

# The Lustrous Dark

LORETTA  
CHEFCHAOUNI

The  
Lustrous  
Dark



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PEACHTREE  
*Teen*



Peachtree Teen  
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For Zaid, being your mother is the honor of my lifetime, and for Hakim, because we are so much alike, you showed me I was always deserving of love.



## LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

The first time I read the Moroccan folktale “The Jealous Mother,” I knew I wanted to use it as inspiration for a retelling. But it was during a peer discussion with my writers’ group about how the fictional mothers in our books reflected, or in my case up until then *didn’t reflect*, our real-life mother/daughter relationships that I discovered what angle I wanted to approach it from. Writing has always been a sort of therapy for me, a way to make something beautiful out of traumatic experiences, but with this book, I decided I was ready to explore the pain of having a parent who struggles with addiction.

While life doesn’t usually give us a choice about who our family is or how they treat us, you *can* decide what you are in the right headspace to read. This story includes depictions of drug abuse, abandonment, toxic mothers, childbirth complications, human trafficking, anxiety and depression, parental death, government-sanctioned violence against civilians, and grief. Please care for yourself if these topics bring up an emotional reaction and know it is more than okay to put this book aside for however long you need to.

My greatest hope is that the magical world inside these pages will feel like someone’s safe space. When you’re stuck in a situation you have little control over, it can seem like the whole world has forgotten you. If you’ve ever felt this way, this book is for you. Because though you may have been told otherwise, you deserve a family who loves you, even if it has to be one you make for yourself. And just because you love someone, doesn’t mean you have to carry the weight of their battles. One of the things I love about Shay is her capacity to look for the best in people despite having her trust betrayed time and again. Some call that weakness, but I think it’s her greatest strength. Hope is the ability to imagine more.

There are people who say magic no longer exists, or that it never did. I think our imagination proves otherwise. Through fantasy and stories, we imagine a better world, and by doing so, we are empowered to make positive changes and impact the future. Tomorrow is as much a magical place as Narnia or Wonderland, or Mekchaouen.

Reader, I can’t wait to see what you fill those pages with!

Love,  
Loretta





*Tidings of peace, little traveler. May your journey be sweet  
and filled with remembrance of the One.*

*—a blessing whispered into the ears of a newborn child*

The woman cries out, the kind of cry that once set every muscle in Shay's body on edge. The kind she's long grown accustomed to. The guttural intonation reverberates off the smooth tadelakt walls, keeping tempo with the flicker of candle shadows. Heavy swathed curtains fail to dull its urgent tenor.

The contraction recedes. Shay dips a cloth into the wooden bowl beside her and brushes rose water across the laboring woman's sweat-slick brow. The mother-to-be sinks back into the nest of pillows stacked behind her, gathering strength.

Shay kneels by her shoulders while Ghita occupies the more intimate position, tucked between the woman's quivering thighs. The apprentice doesn't need to share the midwife's vantage point to know the infant's arrival is

imminent; she feels it stirring in the air like the chant of angels, as if the gates of paradise have slipped open. Though, in fairness, the look on the woman's face would be better described as someone staring down the leagues of hell.

The next contraction hits—after no more than two beakers' rest—and she squeezes Shay's hand like a tourniquet, reopening one of her newer scabs. Shay winces. She earned the cut on her last foraging trip, the results of which are now tucked inside a small satchel at her waist. She meets eyes with Ghita, who understands the unspoken question and nods. With her free hand, Shay fishes out the potent leaves.

"Here," she murmurs, and pushes a pinch past the woman's lips, depositing it in the gap between her gums and cheek. "It's sepaweed."

The woman stops moaning long enough to begrudge Shay a smile and loosens her grip. Shay sucks the spot of blood from her forefinger, a spark of iron on her tongue.

The herb wasn't easily obtained. It grows farther beyond the umbrageous boundary of Al-Ghaba Mayita than most dare to venture, and it is encased with the most vicious of thorns. *Thorn*, *chawka* in the Old Tongue, is a variation of *Shuika*. Shay's given name literally means *little thorn*. Having resolved to never be the burden the word implies, she goes instead by the shorter sobriquet.

Aided by the sepaweed, the guest of honor soon appears. Shay is always amazed by how little newborns are, and how perfect—their alien purple-gray skin and heads shaped like bunya nuts notwithstanding. The baby's eyes are open and bright, drinking in their surroundings with quiet wonder.

*Too quiet*, Shay thinks, as Ghita bends to their ear with a whispered blessing. The congeries of women—sisters, khalat, friends, and neighbors—who hovered all night in patient stasis now spring to life, gathering warm towels and distributing glasses of celebratory tea.

They haven't noticed something isn't right. And why would they when Ghita's undisputed skill and intuition warrant their deepest trust?

But the mother is still and silent, her worried gaze fixed on the small being wrapped in Ghita's arms. She appears to be waiting—like Shay—for the

infant to pick up the wailing chorus where she left off. To cry, to squawk, to mewl. To . . . something, anything.

Shay imagines the mother refusing to take a breath until her child does. She has a mind to confer with Ghita, but she restrains herself. No need to cause the mother undue distress. A delayed cry isn't always a sign of trouble. As the moment drags from hopeful pause to concern to alarm, Shay feels the adrenaline of being trapped in a nightmare, the kind where she can't stop falling.

She sees the moment Ghita decides to act, reads the tautening of skin around the midwife's eyes. Shay's relief is so strong, it leaves a taste like tonic in her throat.

"Everything will be fine," she whispers to the mother, though she's not sure the words penetrate the woman's shock.

Ghita places the baby on a dry sheepskin rug. She rubs garlic oil onto their chest, their tiny hands and feet. The child's limbs are loose and limp. The massage should stimulate the sluggish baby, but they show no sign of being roused. Instead, their eyes slide intractably closed.

"What is the next step?" The midwife's demanding stare traps Shay like a pinned butterfly.

Shay knows to be prepared for Ghita's quizzes. Tests like this are expected as part of her training. But this is an emergency.

Time drips like water. Every thought, every fact the apprentice has studied evaporates, her mind as dried up as her throat suddenly feels. An invisible bell tolls, *Answer, answer, answer.*

"I . . ." Shay's tongue stalls. She peers into Ghita's eyes while their steady calm is overshadowed by a disappointment that makes Shay want to disappear.

The midwife pushes past the apprentice. A choked sound rasps from the mother, harsh and dry and more haunting than any other she's made. Shay's mind clears. Ghita reaches into her bulging medical bag, and when she hands Shay a stack of clover bean leaves and shoves her toward the baby, the apprentice snaps into motion.

*Turn the child's head. Clean the mucus from their nose and mouth.* The commands, while issued inside her own head, are delivered in the midwife's voice. Shay uses the leaves to clear the baby's airways, then looks to Ghita.

“Push on the baby’s chest.” Ghita grasps Shay’s hands and positions them, aligning her thumbs. “Like this.”

Shay carefully follows the midwife’s instructions to apply chest compressions, then blows two gentle breaths into the infant’s mouth. Only when the baby releases a hearty cry does she feel the terror she’s held back. She shakes, crying and smiling at once. Ghita brings the now-wailing baby to the mother’s chest and declares her sex to be female.

The new mother and daughter become the rightful center of the room’s attention. As women stop, offering thanks to Ghita, Shay steps into the background—mostly.

She feels the brush of eyes on her and turns to see a lone male servant across the room of female bodies, his dark gaze as welcoming as the shade of a palm tree in the Mourian Desert. He nods at Shay in admiration.

She looks down. It’s not like *she* did anything. A blush, more itchy than warm, crawls between her collarbones. By the time it climbs her neck to her cheeks and she looks back up, the boy is speaking quietly with Ghita. His posture suggests he is relaying a message. When he leaves, Shay blames the inexplicable twinge in her chest on indigestion.

She busies herself attending to the afterbirth, tidying the room, and encouraging the lingering entourage to depart so the new mother and baby can rest. She looks away as the baby suckles. She pays no mind to the sounds of sweet contentment, the adoration in the new mother’s eyes, pretending it doesn’t tug at something in her chest, a space reserved for all the things she missed, the cycles of memories she doesn’t have.

But Shay holds all those lost moments inside her like a million ghosts.

A hand lands on her shoulder, and she jumps.

Ghita studies her, every line of her rosy-brown face assessing. “Are you well?”

Shay punches her lips into a smile like she’s fluffing saggy cushions ahead of arriving guests. “Of course, I’m fine, khalti.”

Ghita continues to study her, long enough that her cheeks threaten to cramp under the prolonged strain of her extended lips. Long enough that she

becomes certain the midwife has deciphered not only what's bothering her, but exactly why this particular day is harder for her than most. "A servant boy has brought word that Mukhtar Asim is on his way to document the birth. Why don't you take leave for the morning prayer? I hear there's a corner in the servant's gardens where apple grass grows in profusion. Pick some while you're there for the sayeda's steam bath."

It hasn't escaped Shay's notice that the mistress's home, with its lofty ceilings and expansive second floor, is fancier than most of Nezzar's residences. But a separate garden designated for servants? That's a new level of luxury. Regardless, all Nezzarian women are equal when it comes to giving birth, and those who've carried children are accorded a higher level of respect than those with dozens of rings adorning their fingers. At least, it used to be that way, but times are changing—as Ghita often laments.

Shay turns to leave. She's stopped by an urgent tap upon her shoulder and swings back to find Ghita holding out her shawl.

"Remember to keep warm," the midwife chides. "Resting season will soon be upon us."

Shay accepts the garment with a quick nod. Though Ghita's vigilance can feel excessive, it's not unwarranted. Shay has a weak constitution, and the moon pepper leaves she grinds into her daily tea are the culprit. Regardless of how many vitamins she takes to offset the side effects, she often struggles with fatigue, always suffers from some cold or an upset stomach, and is beset with slow-healing wounds that sometimes linger for weeks. But all this is a price she willingly pays to keep her true nature suppressed.

She collects her scarf and steps into the bright light of a dome-shaped chandelier, only to realize that in her eagerness to flee the cloying scene of maternal bonding, she's neglected to obtain directions to this purported garden. How will she get there? The passage is empty at this late—correction: early—time of day, with a few doors left open and more closed. Left or right, either direction ends in another hallway.

"Quite a labyrinth, isn't it?" A boy emerges from the inner shadows of a nearby door. "Can I offer my assistance, Lalla?"

Not any boy—he’s the messenger who spoke with Ghita. He has earthy-brown skin, languid eyes, and dark curly hair trimmed in straight lines that make his ears stick out. His nose is long and wide, and his impossibly full lips remind Shay of rose petals, bringing her thoughts back around to thorns. She twists the scarf in her hands before remembering to answer his question.

“Yes, khoya.” She clears her throat of a flutter, which annoyingly migrates to her belly. “I wish for a quiet place to perform the dawn prayer. Could you direct me to the servant’s gardens?”

“I shall take you,” he offers with more enthusiasm than necessary.

“Oh . . . I would hate to be a bother.” Shay shakes her head with an equally excessive amount of . . . whatever the opposite of enthusiasm is.

“No bother. I’m on my way to do the same.” The boy smiles, showing the small gap between his teeth. Though Shay is positive they’ve never met, his smile has the strangely familiar quality of a place she remembers, if only from a dream. “Follow me.”

Shay returns his smile with a tight grin. It seems a moment alone to calm her nerves is too much to hope for, and if some part of her finds the idea of his company less than disagreeable, that makes him all the more frustrating. “Thank you, khoya.”

The boy walks left, slowly at first before falling into pace with Shay. The clack of their wooden soles meld into a singular rhythm against the smooth marble of the gleaming floor. “My name is Shadi.”

“I’m Shuika,” Shay responds automatically. Her regret is immediate. She waits for the quizzical look she’s come to expect.

To her surprise, he merely repeats it. “Shuika.”

Her name sounds more beautiful from his lips than it has any right to. A *thorn*, indeed. After all, wasn’t her first act in life that of drawing blood? She drained the last bits of her addicted mother’s magic into her infant body, ensuring her own survival and her mother’s untimely demise.

“Call me *Shay*,” she mutters, the flutter that previously occupied her throat replaced with a jagged lump.

“Look at that!” Shadi claps his hands excitedly. “We alliterate. Why, we’re practically name twins!”

“Hmm.” Shay focuses on counting the number of wall lanterns between each turn. She commits them to memory so as to find her way back later—alone.

Shadi leads her downstairs, through a kitchen where women are working wrist-deep in dough and fires glow from not one but four ovens, and out a set of wooden doors into the crisp of late harvest season. They cross a wide terrace made of bright zellij tiles placed in geometric patterns and arrive at a stretch of low grass. Between fragrant shrubs and succulents that grow from clay pots and raised beds and ceramic benches thoughtfully arranged beneath the shade of wide-leafed laurels, Shay can hardly imagine how grand the *sidi* and *sayeda*’s private gardens must be.

The sky holds a cobalt glow Shay would describe as the color of magic, but not the kind forbidden by *Al-Mukhtar*. Not a magic drawn from Snow or passed through tainted blood. Just a stroke of good fortune that comes to those who have wished for something for a very long time.

She inhales the brisk air, not yet cold enough to irritate her delicate lungs, and notices the thin shift and loose trousers that identify Shadi as a servant. Her own woolen shawl feels suddenly heavy.

“Thank you for assisting me, *khoya*.” Shay presses her hand to her chest and dips her head. “But now that I know the way, you are free to offer your prayers indoors.”

“Do you see me shiver?” Amusement tweaks Shadi’s lips at the corners. “My ancestors hail from *Umm Chanala*, home of the eternal resting season, which basically makes me part mountain goat and immune to the most extreme temperatures. Besides, nothing is better for the spirit than praying in nature. Come, you’ll see.” Over his shoulder, he adds, “And call me *Shadi*.”

He disappears behind a screen of pink-flowered oleander, leaving her no choice but to follow.

Shay finds him bent over an ovular fountain made of shiny brass, washing his feet and hands. She removes her leather slippers and does the same. The cool

water makes her skin pop out in goose bumps. After, she wraps her scarf over her hair and begins to untie her shawl to use as a mat. Shadi holds up a hand to stop her. From a straw basket tucked against the base of a tamarisk tree, he shakes out two soft-worn rugs and lays them facing the holy city of Kiddah.

Shadi's voice falls easily into the Old Tongue. The sacred words ring musically in Shay's ears, lulling her into a trancelike space where she's temporarily freed from life's pressures. The constant weight of earning Ghita's approval. The deeper undefined ache that permeates her existence. She finds she agrees with Shadi's sentiment; praying on the ground feels better than a floor. As though the grass and trees and even the breeze that gently tugs her skirt are joining them in worship.

She's still kneeling in supplication when the rise and fall of laughter filters through the shrubbery. The volley of chatter continues as she and Shadi fold and put away their rugs. The meaningless hum of words slide past her ears like wind until the familiar sound of her name makes her jolt.

If her name were less uncommon, she might brush it off. It's not her habit to listen in on other people's conversations. She has never been one to partake in idle gossip. And she certainly has never done anything so noteworthy as to be the subject of it.

Shay's frequent illnesses prohibit her from most social events, and her dedication to her apprenticeship leaves her little time for leisure. If her lack of friends ever bothers her, she consoles herself that it makes her damning secret easier to conceal.

Shay's curiosity tumbles toward mortification as the topic of discussion becomes clear. Someone who was at the birth is recounting to the others how the baby's outcome had teetered in the balance, the way Shay faltered in those critical moments, freezing up.

"It borders on incompetence if you ask me," the tale-teller huffs. "And as someone who plans to have a large family, I find it concerning."

"A large family?" A new voice interjects. "You can't even keep a houseplant alive."

"Rude," the original speaker grunts. "And entirely beside my point."

“Well, I feel bad for her,” another voice says. “I imagine her studies are rigorous. The few times our paths have crossed, she always looks exhausted, like she’s been up all night. And I heard she was orphaned as a baby. So sad.”

“Also, beside the point. Now, you all know I’m not a harsh judge of character”—the first person pauses when someone snickers in response to this assertion, likely to glare at them—“but it’s enough to make me seriously consider binding my own stomach and birthing my future children with my legs propped to the wall.”

Shay’s gut twists, heat scorching the tips of her ears. She might lack Ghita’s wealth of experience, but she’s not *incompetent*. It’s this day that has her turned inside out. Every cycle, she thinks she’s moved past this vortex of emotions, and every cycle, she’s wrong.

She turns to Shadi to inquire whether the garden has some rear exit, but he’s already pushing through the shrubs, oblivious to both Shay’s distress and the conversation causing it. Shay has little choice but to follow him, through a cloud of cloying floral that induces a surge of nausea, and back out to the terrace.

A group of servants, previously engaged in the hanging of newly washed birth linens from a rope stretched across the tiles, stops and stares at them. Most wear guilty looks, but the face of one girl burns with something unsettlingly close to glee.

“What were the two of you doing back there?” She wiggles her eyebrows, undoubtedly fishing for a new scandal to fuel her gossip.

“We were praying . . .” Shadi supplies, confusion thick in his voice and his blank face a testament of innocence.

“Praying?” The girl scoffs. She hides her face partially behind a sheet, more suggestive than shy. “Or having a frolic in the grass?”

She turns her hungry gaze on Shay, who feels compelled to run a hand over her head, thus liberating a stray leaf from the clutches of her hair and sending it fluttering downward as if to prove the girl’s point. Shay’s face simmers.

“You misunderstand, Lalla. I’m the midwife’s apprentice,” she says, which seems to her an airtight defense. It’s common knowledge that midwives seldom

marry, a fact that, Shay realizes when her words fail to have their intended impact, is *beside the point*.

“I know who you are.” The girl throws the sheet back into the basket on the ground and steps around it. “But perhaps you should reconsider your vocation.”

“C’mon, leave her alone,” another servant mutters weakly. “I told you she’s an orphan.”

“That’s not what I heard.” The girl’s lips sharpen to a scythe of a smile, and she takes another step toward Shay that carries the weight of an invisible strike. She casts a wide glance like a net, ensuring she’s caught the attention of the other servants. “I have it on good authority there’s more to the story.”

Shay shifts nervously, wrapping her arms around her torso. Stirrings of dread flutter through her. But there’s no way anyone could know about the hidden parts of her identity. The girl is bluffing; Shay just can’t work out her motive, other than enjoying the spectacle.

Some people are like that. They thrive off others’ discomfort the way the monsters beyond Al-Ghaba Mayita feast upon the bones of the buried, the blood of the wayward traveler.

“Whose authority is that?” Shadi steps close enough to create a barrier between Shay and the other girl. “And please don’t say it’s your khala who barkeeps at the brewery.”

“What if it is?” the girl answers him, her eyes never leaving Shay. “Everyone has a story to tell, or a secret to hide, and the offerings at Dounia’s Delights have a way of loosening the stiffest of tongues.”

“They also have a way of loosening minds.” Shadi chuckles dismissively, and the servant finally looks at him and frowns. “I hardly think the ramblings of those who are drunk or blitzed are worth repeating. Does anyone disagree?”

He looks sternly at each of the servants in turn. One by one they go back to their work, seemingly shamed by the stark beam of his gaze. Shay has to admit she’s impressed. Even more so when, after he turns to face the girl again, she, too, succumbs to his influence, giving Shay the slightest nod by way of apology and backing off.

Who is this boy who by all reason bears little authority yet wields the power of a withering glare with an effectiveness to rival Ghita's?

He takes Shay's hand. His fingers brush the raised lines of her scars before settling firmly against hers. His skin is warm, yet she shivers as if it were cold. She's unaccustomed to having strangers—or anyone for that matter—touch her so unexpectedly, but too stunned to pull away. He tugs her back through the kitchen to a small alcove that serves as a pantry and turns to her.

"Are you well?" He releases her hand, and cool air fills the now-empty space in her palm. Whatever force his stare held outside is gone, replaced with timidity. He looks at Shay like a person watching a glass tipping toward the edge of a table, about to shatter.

But Shay doesn't need someone to catch her. She needs to know what *that* was all about. How did Shadi know that whatever tale the girl had heard originated from the brewery? Shay peers deeper into his face, and perhaps her own scrutiny holds more power than she realizes because his eyes flutter open and closed. His throat flexes.

"Do you know what she was going to tell them?" Shay asks, not sure until he averts his gaze.

"I-it's nonsense," he stammers.

Unease squeezes the pit of her stomach like a fist. "Tell me, please."

"I'm not certain it's the same rumor, but I did hear something while picking up a delivery from the brewery recently. It was about the midwife." He looks down before adding, "About your mother."

Shay swallows, fear scraping her throat like broken eggshells. As far as anyone knows, her mother was a nomad. That's the story Ghita invented. The one Shay has carefully adhered to. A lie her safety—*her existence*—depends upon.

"No one knows anything about my mother," she whispers, reciting a quick blessing for the dead inside her mind. Shay herself has been able to pry only the barest facts out of Ghita over all these solar cycles. Her chest squeezes with new longing and the desperate notion that she might grasp some flash of memory, a whiff of scent, or the notes of a song her mother sang while carrying

her in the womb, but her mind comes up empty, a well from which she draws only shadows.

“That’s the thing. A woman who frequents the brewery has apparently claimed to *be* your mother.”

The shock that grips her is so jarring, she takes a physical step back. Her shoulders clatter against the jars of preserves on the shelf behind her. *That* is not what she expected him to say. “What?”

“As I hear it, a touched one—who I think it is important to note was blitzed off her kettle at the time—told the barkeep a story, and the barkeep repeated that story to her uncle and cousins, who repeated it to more people after that. So, you can imagine, in addition to the suspect nature of the original story, there have probably been some embellishments added along the way.” He speaks with such a deeply apologetic tone, it’s almost as if he’s confessing some grave sin he himself has committed.

“Anyway, this touched one claimed that nearly eight and ten cycles back, she gave birth, but that the midwife stole her daughter and left a puppy in her place.”

“A *puppy*?” Shay asks, not sure on what basis her brain has determined that this is the part of the story that needs interrogating. She tries to think over the strange noise inside her head, like her ears are covered by trumpet shells or her brain is stuffed with poof flowers.

Of course, it’s ridiculous to suggest that Ghita could be capable of such a thing. More ridiculous, as Shadi has rightly pointed out, to entertain the ramblings of someone addicted to Snow—a drug that puts women in touch with ancient magic at devastating cost to their bodies and minds. Most ridiculous of all, the touched one he’s talking about can’t be Shay’s mother.

Snow often renders women infertile. In the rare cases where a touched one manages to conceive, it is rarer still that they carry to term. When they do, the babies are unlikely to be viable. In Shay’s case, it was her mother who died so she could be born, a fact she is constantly reminded of in her line of work.

Especially today.

On the anniversary of her mother’s death.

Shay's birthday.

"My mother is dead," Shay says, the words clawing out of her like a revenant from the grave. She tries to elaborate, but the details Ghita drilled into her until she sometimes forgot they were fabricated now fizzle upon her lips.

"I'm not saying I think the story was about *you*, or that it's true at all." His voice gentles, lowering until it reminds Shay of softly rustling waves. "But if there were any chance, would you *want it* to be?"

Shadi is giving her a funny look again. Despite the skepticism he voiced, she's not entirely sure he disbelieves the touched one's story. She wants to say something to convince him it's false—all of it—but she doesn't trust herself to speak. Afraid she might slip up and somehow admit that, strangely enough, her mother *was* a touched one.

The shelved walls of the pantry seem to slant closer, tightening in. The air grows thin. Shay rushes out, leaving the question he had no right asking her unanswered.

"Lalla!" Shadi strides after her. "Please, allow me to escort you."

"I can find my own way back," Shay says without turning to look at him, startled by the bitterness in her voice. "I'm sure you have more messages to deliver, *hopefully ones that are true.*"

She hurries across the kitchen, not stopping when her hip knocks into a table stacked high with rounds of fresh-baked khobz. Somehow, she takes all the right turns and makes her way to the birthing room as the mukhtar is leaving it. A reedy boy accompanies him, struggling to carry the heavy book wherein records of the medina's lineage are stored.

Shay respectfully inclines her head without slowing, but the mukhtar stops her with a sharp clearing of his throat. He is not the one she remembers Ghita telling her would come, Shay realizes. Not . . . *Asim.*

No, he has the same long robes, white beard, and red cap as every mukhtar she's ever seen, but his weathered face is unfamiliar. That in itself is less than surprising. Al-Mukhtar consists of twelve leaders who periodically trade positions between the four regions of Mekchaouen—excluding the fifth region of the Mourian Desert, ruled by Hazmaggi nomads.

What's peculiar is the look he's giving Shay. Does he recognize her? She stands straighter, holding her breath. This time, the rehearsed answers to questions of her heritage form faithfully in her throat. "Labas, Sidi?"

The man blinks. He shakes his head, smiling gently. "I'm sorry, Lalla. You look very much like someone I know. Are you close to the mother?"

It takes Shay a moment to understand he's referring to the mistress of the house. "No, Sidi, I'm the midwife's apprentice."

"The midwife." His smile slackens. "Hmm. I expect I should introduce myself. I'm Mukhtar Jawad. It's been some years since I presided over Nezzar. Why, you would have been a baby yourself last time I was here."

"Welcome, Sidi." Shay inches imperceptibly toward the door. The mukhtars all make her anxious, with good reason. If anyone cared to search for her name in that massive book the young page is bowing beneath the weight of, they would find that Shuika Fulan does not officially exist. "We are most pleased to host you in our beautiful medina."

"Yes, yes. It feels good to be back." He nods a few times. "I suppose we will be seeing each other again soon enough. A healthy specimen we were graced with this day. Keep up the good work."

He shuffles off, to Shay's relief, his page scurrying behind him. Who calls a baby a *specimen*? She rests her head against the solid plane of the door, closing her eyes for a moment. Her exertion catches up with her like a wolf drooling over felled prey. The toxic herbs in her bloodstream drag against her bones.

Her hand drifts to her depleted satchel, and her heart plummets. After everything, she's forgotten to fetch Ghita's apple grass.



## 2

*If you have irises of unmatched color,  
hurry to your mother.*

*If your hair is light like the sun,  
You'd best know how to run.*

*If your palms have lines that cross or your tongue splits down the middle,*

*If one eye wanders thither or your skin by spots is riddled,*

*The hunters will detect you by the signs,  
They'll spill your blood, hidden treasure to find,*

*They'll snatch you when you least expect.*

*Your poor parents will never see you again.*

*They'll bleed you to conjure spirit guides.*

*Oh, hizoura children, you must hide.*

*Pray you get home safe,*

*Pray they leave you be,*

*Pray your death is quick,*

*And then you will be free.*

*—a schoolyard rhyme*

**T**his is Shay's favorite time of day, right before sunset, when she slips through the back of the apartment she shares with Ghita and into the narrow alley behind it. Fading light makes ripples on the blue-textured walls, giving the illusion of being submerged below the Cerabbi Sea's cool waters.

The strays hear her coming before she's fully closed the door. Shay lifts a finger to her lips in a vain attempt to deter the shuffle of paw steps, the litany of meows as cats of all shapes and sizes leak out from under bushes, within shadowed nooks, and behind piles of garbage, spilling over one another in a bid to be the first to rub against her legs.

"Salaams, Mishmish, Beesoo, Louloua." She crouches to greet a tomcat with a faded orange coat, a tabby missing half an ear, and a white female with a crooked tail, distributing an abundance of pats, strokes, and ear scratches among them. A gray cat with a small white crescent marking his forehead, whom she hadn't caught sight of in a moon quarter, head bonks her for attention. "Oh, Qamar! Good to see you're back, kbida! You had me worried."

Qamar paws the straw tote looped around her elbow. Shay withdraws a thin cloth tied in a bundle and stuffed with a mix of fish bones, chicken skins, and crusts of khobz gone stale. Ghita would be appalled to see Shay "wasting" these leftovers instead of saving them for broth or sausage. She'd further maintain that the cats are better left to fend for themselves, saying Shay is doing more harm than good by conditioning them to rely on humans, abandon their hunter instincts, and become vulnerable to people with inclinations less tender than hers.

Shay tells herself—because there's no arguing with Ghita—that the affection she gives the strays has value. It enhances their well-being rather than makes them weak. In her core, she believes being loved feeds the hunger of the soul. And every creature has a soul.

So, each night after cleaning up from dinner, she waits for Ghita to settle into her corner chair with a book in hand—typically a collection of mystic poetry or scholarly essays—lest anyone accuse her of indulging in something as unproductive as a nap. She won't awaken until Shay goes back in and brews a pot of tea, and then she will uphold the pretense that she was reading all along, an accomplishment for anyone with their eyes firmly closed.

"The offerings are slim tonight," Shay whispers. Delayed by the birth, she missed stopping at the nearest sandwich shop, the one whose kindhearted owner often sets aside a medley of meat bits and trimmings.

As she portions out the scant treats along with more snuggles, she's sure to include those who linger back. Like Lawz, a brown cat with a limp; Sukkar, an older cat who's timid and sweet; and Mushaakes, a small but energetic kitten who relentlessly wiggles to the front of the crowd only to be buffeted to the rear. Fluffy Ghaymah, black Layl, grumpy Absii—Shay has named them all.

She relaxes, soothed by the gentle rumble of purrs, the warm nap of fur between her fingers. By God's blessing, the leavings stretch, her bag running empty long after she imagined it would. She lowers herself to the cobblestones and leans against the wall. Mushaakes spares no time springing into her lap. "Aww, I love you, too. I wish I could take you to sleep in my cozy pallet with me, zine diali, but Ghita would never allow it."

*It would also wreak havoc on my allergies,* she doesn't say. Already she feels the familiar prickle in her nasal passages, moisture pooling in her eyes. Yet, ironically, being around animals is one of the few things that eases her discomfort in the throes of a flare.

A rainbow of fabrics flap from laundry lines strung across balconies overhead, turning Shay's thoughts to the servants from this morning, their gossip. The messenger, who she supposes was less than deserving of her rebuke.

*Would you want it to be?*

Her heart pangs. Despite the threat of being discovered as a hizoura—a person who inherited magical tendencies from an addicted mother—Shay can't help wishing her mother *were* alive. She sighs.

The fact is, Ghita took pity on Shay when she was as desolate as this lot of strays. The midwife gave her a home and an honest trade. *A purpose.* She offered protection, both from those who fear magic and those who would exploit it. The least Shay can do is complete her apprenticeship and make sure Ghita's investment was worthwhile. No idle chatter is going to stand in her way.

With a low *snick*, the apartment door swings open, catching Shay off guard. Ghita fills its frame, if not in height, then in presence. She's unquestionably awake, the soft shadows of dusk failing to smooth the hard set of her face. The felines clear out, fleeing to their respective crannies well before Shay blunders

to her feet. They seem to sense Ghita's disapproval like a charge in the air, as clearly as the sound of thunder, the scent of danger.

Shay scrambles for a reasonable excuse, still upset with herself for forgetting the apple grass. Meanwhile, the midwife's judicious eye has already clocked the tufts of multicolored hair clinging to Shay's skirt, the tang of meat hanging over the alley, and—perhaps the most incriminating evidence—the guilt Shay suspects maps her face as clearly as a guiding star.

"I came to call you to open your birthday present," the midwife says, the last words Shay expects to hear. Current situation aside, birthdays are not something Ghita is given to acknowledging, much less celebrating. She raises a shrewd eyebrow. "Though it seems I missed my invitation to your private party."

Stunned silent, Shay watches the midwife's lips twitch into a playful smile. Even then, it takes a moment for the joke to register. She sputters a delayed laugh, or something laugh adjacent—as close as she dares in case she has misread Ghita's undertone.

Ghita turns, and Shay follows her inside, where a pot of tea is already set to brew over a hot tray lined with coal. Their small dining room has been dressed for two with dainty glasses trimmed in silver, the decorative ceramic plates normally reserved for guests, and a broad platter laden with dates and figs and an array of Shay's favorite cookies. There's triangular briouat pastries stuffed with almond paste, chebakia—thin dough-strips fried in flower shapes and sprinkled with sesame seeds, and ghriba—short cakes flavored with orange blossom and drizzled in warm honey.

Shay hastens to gather mint and sugar from the pantry when Ghita sidesteps her. "Go and sit, Lalla Shay. Please, just relax."

*Relax.* Shay turns the word over in her mind. She can't get a grip on how foreign it sounds uttered from the lips of someone with a severe intolerance to inactivity.

Dazed, she obeys, sitting on a chair and watching as Ghita grabs a second pot to aerate the tea. The midwife lifts the first pot high, silver twinkling from the dimples of its surface, and pours the beverage from one pot to the

other. She repeats the process back and forth and back and forth between two glasses.

Finally, Ghita hands Shay a glass of amber tea topped with delicate froth and recites the first portion of the old saying: “The first glass is bitter like life.”

Shay sips. The sharp flavor and the heat in her throat cut through her sense of confusion. Ghita continues preparing the tea, adding ample mint leaves and an alarming amount of sugar cubes. Meanwhile, Shay can’t decide whether she’s touched or suspicious.

Ghita has always provided for her needs, and Shay is grateful to enjoy a comfortable life. Not everyone in Nezzar is so lucky. No more than a few blocks from their apartment building lies a shantytown, a makeshift string of shelters hobbled together with metal slabs and loose bed linens, inhabited by displaced citizens no longer able to afford Al-Mukhtar’s ever-steepening taxes.

Clothing, food, and education are things Shay has never lacked, but this—whatever this is—she stopped dreaming of back when her only toys were the pinecones she collected on foraging trips and her only entertainment, the games she invented for herself. Ghita has never been unkind, but neither has the midwife been disposed to unnecessary kindness. Shay understood early on that what most families call affection, the midwife would classify as spoiling.

By the time Ghita sits across from her, Shay has drained her first glass of tea.

“The second glass is strong, like love,” Shay recites the second part of the saying as Ghita refills her glass, pouring the elixir from such a height that the steaming cascade forms an even thicker layer of foam.

She can’t say with any confidence that Ghita loves her. Their bond may not go deeper than that of a teacher and her student, but it provides Shay the security of knowing her place in the world. And in a realm on the brink of rebellion, being someone’s apprentice is of greater value than being someone’s beloved daughter.

Or so Shay tells herself.

“You haven’t eaten any cookies,” Ghita scolds, before biting into a piece of chebakia shaped like an elongated rose.

Shay smiles. She likes to think of scolding as the midwife's version of endearment and her bestowal of it as proof that she does, in fact, have some capacity of fondness for Shay. "I was waiting for you, khalti."

The midwife stops chewing until Shay picks a cookie. She chooses a ghoriba, the soft fluff and fruity zest thrilling her tongue, and follows the morsel with a happy slurp of tea so sweet, her toes curl.

Ghita stares expectantly, waiting for an appropriate compliment.

"May God keep you in good health, khalti. The cookies are melting in my mouth," Shay says obligingly, though she herself helped bake the treats, which, like the special plates, rarely appear in the absence of visitors. "And the tea is zwin. Thank you so much for doing all this for me." She stops short of asking, *And by the way, why are you doing this?*

The question sits heavy in Shay's chest, disturbing the airy warmth of her sugar-induced buzz. And beneath it, like a rock she dares not overturn, squirms a tangle of fears, the top contender being that Ghita is buttering her up to deliver bad news.

Is the midwife unwell? Have rebels begun harassing her?

Did these awful rumors reach any of her clients? Has it affected their trust in her?

"Are you ready?" Ghita presents a slim box tied with a glossy ribbon. Shay's hands shake so much, she nearly drops it. She's sure this can't be the first time she's received a gift, but she fails to recall a specific occasion that confirms otherwise. "Open it."

The midwife smiles warmly, her eyes sparkling with an excitement that's contagious. Shay's worries don't ease so much as they sail out the window. Grinning, she tugs the bow, unraveling the ribbon, and whisks the lid aside to reveal the most perfect pair of new leather gloves.

She lifts them gently, inhaling a scent like burning oak, and slips her hands inside. The fleece lining kisses her skin like a delicate cloud. They feel *expensive*. Unlike the common cow hide of her slippers, this feels like skin from the underside of a sheep or a young lamb, sanded to a soft buff and waxed to a subtle sheen.

On occasion, the husbands of Ghita's clients—be they bakers, butchers, or carpenters—offer her discounts out of gratitude for her services. Many consider her family. And that is the only conclusion Shay can draw as to how the midwife afforded such a luxury.

They fit perfectly. Shay blinks back tears, her throat closing, chest aching, like she's coming down with a case of sweats, only less unpleasant. Is this what it feels like to be loved?

"They're for foraging," Ghita explains, perhaps sensing the apprentice's bewilderment. "To protect your hands from thorns. After all, a midwife needs smooth hands; they're the first touch a newborn receives coming into the world."

"Khalti." Shay stares at her hands, riddled with scabs and rough patches that even liberal amounts of Ghita's homemade argan oil haven't managed to soften. She fights the impulse to leap up and embrace the midwife. "You're going to make me cry."

"Bah," Ghita grumbles. "What good will that do but turn our tea salty?"

Shay's laughter is thick and strained. "Can't have that."

"Certainly not." The midwife winks, throws back a hefty swallow of tea, and plunks her glass on the table in front of her. "You did well last night."

"This morning." Shay shoves a date into her mouth to stop herself from speaking further. Part of her starves for the praise; another part insists it was Ghita's knowledge that saved the baby. Shay barely managed to follow directions she should have known from memory. Even the servants who were present came to that conclusion.

*Incompetent.*

Shay shrinks into her shoulders.

A look from Ghita alerts her to right her hunched posture, a bad habit—and a sign of sloth and subservience, according to Ghita's medical books.

"But today you are eight and ten cycles, Shuika Fulan," Ghita continues. *Fulan*. A common placeholder name assigned to people whose identity is unknown. A name for the lost, the forgotten. "It is time to stop overthinking. Stop getting in your own way. You must be more confident. That's why I've decided you will catch the next baby on your own."

Shay chokes, then guzzles tea until the half-chewed date stuck in her throat finally shuffles down. She knew this was leading to something. Her mind, so vacuous at the birth, now readily conjures a thousand scenarios to demonstrate the ways she could fail.

Shay carefully arranges the gloves back in the box and slides the lid on top, buying time to compose herself before looking at Ghita. "When is our next mother due?"

"Before the next lunar cycle." Ghita refills Shay's glass with more tea.

*Two moon quarters. Barely time to prepare.*

The midwife folds her hands, resting them atop the mound of her belly. "The third glass is gentle. Like death."

Shay wonders, not for the first time, if death was gentle to her mother. This is her chance to redeem herself. She already failed her mother; she cannot fail Ghita, too.

She sets her glass down and taps a nail to the side of it, considering whether she should inform Ghita of the servants' gossip. Even if no one can prove she's a hizoura, the suspicion alone could stick to her like the smell of cooking grease on clothing. She'd have to work twice as hard to prove herself to the women of her medina. But really, the rumors should be easy enough to disprove. "Khalti, another benefit the gloves will provide is a barrier against germs . . ." Shay runs her fingertip around the rim of her glass and waits until the midwife hums in agreement, hesitant of ruining her good mood. Although, by all rights, this should be a day of mourning. "Perhaps I could wear them to visit my mother's grave?"

Anytime Shay has asked to pay her respects properly, Ghita has insisted that cemeteries are breeding grounds for disease. She watches the midwife's face, hopeful this time will be different, but when Ghita's expression darkens, Shay wishes she could retract the suggestion. It's a look she's seen once before and hoped to never see again.

She was nine. Ghita allowed her to play with a girl her age, the daughter of a laboring woman. Despite Ghita's instructions not to swim in the lake behind their home, the other girl convinced Shay it was safe. She didn't know Shay couldn't swim.

They only made it waist-deep before Ghita appeared at the shoreline, screaming for Shay to get out, tromping into the shallows, heedless of her long skirts, the same fear on her face then as now. As brief as her exploit was, Shay must have swallowed some of the water as she and the other girl exchanged playful splashes. She was sick the next moon quarter with severe diarrhea.

“I’m sorry, Lalla Shay.” Ghita looks down in a most un-Ghita-like fashion. “Your mother was buried in the part of the cemetery reserved for criminals. The part closest to Al-Ghaba Mayita and most vulnerable to bone-eater raids. Last I checked, her grave’d been dug up.”

“You mean . . .” Shay can’t speak it aloud, but she understands. There is no body, nothing left for Shay to visit. Even this small connection to her mother has been denied her. And the lack of a proper grave site won’t make the gossip any easier to refute.

The midwife goes stiff and sucks in a breath all at once, another look overtaking her face, more alarming than the one it replaces. Ghita has an extra sense, though nothing significant enough to be considered illegal. At least, not yet. She says midwives, as ushers of souls, have a special connection to the spirit world. Their ability—a sort of mental alarm that sounds when a laboring woman needs assistance—is one of the few remaining echoes of women’s natural magic.

Under normal circumstances, Shay would eventually develop this echo herself, but the moon pepper will likely inhibit that, too. She realizes, belatedly, that in her excitement over the surprise festivities, she didn’t add her daily portion of the herb to her tea. Her stomach twists, and she practically tastes the bitter residue on her tongue. She’ll double up on her next dosage. She’s already tired, and there’s little time.

Before the midwife jumps up and rushes to fill her bag with tools, Shay knows the situation has changed. She no longer has two moon quarters to prepare herself to be tested, because the next birth, the one that is to be her initiation into midwifery—is happening now.



# 3

*Official Decree on Magic*  
*Quarter Two of the Second Moon of Tending Season*  
*Sun Cycle Five and Fifty, TOM*

*It is apparent through the natural decline of Shawafa that the gift of magic, hereby defined as the use of powers beyond the ordinary physical and intellectual capacity to influence the natural order of the world, has been revoked by the Creator Himself. Therefore, the use of Shawafa either induced by the mind-altering substance known as Snow or occurring in those born of hizoura blood—or accessed by any other means—is declared illegal in all four regions of Mekchouen and beyond.*

*The creation, distribution, and usage of Snow and any equivalent substances is also declared illegal. Any woman or mutahawil with dormant Shawafa found guilty of engaging in such activities shall be sentenced to a minimum of five years in the dungeons or may opt to transfer their sentence to a male child or relative who will serve five years as a Moulay in service to the realm.*

*It must be clarified that miracles, hereby defined as extraordinary events that cannot be explained by natural laws and are thereby attributed to the divine hand, do not fall into the category of magic, but are rather to be considered proof of God's blessing and affirmation of His approval of the realm's current leadership.*

**THE ARM OF GOD HAS MIRACLES IN ITS FIST!**

**A** cat's distant screech raises the fine hairs on Shay's neck as she waits before the arched blue door of the stable for someone to answer.  
An unknown woman is in labor. Ghita's sense typically reveals

both where her service is needed and who needs it, but this time the mother's identity was unclear. None of her current clients are due. It would be unusual for a mother to carry a pregnancy to term without seeking preventive care, and Shay fears another scenario: one where the baby has come too soon.

She shivers, her thoughts taking a darker turn. Three times in as many solar cycles, they'd been called, not to a birth, but to an empty alley, a field, a barn—to discover the still body of a newborn delivered in secrecy, compromised by drug exposure and abandoned to die. The grim findings came as a blow to the midwife, who had never lost a baby and rarely a mother.

Rarely, as in *once*. But notably, that once altered the course of Shay's life.

After a few rounds of knocking and waiting, Shay has resigned herself to seeking a different stable, when the door opens. A bleary man blinks out, the narrow hall behind him lost in a smear of shadow.

"Labas, Sidi." Shay scoops a handful of luncers from the satchel at her waist. The man's tired eyes brighten. "I require your fastest donkey."

"You have come to the right place, Lalla." The man smiles crookedly, scratching his scruffy cheek. Shay follows him down the hall, where she's immersed in the reek of animal sweat and dung, like being dunked under foul water. "But renting Jarjeer will cost a tenner."

Shay wants to rail against the price hike, but amusement wins her over. "Do you give all your donkey's names, Sidi?"

The central area is divided by rows and into stalls that hold either a sleeping donkey, a few goats, or some chickens. The man lights a lantern from the coals of a low fire burning in a corner hearth and beckons Shay toward a bigger stall, set apart from the others at the end of another short hallway.

"No, Lalla. I named this donkey, because he's special." The donkey pushes to his feet at the stable master's voice. The man tilts his lantern toward the stall. Its light limns Jarjeer's coat, revealing it as smooth and shining with health. "Jarjeer is fed only the finest hay and vegetables and has never been whipped in his life."

"But is he fast?" One look into Jarjeer's big, dewy eyes melts Shay's heart. But where most births occur within walking distance, tonight's destination lies outside the medina walls, and cuteness won't get them there in time.

“I guarantee it.” The man affectionately pats Jarjeer’s rump.

Shay reluctantly hands him a leather note in place of the coins. Pushing back her shoulders, she hopes for the best. “Alright, Jarjeer. I’m counting on you.”

She rides the donkey home to a waiting Ghita. Together, they hook him to their small riding cart, stopping to exchange greetings with the lantern lighter as he makes his rounds. The streaming afternoon crowds of Sultan’s Alley have tapered to a thin trickle with the settling of night. Jarjeer deftly swerves around sellers lugging home their carts, men and women on evening strolls, and boys sent by their mothers to grab a jar of honey, a jug of oil, or a tooth-cleaning stick from a late-night replenishments shop.

A few winding turns, and the street they’re traveling is suddenly blocked by armed Moulays.

As early as one and ten cycles of age, Nezjar’s boys are recruited as pages or soldiers, the latter dressed in red uniforms and given muskets twice their height to carry upon their backs. To Shay’s exasperation, the roadblock forces them to seek an alternate route. They turn around, but not quickly enough to avoid seeing an older Moulay kick in someone’s door.

Apprehension flashes over her. Ghita huffs, the shape of a scowl visible on her shadowed face. It’s happening more frequently: citizens reporting neighbors for being members or supporters of the Citizens’ Naturalist Movement, Nezjar’s arm of the resistance.

These raids on private residences, always taking place under the cloak of night, used to coincide with the spread of a new sickness or the onset of a failing crop, a sure symptom of insurrection. Once the rebels were rooted out, the problem quickly disappeared. But there have been no such crises in recent times. To Shay’s memory, even the weather has remained consistently fair. Loyalty, it seems, protects the realm from ill fortune.

But several moons ago, Al-Mukhtar ruled that any citizen who reports a rebel will be relieved of their next round of quarterly taxes. A preventative measure, according to the decree posted in the square and marked with an official seal. Tonight’s raid means that tomorrow there will be a hanging in the

same square. A practice Ghita, too outspoken for her own good, is unafraid to label as true evil.

Shay agrees, if more quietly. She has as much to fear from the CNM as she does from Al-Mukhtar. If the latter deem her suppressed magic a legal offense, the rebels' view is no kinder. They accuse Al-Mukhtar of employing touched ones for magical favors and believe Snow and all other forms of magic must be eradicated along with the current leadership.

Shay understands how their ideology appeals to those who have lost sisters or daughters to addiction, but it's not her fault she was born with tainted blood. So extreme is their zeal that if they ever gained power, even those with small echoes of magic like Ghita would be in jeopardy. She isn't sure what eradication looks like in practice, but it sure sounds like something that involves killing off a whole lot of people.

She's heard the tales of children disappearing, of course. They're the biggest reason Ghita began administering the moon pepper to Shay when she was so young. Though, in most of those cases, the culprits aren't rebels, but rather treasure hunters or practitioners of witchcraft. Men and women who steal the children off to the desert, believing the magic in their blood will aid their search for buried riches. And the children—who are later found dead, if at all—are often not even true hizouras. Just normal children bearing some unfortunate physical feature that makes them a target of the uneducated.

To bypass the congested detour, Ghita rings a large bell at the head of the cart, identifying herself as a health practitioner. True to the groom's words, Jarjeer carries them swiftly to the medina's outer walls. The midwife recites a blessing under her breath as they pass the soaring minaret of the worship house, where up until a few solar cycles back, citizens gathered quarterly for congregational prayer. The callers' melodious invocations once echoed daily, reaching every corner of the medina.

That was before Al-Mukhtar commandeered the building to house Moulays in training, the best of whom will become mukhtars themselves. Ghita said she fears their next step will be taking away people's right to pray in their own homes. Shay used to doubt this could happen, back when she believed

Al-Mukhtar's powers to be proof of God's anointing. But what if the CNM's accusations are true?

What if Al-Mukhtar really are employing touched ones?

Jarjeer clears the gates. A sudden expanse of land opens before them, spurring the donkey to an even faster pace. Its speed rivals that of a horse. To Shay's relief, their gravel path veers away from the looming silhouette of Al-Ghaba Mayita, a place where trees shoot from the earth like a mouth overcrowded with teeth, every one of them a canine. Even after hundreds of foraging trips, she breathes easier when its hulking border is put well behind her.

A smoke pillar rises over an open field to the west, likely a campfire of the Hazmaggi tribe she pretends to descend from, perhaps making their way to Lahat to visit the Cerabbi Sea while the weather is at its most pleasant. Chants and ululations carry across the hills. A switchback leads the cart through groves of stocky fig and olive trees.

They're passing a rocky pasture dotted with sheep when Shay spots the farmhouse, kindling her anxiety. Will Ghita insist she deliver the baby even if there are complications? Or will she decide the apprentice isn't ready? Shay isn't sure which option unsettles her more.

Stepping from the cart, she's taken aback by a thick earthy scent. It's not unusual for the country air to smell fresh and sweet, but this is more cloying. Something lush and wild and not entirely pleasant. The donkey brays. Shay slips him a small carrot and pats his nose while Ghita unloads the cart. "Good job, boy."

She helps Ghita carry her bags, raising a lantern in her free hand and absorbing the building's miserable state. Vines smother the rough walls. Rogue tree branches jut through cracks in the roof and the missing panes of broken windows. A cry, at once human and not, erupts from inside, starting as a deep bellow that rises to a scream.

Ghita quickens her steps, making Shay jog to keep up. At their approach, the front door flings wide. An old woman runs out, swatting a few insects that buzz around her head. Jagged scratches run the length of both her arms.

Her torn dress hangs loose off one shoulder. She glances back at the building fearfully before she notices Shay and Ghita.

“God is great,” the woman shouts, barreling toward them. “Help has arrived.”

“Are you well, Sayeda?” Ghita drops her bags and reaches toward the distressed woman.

“Don’t worry about me.” The woman shakes her head, not bothering to wipe her tearstained cheeks. “There’s no time. You must save my niece’s baby.”

“Of course.” Ghita peers nervously at the farmhouse. Through the lens of moonlight, dense moss in colors of mold seems to slither across its stones. “Go rest on the donkey’s cart and wait. We’ll return and assist you shortly, God willing.”

The potent, overripe scent intensifies as Shay and Ghita pass through the door and search the dim room for the pregnant mother. Finding her, Shay releases her own startled scream.

The woman stands on a table, arms raised. Tendrils of green smoke swirl from her glowing fingertips. A wide bloodstain spreads like a red sash across her dress. Her feet are bare, more blood puddled around them. Her face bears so many wrinkles, its other features blend together. Her skin tinges gray to green. Her eyes run milky white, voiding her pupils, the hollows around them pitted black, like kohl smeared by weeping.

A touched one? This makes the situation profoundly worse. There’s simply no possible good outcome. The baby is unlikely to survive, and if it does, it will be at the mother’s expense, either case casting a black mark on Shay’s reputation.

The woman moans harshly. Her gaze darts about, unseeing, as though she’s lost in some hallucination. There’s a muffled cry across the room, where an argan tree—*an actual full-size tree*—grows right through the floor and sprawls like a greedy guest trying to finger every object within reach.

In fact, the whole room is overrun with plants and bushes of all varieties. They hang long and loose from the ceiling and spill in waves out of cabinets. High in the leafy folds of the tree, Shay spots the source of the cry and gasps. She slaps a hand to her mouth.

Covered in creamy film, the newborn Shay was meant to deliver lies curled inside a large, round nest. A nest surrounded by branches hung with thorns. Thorns the size of butcher knives. And just above the baby, a floppy purple flower with yellow flecks dangles like a canopy. Shay doesn't recognize the flower, not from the fields around Nezzar, not from the bowels of Al-Ghaba Mayita, and not from any of Ghita's books.

She doesn't move. Her shock is too heady. Then the yellow flecks on the petals begin to vibrate. A low buzz reaches her ears, a sound so out of place in the shade of night that it takes Shay a beat longer than it should to place it.

"Bees!" she shouts in abject horror. "Devil be damned. The baby's surrounded by bees!"

The second she steps toward the tree, the touched one swings around with sudden focus. She thrusts one arm in Shay's direction, smoke pulsing in green flashes from her fingertips. The room shudders. The floor ripples, tiles splitting. A giant root shoots up. It whips around, and before Shay can react, it belts her in the stomach. She stumbles into the wall.

"The baby will die," the feral woman screeches. She leans forward and balls her fists, the table shaking beneath her. A glass frame clatters off the wall and breaks.

"Why, Sayeda?" Ghita sets down her bags and raises her palms beseechingly. "Is something wrong with the baby?"

The woman frowns. For a moment, she looks uncertain. "The moon tells me things. It says my baby is a monster."

"Sayeda." Ghita takes a hesitant step toward the woman. "Your baby is beautiful. You should be proud. Please, let us help."

Shay painfully pulls herself upright, ready to jump to Ghita's aid if it's required.

"Stop right there," the touched one warns, and Ghita freezes. "The moon is my friend. It wouldn't lie. I must kill the little monster."

She thrusts both hands out, and the tree shakes violently. The swinging thorns slice the air around the nest, barely missing the infant tucked inside. The buzzing pitches louder. The baby kicks into crying, every high, spasmodic sob twisting Shay's chest tighter. And tighter.

Suddenly, the woman bends over and grips her middle, her already more haunted than human face contorting further. The shaking stops. The baby's wails settle into a string of low whimpers. Shay breathes a sigh of partial relief, still fighting her urge to run to the helpless infant.

"Sayeda." Ghita moves forward again with careful steps. "You're hemorrhaging; you must let me help you." She convinces the woman to lie on the table and allow her to massage her stomach before turning back to Shay. "Bring me clover bean leaves to measure the sayeda's blood output."

As Shay passes Ghita the leaves, the midwife gives her a pointed look.

"Have you noticed the variety of plants growing around us, Lalla Shay? It's quite spectacular. There's even a patch of sepaweed by the back wall. Won't you fetch a pinch for me? To ease the sayeda's pains?"

Shay dons her gloves, almost missing the midwife's quick wink. She picks her way across the room through the rampant growth.

"Watch out for tater sponges," Ghita calls.

Shay pauses, reevaluating her path, and proceeds with new caution. She learned her lesson about tater sponges at the age of ten and two. While foraging in the early afternoon, she unwittingly stepped on one of the seeds and was rendered unconscious by its toxic fumes. It was to the pitch of night that she awoke, and while Al-Ghaba Mayita is best avoided altogether, this is even truer after dark.

Shay locates the sepaweed, and carefully avoiding its thorns, she harvests the potent leaves. She turns back and spots one of the poisoned pods in her path. It looks innocuous enough, like a small potato with a thin and crunchy outer shell. Only when crushed underfoot will it release its incapacitating cloud.

Understanding washes over her. If one person had need to incapacitate another, the tater sponge could ostensibly be made to release its toxins not so accidentally. Shay stores the sepaweed in her satchel. She bends down, gingerly nudges the seed pod into the cup of her hand, and proceeds with featherlight steps. Her heart beats so hard, she fears the vibration alone may cause the seed to burst.

The touched one has returned to a trancelike state, but Shay has no doubt she'd snap out of it if either woman advanced toward her baby.

“I brought you the sepaweed, Sayeda.” Shay’s nerves spark like struck flint. She notes the clover bean leaves held in each of Ghita’s hands, and despite adrenaline tunneling her focus to a pinpoint, she has the presence to wonder at the midwife’s cleverness. Sometimes called *puppy ears* for their softness, the leaves’ tight-knit fibers make them perfect for filtering small airborne particles.

Shay breathes in deeply. She positions her fist with the seed held inside near the touched one’s face and squeezes, dispersing a black cloud. On the touched one’s next inhale, her whitened eyes widen. She quickly caps her nose and mouth, but it’s too late. Ghita presses one clover bean leaf over her mouth and hands the other to Shay. The barrier will help only so much. They must hold their breath as long as possible.

“What did you . . . ?” The touched one attempts to push herself upright. She struggles to lift one arm, succeeding only in stretching her fingers. Their tips bleed green smoke. The skin of her palm bulges. A small stick flies from the woman’s hand and zips toward Shay’s head.

She ducks. Sharp pain bites into her shoulder blade. She waits for an onslaught to follow. When it fails to, she straightens.

The light in the touched one’s fingers is dying out. Her eyes roll back in her head, and she slumps to the table, limp.

“Hold still, child,” Ghita mumbles through the leaf. The apprentice winces as the midwife removes a thorny spike that she then shows Shay. It’s equal in length to Ghita’s longest finger.

The baby fusses, drawing both women’s attention to the nest. Shay squints through the black haze at the tree. Its writhing branches have calmed. Fat bees crawl lazily around the flower petals. The midwife tries to speak, but she wobbles on her feet.

Shay quickly shepherds Ghita to the front door and guides her through. She sticks her own head far enough out to gulp a lungful of fresh air.

“Wait here,” she tells the midwife. “I’ll go back for the baby.”

“Are you sure?” Ghita coughs. Even as she clears toxins from her throat, concern etches creases onto her face. “The effects of the tater sponge may not

last. If the Snow in the touched one's system counteracts it, she could awaken sooner than expected."

"I'll be fast." Shay leaves Ghita no chance to argue. She fills her lungs once more and plunges back inside. Shielding her nose and mouth with the leaf, she stumbles over rife foliage and mows her way to the tree. Her joints will suffer later, but she can't think of that now. She hugs the thick trunk and monkeys her way up as fast as she can with only one arm at her disposal.

At the tree's crest, she stretches her body across the long branch that holds the nest. The baby coos in a contented state of half sleep, all wiggly toes and dimpled arms. Praises to God, the toxic spores haven't floated up this close to the ceiling. Shay steadies her balance and reaches into the nest.

An angry buzz. A bee swoops down and lands on her gloved hand.

Shay halts, a stop so sudden and complete, her bones feel fused.

At this vantage point, what hangs behind the flower is exposed: a hive that doesn't belong to any ordinary bee. It's dented by two hollow sockets, the skull-like shape both fearsome and unmistakable. *Of course*. Unlike most common bees, ghost bees are nocturnal. And a single sting can prove fatal—even to someone not in the habit of regularly ingesting toxic leaves.

"Hello there, little friend," she whispers, willing her heart to settle lest her shaking hand provoke the insect. "I mean you no harm. I only wish to take the baby, and then I promise to leave without disturbing your hive or harming your colony."

While talking to a bee is not the most realistic strategy, Shay doesn't know what else to do. She waits for burning pain to pierce the leather of her glove, spreading numbness up her arm and through her body. Before she can shimmy back down the tree, she'll be completely paralyzed. Cold sweat seeps across her hairline.

The bee walks in a small, agonizing circle before it takes off and returns to the hive. Shay waits a bit longer, fearful the insect is simply seeking reinforcements. Once she's convinced she's been spared the wrath of a murderous bee army, she scoops the child to her chest.

A boy. One who looks quite healthy despite the drugs he's been exposed to. A true miracle.

He blinks at Shay and roots hungrily at the cotton of her dress. Cradling him close, she makes the nonsensical sounds people make when soothing restless babies. Though most of the black particles have dissipated, she continues taking shallow, sparing breaths until she clears the farmhouse. She pauses outside the door with a glance back at the kitchen table. The touched one remains there, still held dormant by the effects of the tater sponge. For now.

In the yard, Shay finds Ghita crouched over the body of the khala who was so frantic when they arrived. The midwife is softly reciting passages from the old scripture, while the khala, no longer frantic, lies still amid the grass, seemingly napping. Ghita looks up, her eyes damp and sorrowful, only smiling when she notices the baby. "Oh, thank our merciful God. The child is well."

Ghita stands, while the other woman remains unmoving on the ground. Even with the khala's eyes glazed in a vacant stare, it takes a stunned moment for Shay to register the absence of her breathing. "What happened?"

"She was stung by ghost bees." Ghita wraps her arms around herself and scans the quiet countryside as though fearing more of the dangerous insects will appear.

Shay looks closer at the dead woman, inspecting the multiple red welts that pattern her face and neck. She shudders, but quickly reins in her horror. It's not the worst death she's borne witness to. "Surely from God we come, and to Him we shall return."

The words bring her comfort, but . . . Shay can't help feeling guilty that the bee refrained from stinging *her*. The question is, why?

"Ameen." Ghita bends and strokes her fingers down the woman's eyelids to close them. "I hate to leave the body, but we must get away while we can."

"What will we do with the baby?" Shay wonders aloud, jiggling the fussing infant in her arms. Staring down at him, she scans the pink newness of his skin for some visible mark of the magic that must have saved him. By all odds, he should not have lived.

A loud crunch brings their focus back to the dead woman. Shay's stomach goes rubbery as the corpse withers before her eyes.

Her skin shrivels, hair and fingernails falling away, her insides melting with a sound like bubbling stew. Soon, nothing more than a desiccated mummy remains. Thin lines of honey dribble from her dried-up mouth and empty eye sockets.

*Glory to heaven.* The sheer number of stings must have intensified her body's reaction to the venom. It's still not the most gruesome death Shay has had the misfortune of seeing, although it ranks closer now.

"We'll worry about that later," Ghita says, answering the question Shay forgot she had asked. The midwife steers the apprentice by her elbow toward the waiting donkey. "Hurry now, Lalla Shay."

They've barely taken a seat when the silhouette of the touched one pops into the farmhouse's doorframe. Swaying unsteadily, she leans her forearm on the wooden jamb. "What are you doing? You fools! Don't you see that the baby has to die? Give it back to me this instant!"

"Calm down, Sayeda!" Ghita shouts from the cart. "The baby is already dead. We only wish to give the child a proper burial."

Shay tugs the baby closer. She gives him the pad of her finger to suckle, lest his cries disprove Ghita's words.

The touched one's age is difficult to place. There's something youthful in her voice, in how she carries herself. While her sagging skin and wiry hair, the bend of her body under its weight, suggest a woman advancing in age, and not gracefully. Yet she not only survived the rigor of childbirth, but she has strength enough left to stand there, issuing her bloody demands. Shay cannot understand it.

"Dead? Are you sure?" The woman wobbles her head and pauses. She looks back at Ghita, her white eyes gleaming with deadly intention. "The moon says you're a liar, khalti."

The touched one's fingertips kindle green.

Shay clucks her tongue twice. "Go, Jarjeer. Faster than you've ever gone."

The cart jolts forward. Shay shoots a backward glance at the touched one. She looks as thin as the moonlight surrounding her, her glowing hands thrown toward the sky.



## 4

*The truest lover is a friend.*

*The truest gift is trust.*

*The truest misfortune is false belief.*

*The truest leader is a seeker.*

*—the poet Rimkin*

J arjeer rockets down the path, hooves clacking, gravel popping. The ride starts smooth, but soon the ground rumbles. Quakes cant the cart side to side in steepening arcs. Shay's stomach sloshes. More rumbling. A louder sound, like fabric ripping.

She peers fearfully over the side rail, feeling the prickle of cool night air against her cheeks. Vines as thick as snakes shoot from the ground and curl like hooks around the spokes of the wheels, thwarting their spin. Shay looks back to the farmhouse.

The touched one has moved from the door to the lawn. She reaches after them with outstretched arms, fingers a distant firefly glow. The earth hums with malice.

The mother shouldn't be able to access her Shawafa. The baby should have

siphoned it. There's no other way to explain his survival. Glory to heaven, how much Snow did the woman take?

The midwife digs into her bag and hands Shay the one tool the apprentice has never seen put to use. The knife—carried in case a mother passes and the baby requires emergency delivery—summons a visceral chill, but it's the sharpest instrument they have.

Shay carefully trades the baby off to Ghita. She hangs precariously over the cart as it bumps up and down, lurching forward in bursts. Despite her valiant hacking, three new vines sprout up for every one she chops down. Sweat puddles at the small of her back, gluing her tunic to her skin.

The donkey stumbles as a vine climbs up his leg. The animal bucks free, dipping their bodies low enough to sniff the leafy grass and nearly overturning them. Shay clings to the railing until the cart rights itself.

She stretches forward and caresses Jarjeer's back. "Please, Jarjeer, you must run harder."

At her words, the animal takes off again, building to an impossible speed that blows Shay's hair to tangles. Jarjeer flies them away from the farmhouse, away from the touched one. Away from the reach of the magic she impossibly continues to wield. Only once they safely clear the gates of their medina does the animal slow to a soothing clomp. Shay and Ghita are shell-shocked, unable to utter a single word between them.

Back at their apartment, Shay waters Jarjeer before walking him back to the stables. She wonders how anything, even the influence of a powerful drug, could warp a mother's natural instinct to the point that she'd attempt to murder her child. Would her own mother have turned on her the same way if she had lived? This thought, held to the light of the worrisome rumors, hints to something Shay's loyalty to Ghita won't allow her to probe.

Although they weren't paid for tonight's birth, Shay dishes out extra coin to the stable master in compensation for the limp the bewitched vines inflicted on poor Jarjeer. She then borrows a pail of milk from the lactating goat of a neighbor who regularly borrows tomatoes from their rooftop garden. Shay hopes her foresight will please Ghita, never imagining she'll find the midwife

seated by the hearth, sleeping robe draped open, with the baby happily latched upon her swollen breast.

Shay gasps. “Are you with milk, khalti?”

“Oh yes.” Ghita blinks at her sleepily. “It’s another echo passed to midwives for the unlucky cases when a baby is rendered an orphan. Surely you remember this information from your studies of maternal mortality.”

She doesn’t phrase it as a question, causing Shay to doubt her own surprise. Such an important fact would not be easily forgotten, but this is their first time caring for an endangered infant.

Shay removes her leather slippers, opting to leave off her bamboo house shoes in preference of the bare feel of clay flooring under her feet. She makes her way around the uneven and loose tiles she knows by heart, unhooks a latch in the floor, and stores the goat milk inside a small cellar space to keep it cool.

But . . . Ghita called the child an *orphan*, which isn’t exactly correct.

His mother seemed very much alive when they departed. Shay almost asks if the midwife also nursed her, but thinks better of it. It doesn’t really matter whether she did or didn’t. Shay isn’t her daughter either way. She’s only an apprentice. And thankful, of course, to be provided such an opportunity.

“Can I get you anything, khalti?”

“Yes, Lalla Shay, thank you,” Ghita murmurs, gently rocking the baby, his eyes drifting contentedly closed. “Some tea would be wonderful. Add a bit of morning thistle. It will aid the flow of milk.”

Shay sets a pot to boil and grabs first the jar of morning thistle and then the moon pepper she forgot to take earlier. She sniffs the nearly empty jar, the bitter scent almost comforting in its familiarity, and for the briefest moment, she wonders what would happen if she stopped taking it.

Not how it would feel to access magic, but how it would feel if the poison holding her body in its grip were to loosen its hateful fingers. If she no longer existed on the brink of exhaustion.

If she were *well*.

Dismissing such foolish thoughts, she shakes the last of the leaves into her glass, enough to make up for the dose she missed. She drafts a mental reminder to forage more tomorrow.

“How did the baby survive?” Shay asks Ghita. For reasons she can’t explain, it suddenly seems important she understand the answer.

“It’s rare, but not unheard of,” Ghita answers distractedly. “You’re proof of that.”

While that is true, it’s not the same. Her throat tightens. “But my mother . . .”

“Touched ones don’t usually give birth to boys. Did you know that?” Ghita says more decisively, then continues without waiting for a response. “I bet that has something to do with it.”

It seems a very loose correlation. It would make more sense to Shay that the mother may yet be in danger once the drugs clear her system and she inevitably crashes. “Are you sure she’ll be well? The mother?”

“Not as long as she keeps using.” With a tired sigh, Ghita carries the sleeping baby to a basket lined with sheepskin, a makeshift bassinet. “But her bleeding was under control when we left her.”

They sit by the hearth, cotton-weave blankets snuggled over their laps, knees tipped close together, not quite touching. Most times, the apprentice cherishes such moments, the calm quiet between them an approximation to tenderness. But tonight her mind is neither calm nor quiet. Shay doesn’t understand how Ghita can be so cavalier about all this.

Shay sips her tea, the sugar and mint unable to mask the sour tang of the moon pepper on her tongue. “What kind of Shawafa did she have?”

Every woman has one, a unique magical gift buried deep inside, almost beyond reach. There was a time, known as the Time of Women, when Shawafa was considered as natural as any other aspect of life. But now is the Time of Miracles. Or, as Shay secretly thinks of it, the Time of Men, for there are noticeably no female rulers. Of course, nothing in any history book Shay has read suggests there ever were, but sometimes she thinks, with all that power, there must have been.

Nowadays, only Snow activates women's Shawafa, and it does so temporarily. The classification of magic types isn't readily available information, but Shay has gathered some details from secondhand accounts, whispers of the ancient magic it awakened, the cycles it stole away. If the moon pepper that suppresses magic is a poison, then the Snow that awakens it is a plague.

"Hadiqmin." Ghita peers at the steam rising from her glass as if she might scry the future in its unfurling tendrils.

"The ability to control plants?"

Ghita nods. "Quite amazing when you think about it."

The overgrown farmhouse surfaces in Shay's mind, the remembered smell of overripe vegetation. She hears the frantic buzz of ghost bees, the bubbling flesh of a stranger's corpse—impressions sure to darken her dreams tonight and for many nights to come.

"Should we . . . ?" Shay shifts nervously in her seat. She swallows hard. Unlike harmless echoes, Shawafa is the illegal form of magic. If they report the incident, the mother could be arrested. Whereas, if they don't tell, perhaps the baby could be returned when it's safer. Maybe they could help the mother purge from Snow. "Should we do something?"

"Us?" Ghita shakes her head and chuckles dryly. "Every passing day sees more touched ones on the street. It's become an epidemic. Meanwhile, our esteemed leaders are preoccupied with taxes and rebels. Unfortunately, if they keep ignoring the problem, I see it only getting worse."

Which problem? The spread of addiction? Or the children being born to addicts? Before tonight, Shay didn't think the latter was possible, not without the resulting death of either the mother or the child. "Then what *will* we do with the baby?"

"I suppose I'll care for him."

The same way she cared for Shay? But . . . the child's mother is still alive. That makes it more complicated. The things the messenger told her the touched one had said about her baby being stolen suddenly seem less far-fetched.

“Someone told me my mother could be alive.” Shay realizes she’s spoken out loud only when Ghita’s eyes widen. Does Shay imagine the sharp intake of her breath?

“You stuck to our story, I hope,” the midwife admonishes. “That your mother was a nomad who was left behind by her tribe because she was too sick to travel.”

“And she died during my delivery,” Shay recites to appease her. If the first part of the story is a lie, could the second part also be? Doubting Ghita, even in the confines of her thoughts, feels like a betrayal, but the parallels between this child and herself are too striking to ignore.

“Congratulations are in order.” The midwife abruptly changes the subject, her face and posture shifting to a businesslike formality with her tone. “A midwife in Kiddah has unexpectedly passed away without an apprentice to appoint as her successor. I recommended you as a replacement and received word you’ve been accepted.”

Shay’s head spins. How long ago did Ghita recommend her? “You . . . want me to move to Kiddah?”

“The next caravan leaves in three days.” Ghita swallows the last of her tea and rises. She opens a nearby drawer, and the next thing Shay knows, the midwife is handing her a crisp caravan ticket that smells of fresh ink and unceremonious dismissal.

“I . . .” Shay stares at the parchment for a moment, the sharply penned details of her departure blurring as her vision quakes. She looks up at Ghita, unmoored. “My training . . .”

“Is complete.” The midwife doesn’t meet Shay’s eyes, seeming to address some invisible entity perched upon her shoulder. “You are competent and caring. I’m confident you will be successful in your new post.”

They are words Shay has longed to hear, has striven for with all her being, but they feel hollow. Only earlier today, the midwife informed her she had two moon quarters to prove herself. Things seemed more imminent once the birthing call came, but . . . the child was delivered without Shay’s assistance. Why, she wasn’t even there.

“You saved him,” Ghita says, as though Shay’s thoughts were wholly transparent. “Very brave, if you ask me.”

A sound rises from Shay’s throat, one that could signify agreement or dispute, and she’s completely unsure which expression she intends. Even if she were convinced she deserved this, she finds herself aching for *more*. For something she can’t quite translate into words.

“I must get some sleep before Sami wakes again. He’ll likely be extra fussy until he acclimates to no longer receiving Snow from his mother’s bloodstream.” Ghita turns, effectively buttoning up the conversation.

Shay cups her cheek like someone on the receiving end of a strike. *The baby already has a name*. Her heart pangs for the child, sure to grow up as she did, without a mother. When he’s older, will Ghita tell him the truth about how his mother tried to kill him? Or will she lie to save his feelings?

“Wait,” Shay calls out. This is all too sudden. It feels so final. And it is impossible for her to imagine her future when so much of her past remains shrouded in mystery. She will always be looking over her shoulder for it, like a shadow without a shape. “What was her name?”

Shay doesn’t specify whom. She’s asked the question a million times and never gotten a straight response.

Ghita stops, keeping her back to the apprentice. This time, she answers, “Hind.”

With that, the midwife shuffles off to bed.



### *The Creation Myth of Mekchaouen*

*It is maintained that God created the world, an endless sprawling valley of the lushest greenery and most vibrant gardens. That He created humans to live off the land and rule over the animals. The first people had no language and communicated using a primitive system of pointing and grunting that lacked any nuance or depth. It is said that one of the angels took pity on humankind and taught people to speak in the language of paradise itself.*

*This had undesired consequences. For the language was so beautiful, it distracted people from engaging in the activities necessary for their survival, like hunting, gathering, and mating. All humans wanted to do was talk and listen to others talk. To sing, and listen to others sing.*

*Spellbound women were so touched, their tears fell in an unceasing flow that accumulated and grew into the Cerabbi Sea, covering one third of the world in water. Men were moved to levels of faith so zealous, their hearts would burst into flames, their bodies combusting. Thus, the ashes of their bones became the sands of the Mourian Desert and covered another third of the world.*

*With the livable land reduced to one third its original size and the population dwindling, God spoke to the people. He ordered humans to create a new language and reserve the Old Tongue for prayers and celebratory songs alone. The Marabouts were ordained as keepers of the Old Tongue and tasked with building the sacred prayer house in the center of Kiddah.*

*God is then said to have separated Nezzar from Kiddah by creating the Umm Chanala Mountains. He prescribed that those who are able should make a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime, traveling to the frigid mountains and spending a quarter there with the*

*Marabouts at the holy institute. Seven days devoted to spiritual learning and drawing close to their Creator.*

*Time passed, and people were sent to explore the desert and determine if it had any end, and though no end was found, some preferred the desert life. And so, the first Hazmaggi tribe was born. Likewise, more people set out on boats to explore the Cerabbi, and these became a tribe of sea nomads, the B'hamu. And so, the realm of Mekchaouen was divided into five unique regions, its people connected as one human family.*

As daylight crowns the horizon with a white lip of promise, Shay dresses in a comfortable djellaba, evaded by sleep. She brings along the caravan ticket, her pocketknife, and a burning need for answers as she slips through the narrow bends of Sultan's Alley. Three days is no time at all to prepare for her life to be upheaved, and the foraging landscape in Kiddah is foreign to her. It is crucial she harvest enough moon pepper to last until she's able to grow her own.

In the twilight shadows that hang between the blue facades of buildings, stall owners roll ware-laden carts over the cobblestones. The rich aroma of woodsmoke billows from the communal ovens warming up. Steam infused with eucalyptus drifts from the bathhouse. Passing the tannery, Shay crushes a handful of mint. She presses the fragrant leaves to her nose, veiling the noxious odor of curing hides.

Will she carry the imprint of these sights and sounds with her to Kiddah? Or will they be replaced by the new wonders awaiting her in the holy city? The air grows tight as she approaches Al-Ghaba Mayita. Dipping into the tree line of tall pines, Shay feels the scrape of hungry eyes. She whispers a blessing to ward off whatever might be watching through the thin skin of morning mist.

*Hind.* In the quiet of the woodland, she meditates on the name that has possessed her thoughts since it was issued from the midwife's lips. She cradles it in her mind like a fragile egg, tracing each letter as though she could stitch them into the fabric of her soul.

For the first time in her life, Shay allows herself to indulge in a waking dream, inventing an alternate set of circumstances. One where her mother

lived, where instead of being a midwife's apprentice, she learned some other trade. Perhaps she'd be whipping up delicious treats in a confectionary or sewing fine garments in a boutique.

The moon pepper patch is easier to reach than most of the spots Shay frequents, and at this season of earth's cycle, the plants should yield a sufficient amount of the suppressant for her needs. At least, that's what she expects.

Instead, she finds that the stems of the entire patch have been stripped bare of leaves down to their roots. Shay gapes at the ravaged plot, unable to make sense of it. A sinking dread, mixed with the smallest touch of relief, creeps over her.

The culprits could be rabbits or deer, and yet, for her life, Shay can't remember the last time she saw a rabbit or a deer in the forest. At times she's heard *something* moving through the underbrush, and she once spotted a creature that could have been a monkey or a goat munching bean fruits in the branches of a rune tree. But she's certainly never crossed paths with another human, and what would anyone else want with moon pepper? It tastes like the devil's piss and has only one redeemable value.

Panic makes it hard to breathe. Shay doesn't know how long it would take for her latent powers to manifest, what those powers would look like, or how difficult they'd make it for her to continue hiding her hizoura status. She stares at her hands in the splintery light through the thatched branches as if they might start glowing any moment. When they fail to do so, she scours the patch, double-checking that no leaves were left behind.

"Ouch!"

Shay's gaze snaps to the empty thicket. Her heart blooms into her throat, beating slow and heavy. "Who's there?"

Shrubs rustle and shake. Fingers come twisting through vines, and the hands attached to them part the heavy stalks. Shay tenses, her spine wooden. A body emerges from the shadows and brambles, stumbling out as though the forest has birthed him. The familiar boy swats frantically at the legs and sleeves of his servant uniform.

This production goes on for a few moments before he looks up sheepishly and grins. Shay exhales in delayed relief. Then her eyebrows tug together. She doesn't grin back, her lips leveling into a severe line. Why is *he* here?

He walks toward her, thrusting one arm out ahead of him as he shoves his sleeve up to his elbow. "I've been bitten. By a fiddler ant, I think."

The white blister ringed in angry red that protrudes from his wrist would suggest his hypothesis is correct. It does not explain why he's here, but the green stain tinging the skin around his fingernails is a big enough clue that Shay's mouth goes dry when she sees it. She knows that stain well. Knows that even with frequent scrubbing, it takes several days after harvesting moon pepper for it to fully wash away.

"What are you doing out in these woods in the first place"—she pauses, swallowing past a nest of nerves as she rummages through her recent memory for his name—"Shadi?"

She smiles now, if only to cover for the fear she hears in her own voice, and quickly looks away from his hands. Her mind has already dismissed the idea that he might be a hizoura, might be here for the same reason as her. The whole patch is gone. Shadi carries no satchel, and his pockets are certainly not deep enough to hold such a large number of leaves.

No, Shay has already formed her own explanation. If the rebels have realized moon pepper suppresses hizoura magic, they might have destroyed the patch to prevent those who wish to hide their identity from doing so. Hizouras would then be easier to pick out and "eradicate." What better way to determine who to keep a closer eye on than spying on this location and keeping track of who comes around?

"I . . . umm . . ." Shadi peers into the darkness that furls like drapes in the hollows between the trees. "I like to slip away in nature sometimes. To clear my head."

Shay scoffs, though inwardly. There isn't a citizen in Nezjar who slips away to the forest for leisure. Besides, Shadi doesn't seem to have a thought in his head to clear it from. For a Naturalist, he doesn't come across as very cunning. Unless it's an act to lower her guard, which would be cunning indeed.

She nods toward his swelling wrist. “Well, my advice is to find a banana peel to rub on that. And the next time you feel the urge to spend time in the woods, chew on a raw clove of garlic first. It won’t taste great, but the fiddler ants will go out of their way to avoid you.”

“Really?” Shadi smiles gratefully as he folds his sleeve carefully down over the bite. “Thanks!”

Shay shakes her head, finding it difficult to see Shadi as any kind of threat. Perhaps she is simply a poor judge of character.

“Can I walk you home?” he asks.

Shay stiffens. Notably, he hasn’t asked her why *she’s* here in the forest. A normal person would ask. But, if her theory is correct, he would *already know*. The rumors must have put him on her scent. In fact, he probably only told her about them so he could assess her reaction. And now he’s trying to find out where she lives. Oh, he’s *good*.

“I’m not going home.” She has somewhere else she needs to go. Something else she absolutely must do before she can leave her medina behind. “Besides, you really should get that bite taken care of before the swelling gets worse. You wouldn’t want to lose a finger.”

Panic flashes in his eyes, and Shay has to restrain a laugh. *Did he really fall for that?*

“It was nice running into you again, Shay,” he calls out as she rushes away, provoking her to glance back. He’s rolled his sleeve up again. His gaze shifts from looking down at the insect bite with comical concern to looking up at Shay with an expression she can’t read. Is it worry? Embarrassment?

Filtered sunlight through the dense wood washes his face in an amber glow. In the contours of Shadi’s guileless smile, she fails to find any trace of the hate she would expect from a Naturalist.



Nearing the medina square, Shay sights armed guards. They mill the perimeter, looking as formidable as small boys toting large guns can. As if the fact that the

herb she relies upon has been plundered weren't making her nervous enough, hammers ring in the distance, the shouts of men at work, no doubt erecting gallows.

Shay shudders, remembering last night's raid and the glimmer of another scene from the more distant past. She ducks her head and flees the hulking shadow of the wooden apparatus, as if she could outrun the sharp teeth of memory.

She soon makes her way to the seedier side of the medina, its abandoned buildings rendered soft in the pink haze of early light, and tucked amid them, her destination. Morning breeze teases the fabric of an elaborate tent, sewn in patchwork design and bedecked with glittery sequins.

Shay's heart pulses like a living thing inside her throat.

*Dounia's Delights.*

She doesn't believe—*can't believe*—Ghita would lie, yet the vagueness of the midwife's narrative certainly suggests she's hiding something. Shay thought she would stay in Nezzar forever. She'd care for Ghita as she grew old, and only after the midwife had squeezed out every last drop of a long and satisfying life would Shay have taken over her position.

The brewery stands as quiet as a secret. The thick exterior rugs used to deter nighttime intruders have been rolled up. The heavy stones that hold them down are pushed aside. The door flap hangs open and untied. It's early. Shay thought she might have to wait around a while, but is the barkeep who heard and proceeded to spread the touched one's claims about her stolen baby already here? And what will Shay say to her if she is?

She has no idea what form the answers she seeks will take. She only knows with sudden conviction that not being a burden isn't enough after all. Shay wants to be loved, to fill the mother-shaped emptiness inside her.

Stiff corners press between her shoulder blades. The ticket wedges in the hood of her djellaba, a practical feature of the garment that does double duty as a head covering in harsh weather and a spacious storage compartment when needed. She brought the parchment with her as though it might otherwise disappear. To Shay, it is a symbol that she has achieved success in the eyes of

her teacher—and, in so doing, lost her position in the only place she’s ever called home.

If there’s any possibility, however small, that the claims have merit, Shay owes it to herself to investigate the matter. Before she’s shipped off on a caravan to Kiddah, where she’ll have to start all over, having forfeited any chance at understanding where she’s from. Heart wild, she nudges the flap wider and steps into the establishment proper.

Thick sugary clouds swirl above a handful of dinged-up tables. A couple of middle-aged men smoke shisha and play a game of tuti in the back. Shay isn’t sure what she expected, but the reality is less than exciting, although the atmosphere would presumably enliven after dark.

Shay sidles up to a long bar counter. She quietly takes in the strange and colorful bottles that line the shelving unit behind it. The barkeep is balanced atop a wooden stool, inspecting the bottles and replacing those found empty. Shiny locks smoothly drape her shoulders, their straight press no doubt achieved by wielding a comb dipped into a jar of lava procured by B’hamu divers—rumored to be part merfolk—from volcanic caves under the Cerabbi Sea.

“Labas?” Shay tempers the volume of her greeting but still manages to startle the woman, who wobbles unsteadily before climbing down from the stool.

“Labas, Lalla. I didn’t hear you come in.” The woman slaps a hand to the bodice of the stylish blue takchita she wears cinched with a thick belt. She has richly dark skin, lushly flared curves, and her wide eyes are rimmed in kohl. Idly, she massages the palm of one hand with the other and flexes her elegant fingers. “I’m afraid the brewery is not yet open for business.”

“But you have customers . . .” Shay glances uncertainly toward the back table.

“My uncle and brother,” the barkeep says dismissively.

When Shay doesn’t move, the woman produces a prettily embroidered handkerchief from below the counter and uses it to dab invisible sweat from her hairline. “You’re welcome to come back at midday.”

Shay swallows her nerves. They squirm in her stomach. "I . . . actually wanted to talk to you."

The barkeep's brown eyes soften. She shakes her head. "We're not hiring right now."

"Not about that." Shay shakes her own head, groping for words. "About a customer. A woman . . . a touched one."

"You'll have to give me more to go on." The barkeep slings the cloth over her shoulder and crosses her arms.

"Her name might be Hind?"

Frown lines etch across the woman's forehead. She grunts. "Hind is a common name."

Something sours in her tone, and her lip twitches in repugnance, making Shay suspect she knows more. She looks closer at the cloth flung over the woman's shoulder, woven in the style of the blankets Nezjar is known for. "May I see your handkerchief?"

The barkeep grabs the cloth and looks at it, her nose wrinkling. "It's soiled. I can get you something clean . . ."

"I want to see the embroidery."

Nodding, the barkeep relinquishes the cloth, which Shay unfolds. Many washings have left the cotton fabric rough, but the threads have retained their vibrance. The rich patterns in which they are arranged attest to the artistry of a talented seamstress. "Did you make this?"

"Do you like it?" The barkeep smiles, a smile so thin that it may as well be a clover bean leaf slapped over a musket wound. Sadness seeps through like blood.

"It's beautiful." Shay scans the mostly empty tent. She imagines how busy it must get, filled with rowdy customers and individuals of ill repute. "Why work here when you possess such talent?"

The woman's smile retreats.

"I was talented." She gives her hands another brisk rub as though warming them. "That was before I injured my hands. And now I work here. Where I'm forced to deal with the likes of Hind Hibachi."

Shay gulps, anticipation straightening her spine. “So, you do know her?”

“If I did,” the barkeep says, snatching back the cloth and returning it below the counter, “I would have barred her from my establishment for distributing Snow. Not to mention her outstanding tab.”

Nibbling her lip, Shay contemplates the woman’s words. “You mean she was selling it?”

The barkeep pauses, her voice laced with warning when she speaks again. “Not selling. She offered it for free to young women. Women who quickly become dependent on the drug and go live in the kasbah for as long as Al-Mukhtar can use them. When they eventually get cast out, they’ll spend the rest of their miserable lives in the Bib. And that’s if they’re among the lucky ones.” She turns back and grabs a bottle from the wall, uncorks the neck, and sniffs it before returning it to its place. “But you didn’t hear such treasonous talk from me, eh?”

Shay settles onto a stool with a seat of woven leather, allowing herself a moment for the words to filter through her mind. Her thoughts shift like desert sands. She’s heard the rebels’ accusations of touched ones being employed at the kasbah before, but the claim of Al-Mukhtar discarding them after Snow has drained their vitality is a new one.

The barkeep glances over her shoulder and raises her eyebrow as if questioning what Shay is still doing there.

“Did she ever mention having a child?” Shay’s voice stretches as thin as pastry dough, but it gets the woman to turn around and fully face her.

She looks Shay up and down the way a market goer might examine goods, searching for some flaw they can leverage for a lower price. “Touched ones say a lot of things when they’re blitzed.”

It’s all the confirmation Shay needs, and the only person who can tell her more than that is the woman herself. It’s unlikely this Hind Hibachi is one of the touched ones who reside at the kasbah—she wouldn’t have been patronizing the brewery if she did. If she is, instead, one of the castoffs the barkeep speaks of, that means . . .

Shay knows where to look for her: the shantytown, colloquially called the Bib. “Thank you, khalti.”

The woman tilts her head as Shay rises to go. Understanding passes over her face, then sharpens to alarm. “I wouldn’t go there if I were you.”

Shay hesitates. The Bib is hardly a place anyone would go for enjoyment, but the woman’s tone suggests a more sinister meaning. “Why not?”

She huffs. “The Bib isn’t just where poor people live anymore. It’s a hideout for criminals. A place where rebels are free to take cover because no mukhtar would soil his spotless white robe by venturing in. The Moulays don’t even conduct raids there.”

Shay believes this; the midwife herself refuses to enter the slum, its women forced to come to her or deliver their babies alone. As a hizoura, Shay has more reason than most to avoid the rebels, especially when she may have already attracted one’s attention. But, instead of the trepidation she should feel, a lightness floats like soap bubbles in her chest. If she had to give name to the feeling, she’d call it hope.

Seeming to sense her words have not had their intended impact, the barkeep continues: “You’ll need a guide to get through all the rigged traps, and no one there will trust you unless you know the secret hand signal.”

Shay grips the counter, dizzy with the implications. She strums her fingers over the years’ accumulation of dents and scrapes that have been worn into the wood grain, her leather gloves a barrier that dampens their sensation. “Do you know the secret hand signal?”

“Why would I?” The woman kneads her hands again. She grimaces. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

Shay’s shoulders sink. If the barkeep seemed the type to be swayed by dramatics, she’d drop to her knees then and there to beg. One of the men offers her a sympathetic shrug, then returns to his game, which, judging by the fan of cards held in his hand, he’s losing.

She whips her face back to the barkeep. “Did you say the touched one owed you coin?”

The woman sighs wearily. “Are you offering to pay it?”

Shay reaches through the slit in the side of her djellaba. She cups the small satchel hidden beneath, worn around her waist. In her gloved palm, she weighs

its lightness. Her heart goes as still as the moment before a storm breaks. After her extra payment to the stable master, she has little coin left to her name, but the gloves . . .

The gloves were a gift, and so much more. A symbol of the care Ghita poured into her training and the midwife's expectations for her future. Shay cherishes them, both for their utility and their sentimental value.

"Does it hurt?" she asks softly. When the barkeep looks confused, she explains, "You told me you injured your hands."

"A little," the woman admits, but Shay has spent enough time around women in pain to recognize when one is downplaying the severity. "They tingle sometimes. And feel cold."

With a strike of regret, Shay peels off her still-new and much-loved gloves. She squeezes the leather between her palms, soaking up its softness. The barkeep's hands look similar in size to her own. She squares her shoulders. "These might provide you comfort. I'll give them to you if you'll help me."



6

*Our Lallat are waiting to be restored.*

*The keepers of magic, the fairest four.*

*Rabia tends the earth, and Rasha draws the tide.*

*With the sun, Noor dances, and on the wind, Iman rides.*

*Earth, flame, water, air.*

*We remember their names, our Lallat fair.*

*—a Hazmaggi chant*

Shay hates coming to the slum. It breaks her heart to see small children playing in dirty puddles and napping next to fly-covered piles of debris. Yet, she can't help noticing how the women talk and smile brightly among themselves as they hang clothes and carry water. They seem happy despite their lack of what others deem necessities.

It doesn't take long for a young boy to come running up to Shay. With unmatched slippers on his feet and his tiny frame swallowed beneath an adult-sized tunic, he's hardly the fearsome rebel the barkeep led Shay to believe she'd be greeted by.

He stretches his open hand up and out. "Labas, Lalla. Something for me? Please?"

Shay fishes the last lüneers from her satchel. God knows it isn't much, but

when she presses the coin into his palm, the child's face brightens into a heart-melting grin.

"God protect you," she offers hoarsely.

The child tucks the lüneers into his pocket. He grabs her hand and sprinkles the top of it with kisses. "May He bless you and your parents."

Tears prickle Shay's eyes at the innocent blessing. Ghita is the closest thing to a parent she has known, and the midwife surely deserves God's rewards. But what of the mother she hopes to find, the one the barkeep accused of luring young women into a life of addiction? Is such a woman eligible for redemption?

Shay takes a step forward, when the boy springs in front of her.

He glances first to one side then the other, fidgeting in place. "Are you going the right way, Lalla?"

Shay peers into the distance, trying to determine what the boy is looking at. Finding nothing amiss along the uneven belt of makeshift shelters, she squats at eye level with the child and lowers her voice. "Is someone watching us?"

The boy scratches his dirty arm and nods nervously.

Telling herself the worst that can happen is she'll be turned away, Shay holds her palm up in a *khamisa* sign, her three middle fingers touching, pinky and thumb separated out to the sides. She lifts her hand high enough to be seen by whoever is hiding. To complete the signal, she rolls her fingers into a fist that represents the all-seeing eye of protection and taps it to her forehead.

The boy's shoulders relax, but he tips his chin higher. "That's the secret signal. But do you know the *secret* secret signal?"

Shay frowns, her throat tightening. The barkeep didn't mention a *secret* secret signal. She gazes up at the bright white of the noonday sun. It floats in a pool of soft yellow like a reverse egg. But there are no clues written among the clouds. Sweat gathers in her palms.

"Just kidding!" The boy chuckles and winks at her. "There is no secret secret signal."

"M'zein." Shay stands, her panic dissolving into laughter. "You fooled me that time. But I have a serious question. Do you think one of your friends out there would be willing to help me find someone?"

“It’s your lucky day, Lalla.” The child puffs his small chest. “Badar knows *everyone* in the Bib.”

“I see.” Shay swallows uneasily. She assesses the boy’s tender frame. Is it even safe for him to be running about unsupervised here? “What about the traps?”

The boy looks at her askance. He pats his arms and legs, grinning widely. “I still have all my limbs, don’t I?”



Badar scampers over stone blocks and wood beams. Shay’s heart hammers with exertion and the fear that a misstep will trigger a trap and she’ll be sliced by a swinging knife or crushed under an avalanche of rocks. The child races, his stride never breaking, down the narrow rows that run between crowded shelters. Many residents have hung torn sheets for privacy where their walls are lacking, half the stones having crumbled away.

Some dwellings, Shay notices with more than a little unease, openly display the checkered flag of the Naturalists. The offense would be unthinkable elsewhere in Nezzar. One building even has their slogan painted on its side: A COMMON GOAL FOR A COMMON PEOPLE!

The deeper into the Bib they plunge, the clearer it becomes that not everyone here is happy. Touched ones linger in dark corners. The emaciated women alternately pick at their scabbed skin and yank what little is left of their thinning hair. Each twitch is like a move in a compulsive dance they’ve been cursed to perform.

Their backs are hunched, their hands curled into claws. Warts bubble on their faces. One dried husk of a woman sits right out in the open on a palm leaf mat, appearing at risk of being bowled over by the faintest of breezes. She pulls a dropper of amber liquid from a glass vial and squeezes a glistening drop onto her tongue.

Shock ripples through Shay’s body. The touched one throws her head back, her papery eyelids fluttering. A white film spreads over her irises and blots her

pupils. Her black lips melt into a sloppy grin, exposing teeth in the early stages of decline. Red wisps of light pulse at her fingertips.

Shay's skin turns cold. After all these cycles of believing her mother is dead, will she now find her to be alive but trapped in same thrall of addiction as these women?

"Come," the boy urges, tugging Shay's sleeve. "My memma always tells me to keep my eyes on pretty things. She says that which you look upon, you become."

"Your memma is a wise one." Shaking off the chill, Shay quickly pursues the child. They swerve around a small herd of goats in their path and finally stop before one of the few shelters with a door, albeit one resting crookedly in its frame.

Could her mother have been here all along? Surely, Shay would have felt some invisible thread pulling her by the heart, the same way the sea must feel the inexorable tug of the moon. But isn't it true that she's always carried an unnamed longing inside her? She attributed it to her constant contact with expectant mothers, but what if it was more? If she had any inkling her mother could be eking out an existence in the medina's slum, she would have found a way to help her.

But maybe she still can.

Panting, and more winded than a girl her age should be, Shay turns to Badar as he stretches on his toes and beckons her to bend her ear.

"Wanna know a secret?" he asks, whispering mischievously. "There are no traps."

Giggling, the boy darts away, leaving Shay to question everything she's heard about the resistance. Al-Mukhtar would have citizens believing the rebels were heartless brutes who wouldn't think twice about putting their own children in harm's way. But what if they're just the brave few willing to stand up in the face of tyranny? What if they actually protect the realms' most vulnerable?

The door is shaped like a giant keyhole and painted the indigo of night. Once upon a time, it might have been called fancy. Now it's rusted and peeling and doesn't look at all out of place amid the surrounding clutter where nothing matches.

Hesitantly, she knocks. A warm breeze carries distant chatter, the squawk and bray of livestock, fumes of garbage rotting nearby. What if the woman isn't home? Shay knocks a few more times.

Her thoughts skip back to the touched ones who huddled in the shadows. One of the women was slumped against a wall, seemingly unconscious. This Hind may be inside her dwelling right now, suffering an overdose that has left her unable to answer.

"Hind?" Shay knocks again, louder.

The misaligned door gives beneath her efforts. It cracks open to reveal a slice of mud-brick wall. Shay looks back over her shoulder, half hoping no one is watching and half seeking someone who might give her permission to enter. No one is close by or paying attention. Telling herself it's not intruding if someone needs help, Shay steps inside, the door falling shut behind her.

The room, for there is only one, looks almost homey. A single small window draws Shay to the back. She pushes the curtains apart, releasing a cloud of dust and letting in enough light to distinguish that the lumps on the sleeping pallet are merely blankets and pillows. In a corner sits a folded prayer mat, a book of scriptures held aloft by a wooden stand, and a clay bowl cradling a string of glass remembrance beads.

With a heavy sigh, Shay turns back toward the door. It seems the woman is out, after all. The skid of her sole over something wet stops her just before she steps on a fancy-looking bottle. It's tipped upon its side, its contents dribbling out onto the layer of unfinished boards that serve as a floor. She squats and picks it up, sniffing the neck as she reinserts the stopper.

*Peach blossom.* A sweet warmth spreads across the pathways of her mind, coaxing a smile to her lips. The scent, somehow achingly familiar, echoes of infantile memories. At least, that's what Shay chooses to believe. She closes her eyes and basks in the feeling.

Only when she opens them does the shape that lies twisted across the room come into focus. Gasping, Shay tosses the bottle aside. She lunges toward the woman whose form the shadows previously concealed.

Her pale skin looks bleached, shading the dark circles beneath her eyes all the blacker. Sparse fluffs dust her head like a light layer of snow, patches of pink scalp peeking through. Her arms stick from her sleeves, her neck from her collar, thin as twigs, the knobs of her elbows, knuckles, and chin seeming enormous in comparison.

“Hind?” Shay gives the woman’s shoulders a gentle shake, making her head loll limply from side to side. “Are you well?”

Something dark trickles from the side of her mouth. Shay’s mind flashes to the khala’s corpse back at the farmhouse. With flaring panic, she dives into action, but as she gently uncurls the woman’s stiff body, the crisp crackle of bones suggests she’s too late. Nevertheless, Shay delivers compressions to her frail chest. She breathes air against her chilling lips.

“What in the seven hells are you doing?” The woman pushes Shay off her with sudden strength. Wheezing, she wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and glares at Shay.

Their eyes are the same shade of smoky brown. Faded Hazmaggi tattoos scrawl across her cheeks and forehead. Odd, given that Ghita said the detail about Shay’s nomadic heritage was fabricated.

“That’s funny. You don’t exactly look like the sort to break into women’s homes and assault them in their sleep.”

She’s obviously alive, but no less a thing of horror, and Shay’s first impulse is to deny that such a creature could be her mother. Yet, even in the meager light from the shelter’s grime-streaked window, the resemblance is notable. As her adrenaline dies down, Shay’s fingers trace her own slightly crooked nose, her tapered chin. With a strange sense of detachment, she wonders if everything she thought true is a lie and all the lies are true.

“Devil got yer tongue?” the woman derides. She leaves Shay lumped on the floor and shuffles to the middle of the room. There, she dumps a bucket of hot coals into a pit dug into the ground where it has been left uncovered. Shay watches her hang a dented teapot of water over the fire.

Recovering her voice, she sputters, “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Never seen someone make tea?” the woman grumbles. Despite her mockery, a hint of kindness touches her face, turning pit marks into dimples. She pats a large, round starmia made of tattered leather beside her. “Come sit.”

Shay’s tongue adheres to the bottom of her mouth as she crosses the room obediently. All the cycles she carried this wish inside her, this unspoken yearning for maternal love, she never once stopped to think of what she would say to her mother if given the chance. Her heart pumps hard under the cotton of her djellaba, gushing all the words she cannot find.

For her part, the woman says nothing more. She goes about preparing tea, her method similar to Ghita’s but different in a way that takes Shay a few moments to pin. It isn’t so much her process as the way she holds herself as she moves. So unlike Ghita’s confident posture. The touched one, old as she looks, has the body language of an unsteady but eager toddler.

She finally hands Shay a glass, accompanied by a tight smile. Shay holds the warm tea in her hands as though she can’t recall what to do with it. When she opens her mouth, she has no idea what she means to say until the words tumble out. “Khalti, do you know who I am?”

The touched one taps her dirty nail on her glass and looks at Shay as if she insulted her. Something like pain glistens briefly in her eyes before she blinks it away. “Do you imagine I can’t recognize my own flesh and blood?”

Shay’s voice freezes in her throat. Time stops, the question hanging between them like a breath cloud on a cold day. Her mind slowly whirs, repeating the barkeep’s revelations. She doesn’t know whether to jump up and scream for joy that her mother is alive or break down and weep for the condition she’s in. Maybe she’d know the correct reaction if she could get past the feeling that none of this seems real.

“It’s true, then,” she finally whispers, but inside her ears, her voice is a shout. Could Ghita have made a mistake? Did the midwife leave her mother for dead by accident? No, Ghita is much too thorough. She’d never be so negligent. Besides, she told Shay there was a grave . . .

“Drink some tea, habibti,” the woman murmurs. “We have a lot to talk about.”

Shay’s hand seems to lift the glass to her lips by itself. The tea is good, though the mint is not as fresh as that which she’s used to. The warmth of the beverage steadies her. It clears her head a bit.

“Khalti,” she starts, then sips more tea to avoid continuing.

“La,” the touched one corrects her. “Mmi.”

If a heart had ears, Shay’s would perk like a cat hearing the lid peeled back on a tin of preserved fish. But the word, and all it implies, is sacred. If she never bestowed such a title upon the midwife, whom she lived and worked with and learned from, how can she apply it to a stranger? Someone she knows nothing about other than that she’s an addict? “It’s a bit soon for that.”

“Hind, then. You can call me *Hind*.”

“Hind,” Shay starts again. “I . . . I’m sorry.”

Hind’s forehead creases, adding about a hundred cycles to her age. “Why?”

“If I really am . . . If you really are . . .” Shay widens her eyes and clamps her teeth, not wishing to cry and embarrass herself more than she did by trying to resuscitate the woman. “I would have come sooner, if I’d known. I would have offered to help you.”

“What makes you think I need help?” the touched one scoffs.

“I didn’t mean to imply—”

“We both know what you meant.” Hind waves a skeletal hand. “You can judge me if you want. I just . . .” She covers her mouth as she smiles, the gaps between her spindly fingers exposing the sorry state of her teeth. “You’re real, aren’t you? You’re not a ghost . . .”

Shay raises her arm and inspects it as though she herself isn’t sure whether it’s made of flesh or spirit. “I could ask you the same question. Ghita told me you died.”

“Ghita!” The touched one scowls, her lips pulling so tight that they almost disappear. She takes a long sip of tea before she speaks again. “She told me the same about you.”

Shay shakes her head as stubborn loyalty rears inside her. There must be more to the story. There has to be. “Why would she do that?”

“S’pose she wanted you for herself.” Hind shrugs one pointy shoulder, her sullen expression burnished in an orange palette by the light of the small fire. “The way I hear it, her own daughter died tragically.”

Shock falls over Shay’s mind like a blanket, making shapeless lumps of every thought. “Ghita had a daughter?”

“So they say.” The touched one chews her bottom lip. “But they say a lot of things.”

The idea of Ghita’s betrayal doesn’t provoke the anger Shay would expect. Neither does she feel hurt, at least not yet. Either of those emotions would be something concrete, a thread she could hold on to and make sense of. All she feels is confusion, her equilibrium thrown headlong into a senseless rift. More than anything, she wants to understand. “Tell me what happened.”

The touched one arches a thin white eyebrow. “Everything?”

Shay takes a bracing sip of tea. “Everything.”



# 7

## *The Legend of Illi and Udad*

*Once upon a time, two tribes lived on mountain villages that faced each other, separated by a lake. A shepherd named Udad would always spy a maiden named Illi from across the water when he'd bring his flock to drink and she'd come to the opposite shoreline to do her family's washing. Smiles and glances turned to waves and gestures and soon they developed a secret code that allowed them to communicate daily across the distance. They fell in love. Alas, they were forbidden to marry outside of their tribes. As they pined for each other, their sadness grew, until one day Illi signed a most heartbreaking message to her beloved. Her father had promised her hand in a marriage set to be performed after the passing of one moon. The pair began to cry.*

*So great were their tears, they fell into the lake and the waters rose and rose and overflowed. The ensuing flood wiped away both their mountains. As the waters kept rising, Illi and Udad swam toward each other. They are said to have drowned in each other's arms. To this day, claims persist of their benevolent spirits being sighted, and locals believe that if a new bride and groom swim the waters of Barhira Kabira, their marriage will be blessed.*

**H**ind sighs, a low, hollow sound. Her brown eyes glisten with a faraway cast. "When I was about your age, a Hazmaggi caravan was passing through Nezjar during Jou Boulka. I was at the festival, and well, do you believe in love at first sight, Shuika?"

Shay is taken aback by the use of her given name, by how different it feels

coming from her mother. She considers the question and foolishly thinks of Shadi. Is it possible to meet the person you're meant to be with, only to find they may belong to the very group that wants you dead? "I don't know, khalti—Hind."

"Well, I fell in love with a Hazmaggi man."

Shay studies Hind's tattoos, the delicate symmetry of the designs against the crumbling planes of her face. "So, you're not Hazmaggi, then?"

"Not technically." Hind shakes her head, her white hair swaying around her shoulders. "When my family wouldn't accept my lover, I ran away to live with the nomads. I married into their tribe, took their markings onto my skin. Even when my husband was taken by sudden illness and died, the tribe still considered me one of their own."

"Was your husband . . . my father?"

"No." Hind holds up a finger as she drinks from her glass. "I got depressed after my husband died. The tribe tried convincing me to remarry, but I couldn't bear the idea of replacing my first love. The next time we passed through the festival, I tried Snow for the first time. I did it to fill the empty hole that felt like it was consuming me from the inside out. I just wanted to feel something, and at the same time, I didn't want to feel anything."

Shay always assumed women tried Snow out of curiosity about their Shawafa. Out of a desire to access magic, despite it being forbidden. It never occurred to her that someone might use the drug as a means of escaping their pain.

"It didn't take long for me to become an addict. I tried hiding it from the tribe. But when a little boy fell off a camel and was injured, I couldn't stop myself from using Shawafa to heal him. And still, the tribe tried to help me get purged. Then valuables began to go missing, and they rightly suspected me of stealing them to sell for drug money. I was banished." Hind's voice dips low with either shame or remorse, or a combination of the two.

In Hind's story, the Hazmaggi did all they could for her, showing her the same grace and care as their own people, until she crossed a line. While in the cover story Shay has so often repeated, the tribe seems unsympathetic, willing

to leave behind a woman whose only offense was being sick. It's a detail that never sat right with her, though she couldn't work out why until now.

"I returned to Nezzar, but my family didn't want me back. A widow and an addict. I used my Shawafa to earn what coin I could, but customers became scarce when the hangings started."

Shay notices that Hind hasn't mentioned anything about working for Al-Mukhtar, but that isn't her most burning question. "If it's alright, may I ask about my father?"

The touched one sets her empty tea glass on the makeshift floor and picks the grime under her nails. "I had to earn coin somehow, so I sold my body. Back then, I had a body worth selling. That's why I'm sorry to say I don't know who your father is."

Shay has seen women in similar situations come to Ghita for herbal solutions. She might consider it a brave thing, taking on the task of motherhood alone, except no child should be exposed to Snow.

"Once I knew I was pregnant, I stopped using," Hind says, as though Shay has been thinking her thoughts too loudly. "I swear I did."

Shay stares into the fire, afraid Hind's eyes may not lie as well as her tongue. Or is she afraid the words are true? That she has no real need of the moon pepper Ghita has been so insistent that she faithfully ingest? It just seems improbable to her that anyone could overcome such an addiction without help.

Her thoughts turn to Sami, whom Ghita took in for his own protection. She can't imagine any reason why the midwife would have taken Shay as a baby, other than the same. Even if she accepts the possibility that Ghita wasn't fully honest, she still believes her to be a good person.

"But after the midwife told me you died . . ." Hind's voice unravels. "I couldn't overcome another loss like that. I went straight back to Snow, and I've been using ever since."

Shay struggles to bring her thoughts into focus. She was shocked to learn touched ones can carry to term and sometimes even deliver healthy babies. But how could someone who used Snow for so many cycles survive despite its deadly side effects, the rapid aging it inflicts? "How old are you?"