

# 1

## IMANI

**I**N LONG GRASS, THE SERPENT IS KING. IF THE LION IS wise, he will take care where he steps. This is how you become strong: by knowing where you are weak first.

“Imani, it’s time.”

I rouse with a gasp, Baba’s lesson fading to memory. The shadow of my twenty-two-year-old brother, Atheer, leans over me. Abovedeck, sailors call, ropes and canvas shift, the ship rocks, and long, ominous bellows reverberate across the Bay of Glass. I lay a hand over my thrumming heart and inspect the bunk below me. Our sister, Amira, two years younger than me at fifteen, is snoring in it.

I sit up. “How long have I been asleep?”

“A few hours. Horns are blowing in the city.” Atheer gives me room to slide down from my bunk. “We’ll find out why on the way to the stables. We need to fetch the horses.”

“Is it wise for you to leave the ship when you’re the most wanted man in Tael-Sa?” I ask him. “Glaedric’s men will be searching for you.” I sling my cloak over my shoulders, thinking

of how we sprang King Glaedric's prize prisoner from captivity last night and sank the royal ship in a blaze. But I should know my brother better by now. Brave to a fault.

"We'll be cautious." He waits for me to pull boots onto my aching feet and check that the bandage on my neck isn't blood-soaked. We retreat through the cramped crew quarters.

"How about a tea ceremony to replenish our magic?" I suggest, sidestepping a tipped-over clay jug that smells of wine.

"Better not to risk the temptation of using it in Glaedric's city." He glances at me sideways. "I already made that mistake."

And it got him arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. As we near the hatch leading abovedeck, the red afternoon light confirms that this Atheer is not the brother of my happy memories, in which we spar with wooden swords in the courtyard at home and later take our horses for a ride beyond Qalia's walls. Neither is he like the warrior-heroes of folklore I've admired since childhood, immense figures who move mountains and swallow dust storms whole and never look the worse for wear. This Atheer is marked by bruises, scratches, and burns; he's gaunt from starvation, his jaw sharp enough to cut steel, his brown eyes unduly large and framed by limp caramel-colored curls. This is my new brother in my new world.

Qayn waits for us by the mainmast, portrait-still in odd contrast to the sailors working the rigging around him and those extending the ribbed bridge from the ship to the pier. The *Lion's Prize* has been moved from where it was anchored this morning into an isolated berth on the Bay's edge, inhabited by barnacled fishing boats and tired, worm-eaten merchant dhows. A place no one willingly comes except to be forgotten.

The sailors repay Qayn's attention with bashful glances.

Though I'm more familiar with the djinni, I'm equally captivated by the symmetry of his angular features, and the way he comports his slender frame with both serious, regal grace and a casual, boyish ease. At dawn, he promised to save my people if I returned his stolen magic. Now I regard him as if he's an oasis. Beneath my relief at finding a life-saving refuge, I feel the primal fear that I am being lured by a mirage to my death.

He greets us with a nod before glancing wryly over my shoulder. "Quite the motley company you've assembled, Atheer."

Taha and Reza lurk in the recessed shelter under the gangway behind me, but the ropes that the sailors used to bind their wrists after they tried to kill us are nowhere to be seen. Sunlight touches Taha's eyes, their color the pale green of drought-stricken fields; it finds the wounds I gave him last night, his split bottom lip and the welt on his cheekbone. How could I have ever craved his kiss? I was a trusting, foolish girl who cared too much what he thought of me. It's clear now that during our entire journey here, he was only manipulating me to make his mission easier. In the prison, I even confessed that I wanted his kisses to mean something. And he was surprised, not because he'd assumed I'd been pretending to like him all along and was moved to discover that the opposite was true. No; it was because the thought of how I felt had never crossed his mind before.

I turn to Atheer. "What are you thinking, letting them go free? They tried to kill you barely ten hours ago!"

They also nearly buried me alive in the prison. I only escaped that place by falling down a chute onto . . . *Don't go there*, I order myself, but I'm already seeing and feeling—*smelling*—the mountain of decaying bodies and polished skeletons I tumbled down in my own fight for life.

Atheer is frustratingly undeterred. “They won’t try again. Their mission orders no longer apply.”

“No!” I’d be embarrassed to air my outrage before the crew if bottling it up weren’t corroding my insides. “The only reason they didn’t kill you last night is because they were cornered! It was never about mission orders!”

“What was it, then?” Taha demands.

“Old-fashioned clan warfare against the ‘elitists’ and ‘parasites’ you despise,” I reply, echoing the hate-filled words he uttered in the prison. “The wellbeing of our nation is nothing more than a shield for you to hide your sordid truth behind.”

The light gutters in his eyes, giving rein to some waiting inner darkness. “You’re wrong. If I’d intended to kill your brother for any other reason, he wouldn’t be standing here now. I’ve only ever acted in our people’s best interest.”

“Is *that* why you ordered us to leave that defenseless woman to her fate back in Bashtal? I suppose innocent Safiya posed a threat to the Sahir too?” I push my cloak away from the dagger on my thigh. “Drop this embarrassing pretense and admit you don’t care about anyone or anything that doesn’t further your vile father’s ambitions.”

Taha’s nostrils flare. “I ordered you to leave that woman in Bashtal because I didn’t want to endanger our lives by alerting the soldiers. Remember Fey?”

My gut suspends at her mention, as if I’ve been thrown from a great height. “You mean my brother’s third assassin.”

“Fey didn’t know about Taha’s orders and was never going to,” Reza interjects angrily.

He startles me; I’m almost unaccustomed to hearing his voice. When I first met Taha’s cousin—older than Taha by six years at

twenty-four—he couldn’t survive ten minutes without telling a crass joke to amuse their squadmate Feyrouz. He all but stopped talking after she was captured by the Harrowlanders in Bashtal.

I feign indifference, pulling my dagger from its sheath to inspect its polished blade. But while I do, I think of my promise that we’d find Fey after we found Atheer. An empty promise now, and I’m the liar who made it. “I remember that Taha forced us to leave her behind too,” I say.

“After *you* got her captured by refusing to follow my orders,” Taha retorts. “It’s easy now for you to criticize me and my decisions. You weren’t responsible for our safety, the mission, or any of the consequences. Not like you care about those. You only care about playing the hero.”

“And you only care to *talk* about fighting injustice,” I snap. “You see Alqibahi people suffering right in front of you and you try to punish my brother for helping them.” I use the dagger to point at him. “You, of all people, should see why that’s hypocritical.”

“Oh, why? Because I grew up poor and scorned?” He leaves the shadow of the gangway, sneering; the daylight burnishes his ebony hair in a fiery crown. “What’s hypocritical is how you’ve ignored the suffering of other Sahirans your entire life. You’re from a powerful, wealthy clan, Imani. Why didn’t you ever help them? They were right in front of you.”

My ears burn; I feel the eyes of the crew on the back of my head. “We donate generously to the needy on festival days,” I respond woodenly, the heat of humiliation seeping down my neck.

Taha grants me slow applause. “Well done. You applied a bandage to a mortal wound and then praised yourself for being virtuous. The Beya clan has almost never gone unrepresented on

the Council of Al-Zahim. Why didn't they do something more substantial to help? I'll tell you." He steps up to me, striking in his fearsomeness and undaunted by the dagger now hanging limply in my hand. "The real sordid truth is that wealthy clans like yours benefit in every way from the power structure that rules the Sahir. Why would they change it, and why would you ever protest their inaction? It's easier to question my conscience and demand that I risk my Scouts' lives and our people's security to relieve your own raging guilt, now that you've realized you've been molded into the very person you denounce: someone selfish, ignorant, and privileged. But you'll never admit that, because it hurts too much to look in the mirror and see the real you staring back."

I suddenly remember something Qayn told me: *You only use others to get what you want, and you are outraged when they refuse. You're like the rest of your kind. Selfish.*

"You've said enough, Taha," Atheer warns.

But he could've said much less and I still wouldn't have a retort for the most shameful dressing-down of my life. His razor-sharp words have skinned me, pared the gristle back, and bared my humiliated innards for all to see. Earlier I wondered how I could've craved Taha's kiss. Now I wonder how he could've tolerated mine.

"You had your orders in the prison," Taha says with less vehemence. "You shouldn't have gotten Safiya involved."

My heart is heavy; my eyes ache. "I was supposed to die alone."

"As you said, Safiya was innocent." Taha sighs, his stony expression softening. "Can we speak privately for a moment?"

I pretend my pulse hasn't sped up at his request. I'm curious to know what he wants from me, but I refuse to reveal that I care

or that I'm nervous. I gesture with my blade at the hatch. "Fine. You go first."

I follow him with my fist wrapped tightly around my dagger. Atheer looks as if he wants to intervene in whatever's about to happen, but he can't. That would only contradict his earlier stance that the cousins no longer pose a danger to us. Instead, he tensely watches as we descend through the hatch into the gloom belowdecks.

I stare at Taha's exposed neck as he goes down the steps. "You got your privacy. Say what you want, unless this was an uninspired attempt to lure me somewhere where you could finish what you started in the prison."

He reaches the deck and twists to look back up at me. "I had to stop you, Imani, or you would've stopped me."

I falter on the second-to-last step, imagining what I would've done if Taha hadn't trapped me in the prison and I'd uncovered his intention to kill my brother. I would've driven this dagger into his chest to stop him, right through his duplicitous heart and out the other side, and I would've hesitated for such a brief moment beforehand that it wouldn't even be worth mentioning.

"Don't lie and say otherwise," he starts, but I shake my head.

"I won't," I say quietly, because no truer words were ever spoken, and that's what makes them so painful. We're two people stuck on opposite shores of an impassable sea. Who put us here? Was it the Great Spirit? Taha's father or mine? Our ancestors? Just us, perhaps? The answer doesn't really change things. Taha accepted his fate regardless of who orchestrated it, and I would've too if Atheer's life had demanded it.

Taha rises onto the step below mine, the sunlight restoring the familiar, arresting brightness of his gaze. "You said you wouldn't accept my apology, but I'll give it anyway. I'm sorry. I

wasn't happy about what I did to you or your brother. I was only trying to shield our people from the invader."

It's an apology I didn't think I'd receive and don't know what to do with. An apology that doesn't triumph over those treacherous waters to reach me; it sinks below the surface just offshore, and that hurts so much worse than if it hadn't tried at all. This is only an acknowledgment of the heartbreaking truth that Taha and I will never find peace together. The battle that raged between us last night will always be only a small twist of circumstance away.

My hand trembles as I stash my dagger. I try to do the same with my feelings as I silently rejoin my brother. Protecting our people is what matters most, isn't it? The fate of the Sahir hangs in the balance while Taha and I stand around arguing. Suddenly a thick fog of fear rises in me. How do I distinguish the truth from the lie, my enemy from my ally? How do I know who or what to trust? Whether I can even trust myself? The fog seeks to enshroud the future completely. I'll have to wade through it, and there's no telling whether what lies ahead of me is the precipice of a sheer cliff or the threshold of home.

A horn interrupts the tense silence. Perhaps Atheer knows that no explanation of what just happened between me and Taha will be given, because he doesn't ask. He shares a kiss goodbye with Farida, the mid-twenties captain of the *Prize* and his sweetheart, and goes to the bridge. "Let's head out," he says. "We can't leave Tael-Sa without our horses."

"After what I did to you, why not send others?" Taha calls after him.

Atheer pauses to contemplate the boats moored across the pier. "I think you and Reza must see things for yourselves," he answers pensively. "Hurry now, and keep quiet."



And then he's gone, and such has always been Atheer's power that people want to follow him. We leave the ship armed with only our wits, except for the ancient dagger hidden again under my cloak, though I pray I have no occasion to use it. After minutes of swift, silent walking, we reach the port of Tael-Sa. It's heaving with Harrowlander soldiers, sailors, and officials racing around in the dry heat to a cacophony of horns, harried by the burden of some urgent task.

Atheer navigates between them with the hood of his vine-green cloak pulled low. Back home he could go anywhere with his head held high. Sahirans called him the Lion of Qalia and shared tales of his skin-changing magic, his bravery in defending remote Sahiran settlements against monsters. But Atheer is no lion here; he's a mouse scampering between pipe-smoking Tael-Sani stevedores muttering about the mysterious blaze that took King Glaedric's ship in the night, and soldiers who've descended upon the port like clouds of locusts on a wheat crop.

At a row of warehouses, the soldiers hastily load boxes onto wagons, supervised by heat-flushed officials in staid brown robes too heavy for the climate. Only when each wagon is sitting low on its axles does the line trundle on, clearing the road for another convoy. These wagons too are promptly filled in a well-ordered procession, and it seems there's no end to the boxes stored within the warehouses.

In the war-scarred streets behind the port, palisades persist, ditches remain half-filled, and the skeletons of wrecked wagons rest under mounds of sand. Many buildings in this area were never rebuilt after the war, the hurled boulders that ruined them still crowning the rubble like gravestones, between which children dig for arrowheads and shattered swords to smelt for coin. Though the ordinarily loud city is quiet, it is the busiest I've

ever seen it. Every person in Tael-Sa must've been lured to the streets by the rumors rippling out from the port; they meander about on false business, gathering to converse in murmurs while absently perusing linen dresses, colorful clayware, and boxes of fruits, never seeming to purchase anything. Wary eyes peep from beneath draped veils and wrapped keffiyehs. I catch a snippet of whispered speculation at a grocer: “—the fire started in more than one place. This was either the work of our rebels or *their* traitors.”

It's conspiratorial talk that could get one arrested, but few soldiers are patrolling. Pairs of them, shouldering backpacks, march past to elsewhere, and the rest are busy erecting cordons to redirect traffic into narrower side streets. Since we left the *Prize*, I haven't seen anyone pulled aside to be interrogated or searched. Nobody has been told to move on; no additional checkpoints have been established to sort through citizens in the king's hunt for Atheer. I expected to see gangs of soldiers separating young men from the crowds and forcing them to remove their head and face coverings. But it's as if King Glaedric has forgotten about us.

More troubling is the veritable army of workers putting up decorations. As we walk, brown-and-maroon banners depicting golden stag heads unfurl over us, and green cords embroidered in white flowers made of linen are carefully wrapped around lampposts and the beams of grapevine lattices. Whoever commanded the city workers to perform this task would be aware of last night's incident on the Bay, so why does King Glaedric care more about decorating the city than about recovering his prisoner?

Suddenly a series of strident horn blasts echoes up the street. Carriages and riders shrink to the left, and the foot travelers

around us withdraw to the sandstone frontages of the buildings, where they stop to look down toward the port. The ground trembles under my boots as I jog after Atheer into an alleyway and huddle there with several others, who squeeze their eyes shut and shield their airways with their head coverings. I decipher the galloping of horses and the clattering of wheels only a few seconds before the convoy of wagons roars around the bend, so loud that it muzzles all else. It thunders past in an explosion of dust, steered with a single-minded fury that demands that any obstacle in its path be summarily cleared.

It's gone just as quickly, leaving a vacuous silence and crushed doves in its wake. With watery eyes, I watch it wind up the incline between the tall buildings like a serpent belly-down through yellowed grass. It's left several things behind on the street. Reza darts in front of the resuming traffic, snatches up one of the cylindrical objects, and brings it back to our group. We gather outside a coffeehouse with pale-lime shutters coated in dust.

"What is it?" Taha asks.

"A vambrace," I answer.

Reza nods, handing the object to me. The hard, boiled leather is a piece of armor that a soldier would wear on their forearm for protection. It's not as well-made as a Sahiran vambrace, which is specially crafted for the warrior who will wear it, but the construction is sturdy enough.

Taha takes it from me, frowning. "Strange," he murmurs. "This fell from the wagons. *This* was in those boxes at the warehouses."

"Better not to hold on to it," says Atheer, starting up the street again.

Taha tosses the vambrace to the ground, and we continue on.

A few hundred yards past the Grand Bazaar, Atheer stops us in a lane behind a tapered correspondence tower announcing itself far and wide with its unique blend of burning spices. It surpasses the city's defensive walls in height; I have to crane my neck to peer at the balcony encircling its peak, where messenger falcons with scrolls fastened to their ankles sweep in, their broad wings fanning curtains of aromatic smoke escaping the large urns fixed into the stone. Yet for all the falcons arriving, none are leaving, and the tower's front doors are closed.

"I need to check something here before we go to the stables," Atheer says. He knocks on the narrow door in the wall enclosing the tower's back courtyard, thudding his fist several times in a deliberate rhythm. It opens, and a curly-haired young man pokes his head out. His eyes widen.

"Brother! I thought you'd been—" He halts, warily glancing at the lane behind us, and continues in a lower voice. "It's been a long time, Atheer."

"Too long, Basel," Atheer replies. "Could we sneak up to the balcony for a minute?"

"Just for a minute." Basel stands aside, palm pressed to his chest in greeting as we filter into the courtyard. "Officials came past this morning and forbade us to send out correspondence; said if we did, our falcons would be hunted down and shot. Didn't give a reason why, only said they'd be back to make sure we're complying."

I suspect the reason has to do with us, but like Atheer, I don't say anything. We pass the wooden mews and step into a large administration room partitioned in two. One section is a maze of shelves stacked with labeled jars of messenger spices for various towers across Alqibah. Depending on where a departing falcon is

destined, the spice blend of its destination tower will be burned in small quantities to allow the falcon to catch the scent. The room's other section is full of cabinets and desks laden with paperwork. On our right, a wide stairwell curls up into the tower.

Basel hands Atheer a lit lantern. "Don't draw attention to yourselves up there," he says. "I noticed soldiers lurking on the roofs of nearby buildings. They all had some sort of buzzard with them. If I were to guess, that's how they mean to hunt down outgoing falcons."

"Appreciate the warning," Atheer says, and Basel returns to his task of sifting through a bucket of scrolls.

Atheer leads us up the stairwell to the breezy top level, cross-hatched with deep shadows and rosy afternoon light, scented strongly of hay, seeds, falcon droppings, and the heady heat of the burning spices. Atheer sets the lantern down on a table by the landing, pulls a bronze spyglass from his jacket pocket, and continues to the balcony railing, where he stops and peers out.

I tentatively join him. Majestic Tael-Sa sprawls around us in squares of sandstone, columns of marble, triangles of green and tangerine canvas, and domes of glittering tooled gold. Its beauty is protected from the green-speckled wilderness beyond by the defensive walls, and at this angle, from this height, I can see directly over them to the outer fields, where the Harrowlander military camp is erected around stone debris left behind from Glaedric's assault on the city. When I arrived in Tael-Sa, the camp was an intimidating arrangement of hundreds of tents in orderly rows. Not anymore.

"The camp's being packed up," Taha says beside me.

I accept the spyglass from Atheer and use it to locate the camp again. A toppling tent swings into view, pulled down by soldiers.

Elsewhere, campfires are snuffed, and piles of stone, wood, and hay bales are loaded onto wagons that roll out onto the Spice Road. There, they compete with convoys speeding into dusk and the long, dense ribbon made up of thousands of marching soldiers.

I lower the spyglass and stare into the horizon, distantly mindful of Taha taking the instrument from me. “They’re all leaving,” I say. “They’re going south . . . to the Sahir.”

“Y-you don’t know that,” Reza stammers. “They’re probably heading to another city.”

“They’ve already conquered every city in Alqibah,” Taha says, pulling the spyglass away from his wet eyes. “There’s only one place left for them to go.”

“Our home.” I turn my head to Atheer, expecting shock and exclamations of disbelief. But my brother isn’t at the railing anymore. He’s gone to lean against a thick wooden beam in the middle of the balcony with his back to us.

“This is what you brought us to see.” I walk toward him, my heart pounding. “You already knew when we left the ship this morning that Glaedric’s invasion had begun.”

“I knew when you broke me out of captivity.” His voice echoes in the eaves, disembodied. “Apart from the soldiers guarding the gates, I suspected that no one would be looking for me today. No checkpoints, no resources or time unnecessarily spent trying to recapture me. This is a race to reach Qalia, and Glaedric understood that the race had begun the moment you freed me.”

“What did you do, Atheer?” Taha mumbles, his shoulders heaving. He pushes away from the railing and shambles forward. “What did you *do*?”

“No,” comes a voice from behind us, “the question now is what will *you* do?”

We look back to see Qayn perched on the railing beside a newly arrived tawny falcon. I meet the djinni's burning-coal gaze, recalling the offer he made me at dawn: help him get his magic back in exchange for a magical army to defeat the Harrowlanders.

"We'll fetch the horses and discuss the rest on the ship," says Atheer. "Take one last look if you must." He collects the lantern and descends the stairs.

Taha and Reza eagerly return to the railing, as if to find that the vision was a mirage. But once they are there, their faces fall, and any remaining hope is erased from them. They go after Atheer, leaving me alone with Qayn, now reaching into an urn of burning messenger spices.

"Don't give me your answer yet." He saunters over to me with something black pinched between his fingers, raises his hand, and blows on the ash. It plumes between us, lifted on a breeze wafting over the balcony. My eyes water; the back of my throat tickles.

"Do you know what that is?" he asks me. "It's the bitter taste of regret. From now on, think of it before every decision you make."

He watches the ash fall. Fear slips down my spine, an old struggle erupting inside me. We're alone. Nobody could stop me from killing the monster I am oath-bound to destroy. But if I uphold my oath, I may doom my people and kill my unlikely ally and my brother's trusted friend. He saved Atheer from torture and death; this time, he's offering to save my entire nation and the people of Alqibah.

The air between us clears. Qayn starts toward the stairwell, speaking to me over his shoulder. "As I said, don't give me your

answer yet. But I suspect you already know in your heart what it must be.”

My lifeblood thuds in my ears. For a long moment, I stare at the soldiers marching under the blood-red sunset, and then I follow Qayn down into the darkness.