblings approached Hisham after the hall had emptied.

Fati rolled her eyes. “You do know, staying silent is always an option.”

“Nah” Pariza shook her head. “Too boring.”

Hashu slipped away while they bickered amongst each other. The back door to the north was still open, so he stepped out.

Alone, he released a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Gazing out over the gardens, he shook his head.

“Rafay’s right. We really need to get you a bell.”

Aslan turned the corner, coming into view.

“How did you know?”

“I have my ways,” Hashu replied enigmatically.

“Anything to do with transforming into a super powerful human that commands the elements?”

Hashu rolled his eyes.

Aslan was enviously unscathed for the most part, except for the thick bandage around his hand.

“So what will you do now?” Hashu asked diverting the topic.

Aslan gazed over the courtyard, his cape flapping behind him.

“I plan to take down the Mahjoor. Nazar may be gone, but Dabur’s still out there.”

Hashu nodded. “So you’re leaving?”

“We ride at dawn. The younger ones wanted to attend the coronation. I think Pariza just wanted to annoy Fatima.”

Hashu smiled. “She does have a gift for that. You know you don’t have to go.”

Aslan shook his head. “You’ve done your part. Freed yourself, found your purpose. It’s time I do the same. I am no longer someone’s dirty glove. Maybe I can stop others from becoming the same thing.”

Hashu nodded, and held out a hand. “Inshallah, you will succeed.”

He glanced down and clasped his hand in Hashu’s. “Good to know I have a *Sultan* in my corner.”

“Speaking of which...” Hashu began, shaking his head in exasperation. “I have something for you.”

He whistled. A few robins flitted down, a bundle clutched in their hands.

Aslan raised an eyebrow. “I’m not going to try...” he sighed, shaking his head.

“This is for you.”

Aslan took the bundle, tugged the drawstrings. The cloth fell away to reveal two arm guards laden with menacing spikes.

He looked up at Hashu in confusion.

“They belonged to Nomi. His greatest gift was always being able to see the good in everyone. In a way, he did that for you too.”

He waved away Aslan’s protest with his good arm. “I want you to keep them as a reminder of the promise you made to yourself.”

Aslan swallowed and Hashu could have sworn his eyes teared up.

“I promise, I’ll do his memory justice.”



The room was too large. Having grown up in a tent and spending what felt like forever on the run, the space was oddly suffocating. It was strange. Everything felt like a distant memory.

He didn't know when sleep had crept up on him. What he didn't expect, was to wake up in a field.

Despite laying on grass, Hashu was incredibly comfortable. All around him, was sweet soft grass speckled with daisies. In fact, it almost felt a little familiar. Hashu stood up. His sleeve caught his eye.

Gone were his royal pyjamas. He was laden in a white robe shining so bright, it could have been made of light.

"Salam Bhai," Hashu spun so fast, he was seeing stars. There was no mistaking that face. The laughing eyes and crop of hair.

Hashu flung his arms around Nomi, squeezing him, savouring the feeling of holding his brother.

"Nomi," he sobbed, stroking the boy's hair.

"And here I thought I was the teary one." Hashu pulled back, brushing the tears with his sleeve.

"Where are we?"

Nomi smiled and shrugged. "Where we belong."

His smile dropped. "I don't like seeing you so sad."

Hashu looked down. "I miss you. We all do."

Nomi nodded. "I know. But I want you to be happy. I am. Look around. This is home."

Hashu smiled. It was beautiful.

Nomi placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about me, Bhai."

He gestured with his head. "They're taking good care of me."

In the distance, Hashu could make out two men. One looked eerily like himself if he had been aged several decades. The other was a young man with a face so radiant he could barely see him. From his shoulders, two wings sprouted.

"See Bhai I'm fine."

He gave Hashu one last hug.

"No more crying. I love you Hashu Bhai."

Before Hashu could stop him, Nomi stood up and ran to them. The scene swam in front of him as he watched the men embrace his brother.



Fati tugged once more on the fabric, not used to the feeling against her skin. She had gone to see if Hashu was awake, but was told his room was empty.

She entered the throne hall and found him. What did surprise her were five more thrones, smaller and on either side of Hashu's.

He greeted her and gestured to them. "One for each of us. I have always led my life with you all by my side. I don't want that to change."

Slowly, walking past, her fingers just stroked the wood. The seat on Hashu's right was the only one engraved.

"Never think of those martyred in the cause of Allah as dead. In fact, they are alive with their Lord, well provided for"

Surah Ale 'Imran, 3:169

"This is..."

"Yes." Hashu wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Like you said. He will always be with us."

Hashu turned to the empty hall.

"I just can't believe it, Fati. It's all over. Nazar is gone. Aslan and his siblings are free. The Sultanate will recover soon, Inshallah..."

"And?" she asked, a knowing smile on her face.

Hashu shared her grin. "I accepted my legacy."

"So when you have decided, then place your trust in Allah..."

Surat Ale 'Imran, 3:159.

IN the broken realm of the Zavar Sultanate, plagued by corruption and injustice, a humble young boy named Hisham embarks on a journey with his siblings that will unravel the secrets of his past and shape the fate of an entire Sultanate.

Braving the unknown, they discover a world teetering on the edge of darkness where great perils await. They must harness their abilities and face the darkest forces that threaten to engulf the realm. Betrayal lurks at every corner, and a malevolent force seeks to unleash its will, that could plunge the Sultanate into ruin.

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