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ELLA MINA

EMPIRE
OF
SAND
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LOST SOULS

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Violence

Mention of SA & suicide

**Graphic descriptions of mental health struggles such as
depression, anxiety, panic attacks**

Trauma/PTSS

Imprisonment/captivity

Empire
of
Sand
and
Lost Souls

ELLA MINA

Empire of Sand and Lost Souls

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From the River to the Sea...



Thesaurus

Al-Fatiha: opening vers of the Quran.

Alhamdoulilah: Thank God/praise be to God.

Amin: amen.

Asr prayer: Muslims pray five times a day. Asr is the third prayer of the day.

Astagfirullah: I seek forgiveness in Allah (God).

Baba: dad/daddy.

Baraka: blessing.

Djellaba: a loose (hooded) robe/long dress traditionally worn by Arabs/North Africans, also known as a *thobe*.

Dua: supplication/prayer of invocation.

Emira: female form of emir: leader/prince(ss)/person of stature.

Hobi: my love.

Inna lillahi wa inna ileyhi rajioen: Indeed, we belong to Allah (God), and indeed, to Him we return.

InshAllah: God willing.

Ishara: gesture; in this context: placing a fist on the heart as a greeting or salute.

Kashaf: scout/explorer.

La illaha illa Allah: there is no God but Allah (God). Muslims say this on numerous occasions, one of them being at the moment of their death.

Litham: protective cloth used as protection from the elements. The cloth is wrapped around the head/face.

Mahram: a spouse or a person with whom marriage is prohibited because of their close blood relationship.

Malek al Mawt: Angel of Death

Mawlati: Your Majesty.

Medina: city.

Muqawima: resistance.

Omi/Oumi: Mother.

Riad: is a house or palace characterized by an interior garden or courtyard. Originating from the Arabic word for “garden” the riad is a type of architecture that centers around this tranquil, enclosed space.

Sabah el khair: good morning.

Sabr: patience.

Scimitar: a short sword with a curved blade that broadens towards the point, used originally in Eastern countries.

Serai: a place in the desert where travelers can rest.

Seyidi/sir: sir

Soumouw al-amir: prince.

Wallahi: I swear to God/ I swear.

Ya Allah: o God.

Zagharit: ululations.



Prologue

1687-Sirai Palace

THE STEAK KNIFE GLEAMED under the chandelier's light, a tempting invitation. I could kill my mother-in-law right here, right now. One subtle lean, a swift flick of my wrist, and it would plunge into the throbbing pulse at the base of her neck.

My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat urging me on. The forbidden fantasy pulled at me: her warm blood against my skin, the spark fading from her eyes. It sent a jolt of exhilaration through me, dark and intoxicating.

But I had to resist. Patience, a venomous serpent, coiled in my gut. Every fiber of my being screamed for release, but control was my only weapon.

I shushed the screaming furies in my head, forcing them to rein in the tempest of dark desires swirling within.

My mother-in-law, wicked as she was, was not my target. Not yet.

It was my new husband, her son, who had to die first. Killing him would be a more cruel blow, a gaping wound that would bleed the queen's soul dry. I craved her despair. I wanted to feast on the raw agony of a mother burying her only child.

The thought of seeing her collapse into herself, to wretch over the lifeless body of her beloved, perfect child, filled me with a dark, twisted satisfaction.

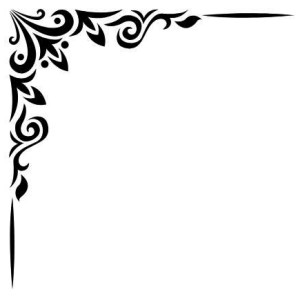
Would her mourning be enough? Or would I be compelled to revel in further chaos, to drink deeply from the well of her anguish?

She had fought tooth and nail to bring him into this world.

Her golden boy...

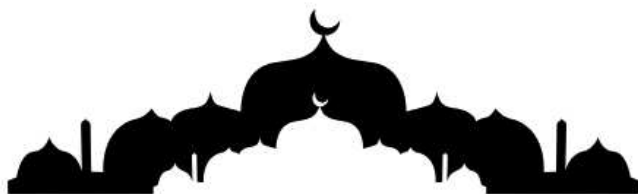
She struggled to have him; I won't struggle to kill him.





Part One





Chapter 1

Talyah Soliman

Sirāī Desert - Dungeon of Minbar

TALYAH RUBBED HER LEFT UPPER ARM, trying to quell the throbbing where a rat's teeth had broken skin. Hunched in the corner of her cell, she glared at the rodent, a silent promise of retribution burning in her eyes.

This dungeon was a festering wound on the world, a far cry from the last one. Years of filth—dirt, excrement, and dust—had melded into a breeding

ground for horrors seen and unseen. She could only pray that the bite wouldn't become infected this time. The last one had almost killed her.

Squeak. The sound was insolent, mocking. The rat darted past, a furry embodiment of her misery. She knew it would be back for another taste.

Hunger twisted her gut, blurring the line between reality and nightmare. The rats here were more than just scavengers; they were predators, their eyes gleaming with a chilling intelligence. Sometimes, in the depths of her despair, she could almost hear them whispering, plotting, anticipating the feast to come once she passed away.

She shook her head, trying to get rid of the intrusive thoughts, the relentless tormentors of her waking and sleeping hours. Pushing herself to her feet, she began her daily exercises, a futile dance against the inevitable. Her body was failing, her muscles devoured by her own desperate system, but she refused to surrender. Life would not claim her without a fight, not after all this time. *Malek al Mawt*¹ might be lurking at her doorstep, but he would find her a difficult prize.

The scorching heat, radiating from the enormous, barred window high above—a mockery of a roof—seared her skin by day. A stark contrast to the bone-chilling cold at night. Without a blanket she had spent many nights shivering endlessly.

Her tunic, once a proud white, was now a stained and tattered shroud, a color she was ashamed to acknowledge.

Today, she got tired quicker than usual. She collapsed onto the filthy floor, rolling onto her back, battered and exhausted, but the rage still burned. It was an insistent ember that refused to be extinguished.

Ever since the Revolt of Minbar, when the queen had condemned her to this life of hardship, that rage had been her constant companion. It festered, a

¹ Angel of Death.

dark fuel that kept her from succumbing to despair. Perhaps the queen had expected her to end it all, or hoped some disease would do the dirty job for her.

The irony was a bitter pill.

The queen, who had so easily murdered her own mentor, her protector, Talyah's *father*, couldn't bring herself to kill his daughter. Talyah didn't understand why she was spared. Perhaps it was some twisted divine joke. To her, this existence was worse than a pyre. Maybe taking her own life would be more merciful. But unfinished business held her tethered to this hell.

She sat up, attempting to untangle the abomination on her head. Once, her hair had been a cascade of rich, brown curls. Now, it was a matted, filthy nest, a weight of shame and decay. And the smell... the ever-present stench of her captivity had long since numbed her senses.

At first, she had tried to maintain some semblance of hygiene, rationing her meagre water supply. But vanity was a luxury she could no longer afford. Thirst always won.

She'd seen prisoners come and go—robbers, murderers, the forgotten. Some were dragged away to their deaths, others inexplicably pardoned. But they all left eventually, even those who had offered a fleeting connection.

She'd learned not to form attachments. The pain of those abrupt departures was a wound she refused to reopen. After a while, she stopped introducing herself.

Lately, the silence had been deafening. The usual chorus of screams, whispers, and desperate scratching on the walls had faded. People were disappearing, but no one was replacing them. Eventually, even the guards had vanished.

A chilling realization settled in: she had been left behind.

Usually, she received a daily ration; stale bread and some unidentifiable sludge. However, recently, she was left to fend for herself. She'd briefly

entertained the thought of killing the rats with her bare teeth, devouring them raw. Maybe that would deter the other rodents from attacking her.

The sudden clatter of keys sent her scurrying back to the corner of the cell, mimicking the exact wary posture of those rats—crouched, vigilant, yet curious. Monir, the kinder one of the guards, took his time approaching. She recognized him by his walk; his limp slowed him down.

It had been three days since his last visit, and the scent of meat and spices filled her senses. Monir's wife must have slipped him something special. The only upside to starvation was the way it sharpened her sense of smell, guiding her to sustenance.

Monir smiled as he placed a bucket of fresh water and a mug near the bars. He clutched a bundle wrapped in cloth. "I'm sorry I haven't been by sooner."

She returned his smile, grateful for the old man who had shielded her from the worst of his colleagues' cruelty. Her gaze remained fixed on the bundle. Her salivary glands worked overtime; she had to swallow repeatedly before she could speak.

"It's okay." What else could she say? She wasn't in a position to demand anything.

Her gaze remained fixed on the bundle, never breaking contact with the grey fabric.

As soon as Monir handed her his treasure, she had to act fast because the rats were already eyeing her breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

When he stuffed the package through the metal bars, she snatched it from his hand like a feline tearing the limb of her prey.

She stomped her feet and snarled at the rats that had encircled her before wolfishly biting into the bread. The vermin scattered.

Monir averted his gaze.

She devoured the meal, barely chewing, oblivious to her appearance. Not a crumb could be lost. Even the risk of choking couldn't stop her. She almost wept when it was gone. The bucket of water was next. She was so parched; she could have bartered with the devil for a single drop. It was a challenge not to scream at Monir to hurry up and pass her the bucket. "Where is everyone? Am I the only one left?"

Monir frowned, the lines on his face deepening, the circles under his eyes more pronounced. During those rare moments when he'd been alone on duty, he'd shared his meals and stories.

She knew he had a sick son whose medicine was costly. This prison paid well; it was a lifeline for his family. She had tried to be compassionate, but sharing her space with rabid rats had eroded her empathy.

Monir glanced at the walls, then pressed a finger to his lips, urging silence.

"What's going on?" she whispered, desperate to know why she was alone. "Am I to be executed? Let it be over, then."

He shook his head, startled. "I won't allow it," he whispered back.

"What is it then?" she asked louder this time.

"I don't know."

A blatant lie. His face was an open book, his fidgeting and the sheen of sweat on his brow betraying his words. A former cellmate had taught her to look for these signs before he, too, had vanished.

Talyah wouldn't press him. Despite her vow of indifference, a part of her still cared for Monir and she wouldn't endanger him.

She changed the subject, nodding toward the bucket. "What's this for?"

He averted his eyes, pushing the bucket closer. "I thought you could use a bath."

The offer surprised her. "Why?"

He usually only brought her enough water to survive, occasionally sneaking in an extra mug. She had grown so accustomed to the filth that the memory of soap and water felt distant.

“Trust me, wash up today.” He produced a bar of soap from his pocket and tossed it into the bucket.

The hairs on her neck prickled. “Why?”

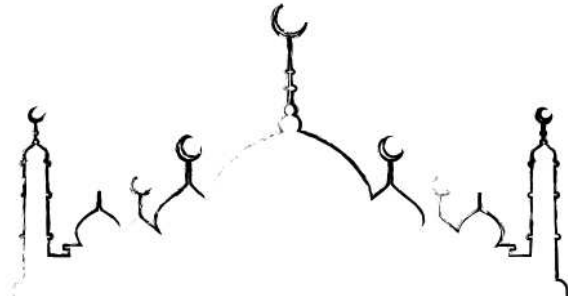
He glanced at the walls again. “Oh, look,” he said, pointing toward the barred ceiling. “That desert eagle-owl is magnificent.”

Talyah looked, but saw no birds. When he winked, her heart leaped. The desert eagle-owl was the seal of her father’s kingdom. Did Monir mean help was coming?

She didn’t dare to hope, but the relief on his face suggested something was about to change.

For better or for worse... She would grab any opportunity for freedom.

She only hoped she wasn’t preparing herself to be sold as a sex slave.



Chapter 2

Mustafa Tarifah

MUSTAFA EXPERTLY GUIDED HIS STALLION down the treacherous descent leading to the agricultural heartland of Siräi, a small region called Baraka. Recent mudslides had transformed the familiar path into an unreliable mire, a labyrinth of slick earth and deceptive gullies.

The weather was chaotic; frigid winds battled stifling humidity and the heat of the desert sun, creating a disorienting climate.

He silently thanked his mother for her insistence that he continue his equestrian training, even amidst the escalating demands of his royal duties. It was more than a skill now; it was a lifeline.

The small family farm, his secret haven, lay nestled behind a sprawling meadow where goats and cattle grazed under the watchful eyes of shepherds; their bells tinkling a discordant symphony carried by the wind.

The air, thick with the scent of sunbaked earth and blooming jasmine from a nearby garden, offered a momentary reprieve from the city's suffocating intrigue.

After dismounting and tethering his horse, he tightened the hood of his knee-length djellaba², the black fabric a stark contrast against the vibrant landscape, shielding his face from prying eyes and the relentless wind that whipped at his back. It was more than just a cloak; it was a shroud of mystery.

A thrill, both exhilarating and terrifying, shot through him at the thought of seeing his beloved Layla again. His heart hammered a frantic rhythm against his ribs as he adjusted the belt that held both his djellaba and matching trousers.

The wind howled through the ornate, creaking hand-carved plaque above the archway, "Baraka³," etched in elegant Arabic script; it was both the surname of Layla's family and the name of the region her father ruled.

The hardened mud clung stubbornly to his polished boots with each step, a small price to pay for a glimpse of Layla's smile. The pungent scent of manure, sharp and unmistakable, filled his nostrils as a gaggle of curious goats met him at the entrance. He suppressed a grimace, amused that even after weeks of visits, he remained a pampered city prince at heart.

A mischievous white goat with a wet nose nudged his leg, bleating softly, its eyes pleading for a treat. "I bear no treasures today, my friend," he murmured, his voice a low rumble.

The goat bleated once more, its indignant cry echoing across the fields.

Mustafa grinned, a flash of genuine warmth lighting his face. "Next time little one, I promise."

² A loose (hooded) robe/long dress traditionally worn by Arabs/North Africans, also known as a *thobe*.

³ Blessing.

Before he could knock, a sharp crack echoed, like a branch snapping underfoot. Mustafa dismissed it; likely another animal foraging in the undergrowth. Still, the sound sent a tremor of unease through him.

“Your mother’s intuition never fails to be correct,” a voice snarked.

Mustafa’s blood turned to ice. He whirled around, his heart seizing in his chest, surprise and apprehension warring within him. He hadn’t anticipated being discovered so soon. His mind raced, thoughts colliding like a runaway caravan in a sandstorm.

“I am not surprised that my mother sent you to do her dirty work,” he said, his voice tinged with disdain. He looked down at Maha, six inches shorter, but with eyes that held a fire rivaling the desert sun.

“The Queen has more pressing matters than indulging in your childish games, *sir*,” Maha retorted, her voice taut with barely restrained condescension. Her hand instinctively tightened on the hilt of her scimitar⁴, the polished steel glinting ominously. “You are meant to prepare for your wedding.”

He smirked, summoning his most condescending gaze, a defense mechanism he’d perfected just for her. “Spying on a mere mortal hardly befits a warrior of your caliber.”

The royal guard’s usually impassive face flushed with anger, the color rising in her cheeks like a desert sunrise. Her hands clenched into fists; her knuckles white. “I am simply fulfilling my sworn duty, nothing more.”

She tried to brush past him, her body tense and coiled like a striking cobra.

He blocked the doorway, his protectiveness toward Layla surging to the forefront. She was his sanctuary, his escape from the gilded cage of the palace. He would defend her with his life, even against his own mother’s most loyal servant. He just hoped Layla and her parents hadn’t overheard the commotion.

⁴ Source “Oxford languages”: A short sword with a curved blade that broadens toward the point, used originally in Eastern countries.

“I could help you find a cause more worthy of your talents, Maha,” he said, his voice softening slightly, searching for a flicker of humanity beneath her steely facade.

Maha’s rigid posture relaxed, almost imperceptibly, as if a fragile dam had momentarily stemmed the tide of her anger. “Such as?”

“You could dedicate your skills and unwavering loyalty to the orphanage I’m restoring. Those children, abandoned and forgotten, desperately need someone like you, someone who understands sacrifice and resilience.” He knew it was a low blow, striking at the core of her deepest wounds.

Maha, orphaned at a young age and raised under the Queen’s stern tutelage, had dedicated her life to serving the crown, seeking purpose and belonging in the cold embrace of duty. Her hard work had been sealed with the emblem of a first lieutenant, an honor usually only bestowed on the elite.

Maha scoffed, a harsh, derisive sound that echoed in the tense silence. She rubbed the knuckle of her index finger over her chin, a nervous habit he had come to recognize as a sign of inner turmoil. “I have no desire to trade the comforts of the palace for an ant-infested hovel teeming with wailing brats.”

Her callous response irritated him. Was she deliberately trying to provoke him, or was she simply unwilling to see beyond her own carefully constructed walls?

He was proud of the progress he’d made in restoring the orphanage, transforming the dilapidated *riad*⁵ into a sanctuary for the city’s forgotten children. “Why are you truly here, Maha?” he asked, forcing himself to remain calm.

“You are expected at the palace, Prince. The preparations for your wedding are behind schedule because you keep cancelling them.”

⁵ A riad is a house or palace characterized by an interior garden or courtyard. Originating from the Arabic word for “garden” the riad is a type of architecture that centers around this tranquil, enclosed space.

The sound of footsteps approaching from inside the house sent a jolt of panic through him. His hand tightened on the doorknob, the wood digging into his palm.

“You’re pathetic,” Maha hissed, her eyes blazing with a mixture of anger and something he couldn’t quite decipher.

Of all the people his mother could have entrusted, it had to be this insolent, unyielding girl who seemed to despise him, despite his futile attempts to earn her respect. Usually, such petty insults wouldn’t faze him. He wasn’t prone to outbursts of anger, but Maha had a unique ability to make his blood boil, her words igniting a cold, simmering fury within him.

Before he could retort, the door swung open, revealing a worried Layla. “Are you alright, hobi⁶? I heard voices. Why haven’t you knocked yet?” Her voice, usually so melodic, trembled with concern. She froze as her gaze fell upon Maha, clad in her imposing royal uniform, the scimitar at her hip glinting like a serpent’s eye.

Maha’s hand instinctively moved to the hilt, her fingers brushing against the polished steel, a silent threat hanging in the air.

“Ya Allah⁷, what is happening?” Layla whispered, her eyes wide with fear, her hand flying to her throat.

Mustafa gently tried to usher her back inside, away from the impending storm. “It’s nothing to worry about, hobi. Just a... misunderstanding.”

Maha rolled her eyes at the endearment, her expression a mask of disdain. She brushed past them, pushing them unceremoniously into the hallway as if she owned the house, her presence radiating an aura of authority and danger. She straightened, every muscle coiling with tension. Her back was

⁶ My love.

⁷ O, God.

perfectly erect, shoulders squared and drawn slightly back, a testament of countless hours of training. Her jaw was clenched, a rigid line that portrayed no hint of fear. With a swift nod to the elderly lady sitting on an ottoman, she pivoted on her heel, checking the room with measured precision. Each footfall was deliberately placed to minimize noise, yet her posture remained unwavering.

Mustafa almost burst out laughing when Maha picked up the smallest of pillows. “I assure you, there are no intruders hidden in that little pouch.”

Unfazed, she moved like a wolf through the small and shabby farmhouse, checking the heavily used pieces of furniture for monsters whilst ignoring the gleaming looks of aversion from Layla’s mother and sisters. The latter had remained quiet as the sight of the sharp sword and the Kingdom’s emblem on Maha’s chest was enough to restrain the usually chatty ladies.

The smell of fried onions filled the area that was both used as a living space and a kitchen. The placement of the stove next to the fireplace, which barely emanated any heat, had always seemed like an odd and dangerous choice to him, but Layla had explained that it was the best way to stay warm during the freezing nights.

Even though the room was dust-free and devoid of clutter, the ragged curtains separating them from the dented staircase gave it a weary appearance.

“You’re needed back at the palace, Prince,” Maha said.

Layla’s hands fidgeted at her simple djellaba that had once been baby pink. He took her hand in his and gently squeezed, hoping that would calm her nerves. She briefly smiled before glancing at her mother.

He understood why she was uncomfortable and said: “Could we get some privacy?” His eyes followed Layla’s mother and sister until they closed the front door behind them.

“I’m not marrying the widow of Raya,” he stated.

Maha shrugged. “Whatever you do with your life doesn’t interest me. All I know is, I’m not to return without you.” The grasp on her sword handle tightened. “You can choose to walk with your own two feet and dignity toward your horse, or I will tie you up like a lamb and drag you back. Either way is fine with me.”

Mustafa let out a bark of laughter. “You’re not serious.”

One of her eyebrows raised aggressively, almost touching her hairline. “You know I can take you easily.”

“I wouldn’t call it easily.” But she was not wrong. For a small dainty female, she was stronger than most of the men he knew. Granted, those men had been philosophers, teachers and strategic thinkers and not trained for battle like her. He had underestimated her once. He wouldn’t do that again. Especially not in front of Layla.

Maha fixed her gaze on the glass of the window, her reflection barely visible due to the dirt. The silence stretched, thick and suffocating, punctuated only by the rhythmic drumming of her fingers against her thigh. “Choose quickly, sir. My patience is wearing thin and I have far more pressing matters to attend to.” She punctuated the insult with a cruel twist of the knife: “Certainly more rewarding than escorting a grown child back to his mother’s apron strings.”

Layla gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, her eyes wide with a mixture of shock and indignation. “Are you going to allow her to speak to you in such a demeaning manner, Mustafa? You are the future king!”

“It’s alright, sweetheart,” he said, adjusting his posture and forcing a reassuring smile that felt brittle even to him. He couldn’t let Layla provoke Maha. The royal guard was a powder keg of barely suppressed fury and it wouldn’t take much to ignite her volatile temper. Maha had always been an enigma, a creature of stark contrasts, capable of serene composure one moment and a ferocious, tigress-like attack the next. He knew firsthand the

devastation she could unleash. “Tell my mother that I will be the captain of my own ship, Maha. I alone will chart its course. I will choose my bride, not her.”

Maha sighed so deeply that the faint scent of mint from her breath reached him, a cool, mocking breeze in the stifling atmosphere. “By Allah, you sound like a spoiled, petulant child, not a future ruler.”

Mustafa glanced sideways at Layla, his heart twisting with apprehension. He desperately hoped that Maha’s blatant disrespect hadn’t diminished him in her eyes. Or perhaps, it was his own meek response that had left him emasculated, a prince stripped of his dignity.

He crossed his arms, adopting a defensive posture, his jaw tightening. “Are these gratuitous jabs truly necessary, Maha? I have shown you nothing but kindness and respect since the moment I met you.”

“Spare me your platitudes. Just come home with me. Make my life easier, for once.”

“So, you can lock me away in a gilded cage once more, a puppet dancing to my mother’s tune?” His voice rose, tinged with bitterness.

“I follow orders, sir. It is my duty, my purpose.”

“Like a brainless soldier, devoid of free will or independent thought.”

Maha’s jaw clenched so tightly that he could see the muscles rippling beneath her skin. He was almost certain she would shatter a tooth with that force. Her foot tapped impatiently against the worn stone floor; each staccato beat was a warning siren. A deep furrow etched between her brows, a testament to the relentless pressure she was under. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, each movement stiff and jerky. Her knuckles turned bone-white, the muscles in her arms rigid and trembling with the effort to contain her simmering rage. A vein pulsed visibly in her temple, a dangerous sign that he was pushing her too far.

Mustafa felt a chill creep up his spine as he watched Maha's expression darken. The tigress was about to unleash her fury, and he had no doubt that it would be a spectacle to behold. Whether it was directed at him, Layla, or both of them, he wouldn't dare test her.

"Fine," he conceded, the fight draining out of him. "I will return to the palace with you, for now. But understand this, Maha, this is a temporary truce, not a surrender."

Maha's shoulders gradually relaxed, the tension slowly seeping from her frame as she exhaled deeply.

Mustafa almost sighed from relief. He had been able to temporarily diffuse her temper. He wasn't interested in being hog tied in front of his betrothed. If she had tolerated Maha's disrespect toward him, she would definitely not have any attraction to him after seeing him being dragged away as a goat. Even the thought of it made him shiver.

"Let this serve as a final warning. Next time, I will not grant you the courtesy of saving face. You will obey or suffer the consequences." Maha's gaze flickered toward Layla, her eyes narrowed, assessing. "Say your goodbyes, princess."

Mustafa gently took Layla's hands in his, his thumbs caressing her soft skin. He pulled her closer, his voice a low, husky murmur meant for her ears alone. "I will return to you, Layla. Have faith in me."

"No, you won't," Maha countered sharply from the doorway, her voice cutting through the tender moment like a shard of ice.

"Stop eavesdropping on our private conversation, Maha. Show some semblance of decorum."

"Stop procrastinating and wasting my valuable time. The queen awaits."

Maha's head snapped toward the front door; her keen ears having detected a subtle shuffling sound that had escaped his notice. With a swift, decisive

movement, she jerked the door open, revealing Layla's mother and sisters, who almost tumbled into the living room in their desperate attempt to avoid being caught snooping.

The women, their cheeks flushed crimson with embarrassment, stammered apologies before hurrying toward the staircase and went upstairs, their hushed whispers echoing in the sudden silence.

"If this is going to be a problem for you, Mustafa—" Layla began, her eyes reflecting her deep-seated fear of the queen and her ruthless enforcer.

He gently placed a finger against her lips, silencing her, preventing her from voicing the anxieties that plagued her. She was terrified of the queen and her potential wrath, and she had been openly vocal about her concerns. He had promised her safety, a vow that now felt hollow and fragile, and it pained him deeply that she didn't seem to believe him. "We will discuss this later, sweetheart. Meet me at—" He glanced back at Maha, who raised a sculpted brow, her eyes gleaming with mocking defiance, daring him to betray their secret spot. "You know where, Layla."

"Three, two, one," Maha said, her voice flat and devoid of emotion. "Time's up, sir. The carriage awaits." She reached for the rope she had discreetly unfastened from her belt, the rough hemp abrasive against her calloused fingers.

He held his palms up in a gesture of surrender, not to be bound, but to dissuade her from further escalation. "Relax, Maha. I am going. There's no need for theatrics. I'll be back soon, Layla. Just wait for me."

The sun cast a warm golden hue over the rugged landscape as Mustafa's horse struggled up the hill.

“You need a terrain horse, not this fancy prized one,” Maha muttered behind him.

“Why don’t you keep yourself busy with killing other people’s dreams and leave me to my own misery.”

She jumped off her horse and ascended on the narrowed path. “You’re such a whiny little—”

“Don’t you dare call me a child again.”

Instead of responding, she grabbed her rope again.

“Hey! I complied.”

“It’s not for you.” She tied the rope to his horse’s headgear and deftly steered him, urging him to find footholds among the loose stones. The horse initially hesitated, but had no choice but to leap forward as Maha’s pulls weren’t gentle.

“You’re hurting him.”

“It’s either this, or ride with me and leave your horse behind.”

He did not want to leave his animal to fend for itself, so he kept quiet.

As they neared the summit, Mustafa could feel the air shift around him, cooler and fresher. He glanced back at the spiral of beige and green below, a breathtaking view of the valley.

Maha nudged the horse one last time, its powerful muscles straining as it crested the hill, the palace looming in the distance. “Stay put, prince,” she commanded, her voice brooking no argument. Then, without a backward glance, she ran effortlessly down the steep slope, her lithe form a blur of motion against the rugged landscape, to retrieve her own mount, which she had left at the base of the hill.

Mustafa watched her, a flicker of reluctant admiration stirring within him. If Maha had been one of his pupils, he would have praised her unwavering dedication, her exceptional horsemanship, her sheer physical prowess. She

moved with a purpose and efficiency that was both captivating and intimidating. But Maha, with her characteristic disdain for superficial accolades, never sought praise or recognition. She performed her duties with a grim determination, driven by an internal code that remained stubbornly opaque to him. And so, he respected that about her, acknowledging her competence in silence. He knew empty words would only be met with scorn.

Within moments, she had remounted her own steed, a magnificent black warhorse that dwarfed his own palfrey, its eyes gleaming with barely restrained energy. She turned her horse back toward him, her expression unreadable, a mask of stoic indifference. With a curt nod, she signaled him to follow, and they resumed their thirty-minute ride back to the palace in a tense, unbroken silence, the only sounds the rhythmic thud of hooves against the parched earth and the mournful cry of a distant hawk circling overhead.

The air was crisp and imbued with the scent of wild sage and thyme. Towering cliffs veined with ancient rock formations that soared in the azure sky. Mustafa had never taken the time to enjoy these views when he secretly hurried toward Baraka. The path he had taken had always been clandestine and filled with anxiety.

“It’s in your and Sirai’s best interest to forget about that milkmaid and do as your mother ordered,” said Maha, breaking the silence and the peace in his mind.

“Layla is not a milkmaid, her father is the tribal chief of the Baraka Region,” he said passionately.

“I don’t care if her grandmother is the Goddess of Light herself. This isn’t just about you, so stop being such a brat and do what’s good for the Kingdom instead of following your needs like a rabid dog.”

The insult hung in the air. A fleeting glance at Maha who had flanked him, sent a wave of heat rushing to his cheeks, burning with indignation. “Wow, I’m a dog now?”

Maha’s posture shifted as she looked at him. “For that girl’s sake—”

The defiance he felt when he was with Maha only grew. “Her name is Layla.”

“I don’t care. You’re not the only one who has made sacrifices for Sirai.”

A spark of surprise flickered in his chest. “What have you sacrificed?”

“Who said I was talking about myself?”

Her tone had, but he knew she was uncomfortable discussing her feelings. So, again, instead of pushing her, he treated her with grace, a sentiment she never had toward him, and didn’t push her for answers.

“If you care about her, let her live in peace,” she continued.

Wide-eyed, he sat bolt upright, his pulse quickening. The feeling of alarm surged through him, forcing the relaxation from his limbs as adrenaline coursed through his veins. “Why? Is my mother planning on harming her?”

“If she is, she won’t do it herself.”

His gaze snapped toward her, anxiety coiling tight in his chest. His breath came in shallow bursts. Anger took over from any sanity he had left. “Wallahi⁸, Maha, if you cause her harm, I won’t have mercy on you.”

“I don’t know of any plans, so relax.”

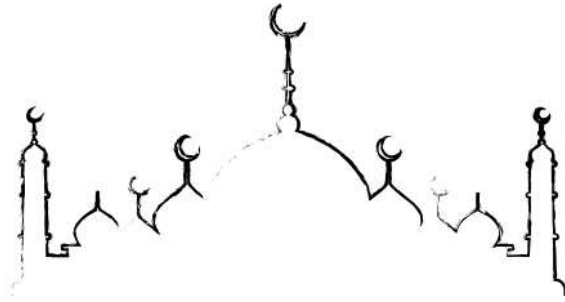
“Promise me you will leave her alone.”

Maha shrugged as she stirred her horse forward over the last hill before the *Medina*⁹ of Sirai would loom.

⁸ I swear to God/by Allah (God).

⁹ City.

“I do not take oaths in vain. I only answer to the queen. If she tells me to stick a dagger in Layla’s heart. I will.”



Chapter 3

Mustafa

The Great Medina

DEENAH OMAR HAD HER BACK turned against Mustafa. The rich, flowing robe made of silk, decorated with geometric patterns and trimmed with gold thread; hid the high heels she was most likely wearing. Her hair, dark and slightly wavy, fell past her shoulders, almost touching the sash that cinched her slim waist.

Mustafa's mother was watching the bustling Medina below, probably contemplating an important decision.

The office was filled with the scent of incense, and the quiet hum of the city that could faintly be heard in the background.

"You're an embarrassment," she said without turning.

"A good day to you too, *oumi*¹⁰. It's always nice to see you." His voice was a mix of irritation and subdued anger. He wanted to address Maha's threats,

¹⁰ Mother.