

Hashim Kheil
and
Keeper of the Gates



Richard Shekari

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By

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.

Dedication.

Chapter One: The Essence of Malefic.

Chapter Two: Imperial slave.

Chapter Three: Dine with the King.

Chapter Four: Veracity.

Chapter Five: Eventide.

Chapter Six: The Foe within the Four Walls.

Chapter Seven: Arrivederci.

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Dedication.

For Buhari Abu.

Chapter One: The Essence of Malefic.

“Father is too old.” Jamil said naughtily as he rode his white horse, his shoulders spoke of his rugged feature; bold and robust. “The good thing is, when his reign is over, the kingdom will have a greater king. I just can’t wait to see you on that throne, brother.” He smirked, “I have no doubt you’ll make this realm an envy in the eyes of all the kingdoms, Hashim.”

“Yes, he’s old.” Hashim responded, a hunk long haired fellow. He rode on a black horse, “But it’ll be wise not to envisage how the kingdom would be in his absence.” He turned to his brother, “The walls have ears, they say.”

“Aah!” Jamil remarked, “We’re in the open field, no walls here.” He giggled and turned to the guards behind them, “Hey! You see any wall around here?”

“Uh...no Prince Jamil!” Answered one of the guards.

“See, no walls here.” Jamil said, “And there are lots of guards who’d stand as witnesses that there isn’t really any wall nearby!”

“You know exactly what I mean, Jamil.” Hashim said as he giggled, “Don’t play that game with me, brother.”

“My point exactly,” he said. “No games! There’s nothing wrong in talking about the future here, brother. Even the one who created us all know that. We’re given the right to plan; be hopeful and dream dreams. Which is why even as we aspire, the gods still bless and surprise us beyond our wildest imagination! Whether we conceive of it or not. It is every good parent’s wish to become one with the earth than watch their own offspring perish before their very own eyes.”

“That, you are right.” He said, “There are a great deal of things to learn from the king. Ruling a kingdom as great as Tzuria is no small task, brother.”

“The people in any kingdom are like women...” Jamil said.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“Find out what stimulates them,” said Jamil, “Toss it over and let the thrills occupy their mind while you execute your existent ploy from behind.”

Hashim put his horse to a halt and sighed. “Just because a few lasses throw themselves helplessly at your feet don’t mean women are all the same, brother.” He said, “Your heart hums with too much misconception and ambition, Jamil. Everything has its time, be careful, for the evil one will give thee what does not belong to him with his left hand and snatch what belongs to you with his right.”

“Aaah! You and your pious ways, Hashim.” He said, “We’re kids no more, we are men now. When you rule, all I ask is you give me an army and in four days I can bring Azikania and the rest of the domains before you on their knees; and slaves their beautiful women we shall make.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.” He said. “When the time avails itself we shall lift the torch and light up the way to peace.”

“You have to be hard on the world if you want to be respected.” Jamil said, “Be unpredictable and show no sign of weakness. Not like father.”

“He’s a peaceful man, a merciful king, you know better.” Hashim said, “Ever wonder why the people love him?”

“Trust me, brother.” Jamil said, “The world we’ll find ourselves tomorrow will not have room for love. Hate shall be adored and chaos bred.”

A guard arrived on a horse and saluted the princes. “His majesty, the king demands your presence in the castle, my lords.” He said.

“Oh father,” Jamil said, “When will he realise that we’re grown men? Every time a man goes out, he sends for you to come home. He worries too much.”

“That’s what fathers do, brother.” Hashim said, “It’s their worries that guarantee this very future of yesterday.” He turned to the guard, “Let the king know we’re on our way.”

“Yes, prince Hashim.” Said the guard, he then rode off.

“I can bet you it’s about marriage, again.” Jamil said, “He’s too keen to become a grandfather.”

Hashim climbed down his horse.

“Don’t tell me you’re walking home.” He added.

“Mmm hmm!” Hashim responded, “Need to stretch these legs, and the big girl need some weight off of her. Right girl?” He tapped his black horse.

“Suit yourself,” Jamil said, “See you when you see me.” He galloped his white horse away, “Yahoo!”

Hashim arrived in time to meet his brother Jamil flirting with some of the maids by the entrance to the king’s chamber.

“Mind if we go in now, brother?” Hashim said.

“Oh sure,” he answered as he turned to the young women, “Don’t forget, I’m getting a full sponge bath tonight, and you girls better be in your best behaviour.”

“Yes, prince Jamil.” They all said as they giggled.

“Hmm!” Hashim remarked, “You still do that?”

“And many more great things,” he said. “You’re missing a lot, it is our right as royals. Just because the oldest of the lions rejects free meal don’t mean the youngest should choose not to consume it.” He bowed to his brother.

“You should be a writer,” Hashim said, “Shall we?”

“Sure, brother.” He replied.

Hashim led the way. They both walked into the king’s chamber and greeted their father who was standing next to his throne in a purple floor-length robe. His crown was on his throne.

“I’ve been standing here ever since I sent for you to be fetched!” Said the king, “if only your mother was here.” He stroke the fringe of grey-white hair around his balding. “You boys better be fast about it!”

“About what, father?” Said Jamil, he giggled as he winked at Hashim, “We’re old enough to lead an army into battle. You worry too much, father.”

“That’s not what I meant,” the king added, “When are you getting married? Especially you, Hashim. Thekina is gone, you’ve got to move on, my boy.”

“I just need some time, father,” Hashim responded. “Time to uh...”

“You think I don’t miss your mother?” The king interjected, “I’m just too old for that, would’ve remarried. Come on, when I was your age I was as strong as a panther both on the battlefield and in bed.”

“Father, you could have a concubine.” Jamil said, “It wouldn’t be bad to have a young woman...taking care of you.”

“The maids are doing a great job.” He said, “I do not have that strength anymore. How much time do I have left?” He coughed, “And all you boys do is throw yourselves out there every now and then.”

“Sorry about that, father,” Hashim said, “you shouldn’t worry much whenever we are out of sight, oh great king. We went deer hunting.”

“I’m not worried, nooo!” Said the King, “I am just wondering what’s so great out there that you two would abandon your father every little chance you get.”

“Father, Hashim is twenty nine, and I, just three years younger. We’re perfectly safe; besides, the guards are always around.”

“That’s the least of my problems.” Said the king, “Anyway that is a matter we shall discuss some other time. There is a package coming in from an old friend, King Zaffariah of Therakania, I’ll want you to go fetch it for me.”

“Did he send a messenger?” Hashim asked.

The king took the crown from his throne and wore it. He then gently sat down. His eyes were fatigued as he was very old, “No,” he

said, "He wrote some days back, they should be by the port of Tashqbal before dusk."

"You know how to read, father?" Hashim asked as he smiled.

"Mmm!" He remarked, "Your brother read the letter."

"Oh, figures!" Hashim remarked, "Have you had anything yet, father?"

"Uh! Yes," he said. "Boiled potatoes and some grapes. It seems I'm going to have to go down the garden by myself, and pick the right ones. What am I saying, huh?" He cleared his throat, "Maybe it is old age. My tongue is losing it. See?" He threw a tongue out.

"Oooh! Father." Jamil responded.

"Ha-Ha! Father," Hashim remarked, "You're doing just fine old man!"

"Is it his daughter he sends?" Jamil asked. "I'll go! Here I am, send me to go fetch the gift."

"He has only but a son..." The King replied, "...And about two...or is it three adopted daughters, I think?"

"What is your will oh great king?" Hashim asked.

"I had wanted you to go alone," he said. "With some of the guards of course but maybe uh..." he coughed, "Your brother should follow you so he'd learn how we welcome our guest in a civilised way."

"Your wish is my command, father." Hashim said as he bowed.

"You boys can leave right after lunch." Said the king.

"In that case I'd only reveal my handsome face after we meet them!" Jamil said. "By the way, brother, from this moment henceforth, call me prince Weird; I will only talk once we see the girls. Need to save this princely tone."

"What exactly do you have in mind?" Hashim asked.

"I know just the right thing to put on for this mission." He said, "Let me go get my Barbut!" He quickly departed from their presence.

"A mission indeed." Hashim laughed.

“Here we go again!” said the King as he shook his head, “I warn you Hashim; never dare a blacksnake in the game of hide-and-seek in the dark.”

They burst into laughter. Hashim and his father engaged into a conversation about the king’s plan to extend the western side of the castle.

By the time Hashim and the ten guards were ready to go, it took a while before Jamil was able join them at the city gate; he appeared riding on his white horse, royally dressed and wearing a Barbute.

“You can’t be serious!” Hashim said. Jamil only lifted his hand and cleared his throat.

“Oh, I forgot,” Hashim added, “You’re in your weird-prince-mode.”

The two princes along with the guards left for the port of Tashqbal.

“The Therakanian King has no daughter.” Hashim said as they rode to the port, “Just so you’d know. You don’t need to pick a girl that’s royal in order to make a queen out of her anyway, you know. Every woman is royal. For in the eyes of every man, his woman is queen.”

Jamil uttered no word throughout their journey. They later arrived at the small village of Tashqbal that appeared deserted.

The guards were on alert.

“Where did all the fishermen go?” Said one of the guards.

Hashim turned and gestured to Jamil to halt his horse. “Go look around, just to be sure.” Hashim ordered the guards. “Maybe they have all gone for...”

“Fire!” a voice yelled from nowhere as arrows sprang out and hit the guards. Some masked men all dressed in black from head to toe, charged toward them on black horses. Hashim jumped off his horse and drew his sword, he swung his blade swiftly and took the lives of four men who attacked him, as he turned to warn Jamil, his eyes caught his brother’s body falling off his white horse and unto

the ground. Jamil did not flex a muscle; two arrows pieced through his chest and one through his throat. He was dead. Hashim was outraged by the sight of Jamil's lifeless body. He ignored the attackers and rushed to where his brother's body lied.

"Jamil!" He cried, "No, Jamil!"

The attackers surrounded him, all the guards were dead and he was outnumbered. As he wept, one of the attackers rode off his horse, rushed towards him and with the hilt of his sword, delivered a sharp blow to Hashim on the back of the head. Hashim fainted.

Chapter Two: Imperial slave.

The next morning, Hashim was brought before King Yuri of Therakania. He was in shackles, as he was dragged before the king, he noticed that the one seated on the throne was a young man about his age, and there was a young beautiful lady who stood on the left side of the throne in a full length vibrant-red silk hooded cape. She looked like a princess but the hood over her magma-red hair made her appear more like a sorceress and not from it.

Things are not as they appear, try to remain calm said a soft female's voice that sounded in Hashim's head. He looked up and wondered if the lady in red was the one that spoke. She only crossed her arms across her chest, her visionary eyes anchored at him.

The king, a tall stalwart young man stood up and walked down to meet them, his cloak bore his royal emblem. The soldiers bowed before him.

"Hashim Khail, I presume." Said the king, "I've longed to meet you. I never expected it to be this soon, and in this manner." He stood with arms akimbo, "Pardon my men, their heart only reveres one throne."

Hashim stood 6-feet tall with his broad shoulders and bare muscular chest before the king.

"You're much taller than I expected," the king added as he looked up at Hashim. "You look more of a warrior than a prince, my friend!"

"You had my brother killed, "Hashim said, with a burning lethal stare. "I swear on my mother's grave, I'll make you pay!"

Hashim sighted a dagger around the waist of one of the soldiers, he rushed for it but received a punch in the stomach, he went down on his knees, and they took turn in kicking him.

“That’s enough!” Said the king. He turned and looked at the lady in the red dress. She ignored him and quietly walked out of the throne room, her elegant personality caught Hashim’s attention once more.

The king bent with his hands on his knees and gazed into Hashim’s vengeful eyes. “For the sake of your mother, I hope you’d keep your lips sealed about who you are while you are here,” said the king, “I don’t have much to say for now.” He turned to the soldiers, “Rid my sight of him.”

The soldiers dragged him out of the throne room and locked him down in a dungeon.

For the days that followed, Hashim tilled the soil in the fields under the scorching sun just like any other slave and was fed twice a day. Every time they returned from the field, they’d be frisked by the guards before being allowed to enter their cells. Hashim found out that Yuri has succeeded his father, King Zaffariah, who had passed away.

One day while at the field, he sighted two slaves in a brawl and made an attempt to separate them but someone stopped him.

“Don’t!” Said one of the slaves, a sinewy athletic looking man. “The guards will beat you up and tie you for days if you try to stop any fight on the field. They love it, it entertains them. Trust me, you don’t want to be tagged a killjoy by these men.”

Hashim ignored the man that spoke to him and ran towards the fighters. Before he got there, another slave who tried to stop the fight was caught, whipped and dealt with by the guards. They caught him, tied him up, and left him bare under the sun as the rest of the slaves were ordered to keep working. The fighters were ordered to continue their brawl moments later.

Hashim went back to the slave that warned him earlier.

“Thank you,” He said.

“You’re welcome, brother.” The man answered.

“What’s your name?” Hashim asked.

“Brutus Boriah.” He said as he continued working. Hashim felt the man didn’t want to be bothered, so he too went along ploughing.

The next morning, while at the field, one of the slaves began to jerk up and down as though possessed. He drooled and began to run after the other slaves, his facial structure changed, and he hissed like a snake and spoke in foreign tongues they’ve never heard. He grabbed a fellow slave and like a catapult, flung him away. It shocked and amazed all the slaves, some of the guards laughed while others got scared. The guards ignored the madman until he ran towards them and began punching the ones he laid his hands on; he’d catch two and throw them off, the possessed slave ran out of control and blasphemed.

On seeing what was unfolding, the commander ordered Brutus be brought forth. And as soon as he arrived the scene, he knelt down and whispered some words then stood up and commanded the spirits that took the man’s body hostage. The madman went down on his knees, and unto the ground. Some of the slaves came forth and took him away to a nearby tree, where he was allowed to rest. After that, the slaves began chanting Brutus’ name, they hailed him. He lowered his head and begged them to stop.

“Are you some kind of wizard?” Hashim asked him.

“No,” he replied, “I only prayed, and cast out the evil spirit that possessed him.”

“Prayed? Cast out the evil spirit?” Hashim responded, “Hmm! Where are you from?”

“I hail from Damarus.” He said.

“Uh,” he remarked, “Damarus, land of the free.”

“Land of the free indeed,” Brutus said. “Where are you from and how did you end up here? Because you don’t look like them.”

“I am Hashim.” He replied, “I am from a kingdom north of this place,” he paused. “And the day my father finds out where I am, not a damn goat will be left alive in this land.”

“You’re royal?” Brutus asked.

“I’ve never felt so.” He responded.

As Hashim and Brutus acquainted themselves, three young beautiful women arrived on a chariot, they went and had a chat with the one in charge of the slaves. Hashim recognised one of them; she was the one he saw the day he was brought before King Yuri.

“That woman...the tall pretty one.” Hashim said, “Who is she?”

“Oh, the fairest of them all?” Said Brutus, “That’s Nabil Tahil, King Yuri’s seer and protector.”

“Nabil? Seer and protector?” He whispered.

“That’s what I said.” Brutus responded.

“Is she the late king’s daughter?” Hashim asked.

“Well, in a way yes!” Brutus added, “She’s a sorceress of some sort; King Yuri’s ears are slaves to her lips, I heard.”

“The other two?” He asked again.

“They are her sisters.” Brutus answered, “Known as the gates!”

The ladies left the man in charge of the slaves and got onto their chariot then rode through the field to where Hashim and Brutus stood. The chariot halted right in front of Hashim.

“The dust from your horses’ feet would degrade thy beauty, my lady.” Hashim said as he coughed, “Where I come from...”

“Please-don’t-say-another-word.” Brutus interjected, “I beg of you.”

Nabil, who was driving the chariot stared at Hashim for a while. Her two sisters were beside her, she lashed the horses and rode off.

He was ensnared by her looks.

“When a man’s eyes are set on such beauty...” Hashim said.

“...Even his soul shall become slave to her command

uncoerced...not only his heart.” He sighed, “and the queen is never...jealous?”

“Jealous? No!” Brutus said, “As a matter of fact, Nabil advised King Yuri to take Haloui as his queen. Queen Haloui is not of noble birth.”

“Who are they?” Hashim asked.

“The girls are triplets,” said Brutus, “The one in red, Nabil, is the oldest, she’s the one that controls the powers of the other two.”

“Powers?” Hashim remarked, “I don’t understand.”

“Well, it is what I heard.” Brutus added, “It’s said that their mother was once a slave in this kingdom, around the time they were conceived; she died of childbirth, and Yuri’s father, the late king, took them in when the matter was reported to him. It’ll take six years before the girls would be discovered to possess certain powers. To his demise, the king treated them as though they were his own.”

“Hmm!” Hashim remarked, “So, for how long have you been here?”

“Seven months.” He said as he ploughed the field, “I was running away from persecution, decided to sleep in the valleys one night and by the time I woke up, I was surrounded by some armed men; slave traders. They chained me up and sold me to someone else who also sold me to another,” he paused, “On our way to an unknown destination, the Therakanians captured us and brought us all here.”

“Including the slave master?” Hashim asked.

“All of us,” he said. “But the old rich fellow died three months ago. He couldn’t stand the heat.”

“You said something about persecution?” Hashim said.

“Well, yes.” Brutus replied.

“Someone wasn’t happy with the colour of your skin?” Said Hashim.

“No. No!” He answered, “Anyway, certain men came to our city years back and preached about this man, whom they said could

heal the sick and even raise the dead. And after some of us watched them make manifest the very thing they preached,” He smiled, “We gave our life to the one they spoke of, the saviour.”

“You gave your life to someone called the saviour?” Hashim said, “I do not understand!”

“It’s a form of uh...acceptance, commitment after an agreement to have a personal relationship with the one we worship.” He said as he laid his hoe aside and sat on the ground. “So those of us who believe, wilfully embraced the way.”

“You can’t be serious.” Hashim responded, “Your ancestors, didn’t they have like a god or some deities they worshipped before you were born?”

“They do; my father and mother both worshipped different gods,” he said, “However, when they decided to marry, my mother adopted my father’s god.”

“But you abandoned the gods of your parents?” Hashim asked, “I mean the gods your parents worshipped for another one?”

“Yes!” He answered, “No one would experience His presence, peace and mercy, and not turn away from the world.”

“Well, why would the king of your land persecute you?” said Hashim, “If what you practice is good, and if the one you serve is as good as you speak of or did you people rise against your ruler?”

“No!” He said, “When we embraced the way, our number began to grow and some gentiles weren’t comfortable with it. We were accused of creating a movement that was seen as a threat to the kingdom, its laws and way of life of the people. So they arrested us, imprisoned some of us and even killed those who resisted.”

“Why?” He said, “But you practice your way in peace, right?”

“If you ask me” Brutus replied, “Maybe the light of the way threatens the existence of darkness in these kingdoms here on earth even though they are of two different worlds.”

“Hmm! The way?” Hashim said, “Is that what the movement is called?”

“It’s not a movement,” Brutus responded, “It’s a way of life; we tend to follow the pattern of life of the author and finisher of our faith. At least that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“I see,” said Hashim. “To cast out demons, heal the sick and...?”

“Share the good news,” Brutus interjected, “Love your neighbour as yourself and...”

“Raise the dead?” Hashim interposed.

“When the need arises, yes?” He said. “With little faith in whom I serve, you have no idea what can be achieved or made manifest.”

“You mean to tell me you watched the dead brought back to life?” Hashim asked, “This is interesting! And I thought I’ve seen all the crazy things in the world.” He snorted. “So, do you have plans of going back to your place?”

“Not anymore,” Brutus said, “The Romans invaded our lands and well, made an outpost out of it.”

“The Romans,” he said, “I heard their story. Great army.”

“You’ve got that right,” Brutus responded. “Crushes anything that stands on their path.”

“Back to work!” A guard yelled.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Brutus.” Hashim said as he continued weeding.

“Please to meet you too, Hashim.”

Chapter Three: Dine with the King.

After sunset, they marched back to the slave quarters. While in the cell, four guards arrived and ordered Hashim to stand on his feet. A guard entered the cell and put on shackles around his ankles, they took him on a chariot to a house in the city.

On their arrival, two guards stood behind while the other two took Hashim inside the house. He was unchained and left standing in the middle of a large empty room, painted white. Moments later, the doors in front of him came open. Two young women walked in; one dressed in a blue hooded cape and the other in green, he recognised them. They were Nabil's sisters, and behind them was their older sister in her usual red silk cape.

"Hashim Khail." Nabil said as she approached him, "Is that what you are called?"

"Yes," he answered. "Who wants to know?"

Nabil's tone resembled the voice that sounded in his head the day he was brought before King Yuri. Her two sisters stood behind her.

"Please be seated!" She said in a polite manner.

"Are you serious?" He said.

"Please," she pled with him as she pointed at something behind him.

Hashim turned and saw a white wooden chair. He looked around and saw no one. He could not remember hearing any sound or footsteps earlier, and he was sure the chair wasn't there when the guards brought him in.

"Ookay?" He emphasised, sighed and ignored her order, "How did you..."

"Please, sit!" She interposed.

Hashim crossed his arms across his chest and raised an eyebrow. "Alright, tough guy." She said, "Shurriah!"

The one in blue dress came forward and stared at him. She raised her left arm and a vortex appeared behind him, and like the wind compelled Hashim to the chair.

"Vina!" Nabil Yelled.

The lady in green came forward and raised her left arm; roots from each handle sprouted and tied his hands. Two more roots pierced the floor and wrapped themselves around his ankles, and fastened his feet to the legs of the chair.

"Don't fight it, warrior." Nabil Whispered as she lowered her face and gazed into his eyes as though she wanted to read his mind, "It'll get tighter. Stay calm." She laid her hands on his forearm.

He was lost in her large green eyes as she was also ensnared by his. They stared into each other's eyes. Nabil couldn't talk anymore, she heaved as though he took her breath away; she held her lips together as best she could, then stood up right and took a step back without saying a word.

Shurriah and Vina looked at each other, then quietly left the room and shut the door behind them.

"How did they...do that?" He stuttered with a smirk, "And hey, did you just sneak into my...mind?"

She snorted and stared down at him as she suspired.

"Oh, I know." He added, "You want to torture me, huh? I saw how you were staring me back at the farm." He paused, "So uh...if I may ask, really, what are we doing here?"

The doors came open once more.

"Aha!" King Yuri yelled, "The great prince himself tied to our little magic chair." He walked to them and shook his head.

Nabil bowed before the king and turned to walk away.

"Hey, beautiful eyes!" Hashim said, "How can three women tie me up to a chair and leave me with this...man?"

She looked at the king, then walked out of the room.

“Hey, I am talking to you!” Hashim yelled, “You didn’t tell me your name!”

“She’s a fine one, isn’t she?” Said the king, “Be careful with her eyes, and don’t say I didn’t warn you, my....”

“One day I’m going to have my hands wrapped around your neck!” Hashim interjected, “I’ll squeeze it and watch the life in you squeal out.”

“If I had a brother, I don’t think I’ll be this fond of him.” King Yuri said, “I have nothing to do with this zany accusations you lay.”

Hashim jerked his hands and tried to free himself from the roots that held him.

“Hmm!” King Yuri responded, “Anyway, I would’ve preferred a more, you know, gentlemen kind of meeting but the way you roared at me in the presence of my men the other day suggests caution be taken. Hence the magic chair.”

“What do you want from me?” He asked.

“Nothing, nothing really!” said the king, “I came to uh...well, it means I do really want something from you; I came to personally invite you to come dine with me and my queen later tonight!” He giggled, “That’s all.”

“That’s it?” Hashim said.

“Yes! That is all!” He answered, “However, you’ll need to get cleaned up. Some ladies are going to come back and give you a good warm bath. Mind you, my guards will come along with them just to make sure someone’s hand don’t reach out to any lass’ neck. You know what I mean, don’t you?” The king clapped.

Four young women walked in half naked, followed by six guards. Four of the men pushed in a big bathtub on small wheels filled with warm water. Two of the ladies had with them soaps and sponges.

“Off I go then.” Said the king, “See you in a jiffy, my friend. Oh! And uh...Enjoy yourself!” He tapped Hashim on the chest and

walked away humming. The women and the guards bowed as he walked pass them.

The men then stationed the bathtub right next to Hashim.

Moments later, two guards brought Hashim before the king. He was dressed in a fine gentleman's attire. The king was at the dining table with his queen by his side.

"Please, join us!" The king said, he stood to his feet as he chomped on a big leg of succulent roasted turkey.

Hashim walked to the table and bowed to the queen. She smiled.

The guards stepped back and stood by the entrance.

"I love pork, it's my favourite." The king added as he sat down, "Please have a seat. I understand that you Tzurians find swine offensive especially when offered as a meal. So I made sure they prepared a nice roasted turkey, just for you."

Hashim looked at the variety of food and exotic fruits displayed on the table, and almost drooled. He then turned to the king and queen.

"I insist," the king said. "Please!"

Hashim sighed, then gently drew a chair out and sat down.

"Please, eat!" The king added, "You Tzurians are lovers of exotic fruits I am told, I also made sure they plugged the finest from the palace garden. Hope you like it."

Hashim grabbed a purple fruit that looked like an apple and took a bite. He shook his head. "Mmm!" He responded, "This is very-very-good! Tastes like uh... assortment of fruits; a mixture of pineapple and uh...grape?"

"You're pleased by the sweetness of what I offer to you then." The king said excitedly, "This is a good start, huh?"

Hashim shook his head as he mashed the juicy fruit with his Tzurian teeth.

"Good!" The king added, "I love the fact that you love it." He giggled, "I believe you've met Nabil?"

“I sure did,” he said, “She’s beautiful, but the way she stares and appears out of nowhere scares my soul.” He licked his lips, “Whence comes this peculiar fruit? It’s...juicy!” He took another bite.

“My queen’s favourite,” said the king, “Jaspel, I call it. I actually named it after her beloved mother.” He cleared his throat, “I don’t know what name your people shall call it, I can give you some samples to go back home with. It is a combination of the heart of a pineapple tree and some fruit tree from the western part of Africa.”

Hashim stretched his hand and grabbed a chunk of meat placed before him. He sank his teeth to it. “Hmm!” He remarked, “You live in a paradise oh great king.”

“Wait till you taste her own meal,” said the king referring to his queen. “She’ll make your tongue realise it has been denied its right from birth.” He smiled.

“Oh please, my king!” The queen said. “Yet he doesn’t want me in the kitchen.” She smiled.

“No king in his right minds would allow a rare and beautiful gem such as yourself near anything that burns, my queen.” He responded, “As much as I’d do anything to eat your food, I’d rather die trying to protect your tender skin from being gouged by the wind itself.”

She smiled and shied away from his comment.

Hashim belched, “Pardon my manners.” He said.

“The seer, Nabil.” Said the king, “She thinks you’re special, and should not be tampered with.”

“The beautiful lady in red?” Hashim said, “I think she’s in love with me. I can see it in her eyes.”

The king cleared his throat and turned towards his right.

Hashim turned and saw Nabil standing behind him. He gently turned his head back to the table and laid the meat on a platter, he reached for a cup filled with red wine. “Nabil, her name?” He asked, “She’s not from this kingdom, is she?”

“Hmm.” The queen remarked, “And, how did you know, might I ask?”

“Hashim is one of Thal Kalliman’s great student.” The king said.

“Thal Kalliman?” The queen asked, “The great old and grey scholar from the Ghanerk?”

Hashim shook his head, “and how did the great king know all these about me?” He asked.

“I know more than enough about you, Hashim.” Said the king, “I know that you’re the true heir to the throne of your father, King Xhafir Khail III. You’re a brilliant swordsman, and very generous to the people, even those not of your father’s kingdom. I also know that you lost your wife to the cold hands of death.”

“Oh dear,” said the queen, “So sorry for your great loss.”

Hashim smiled. He gently placed the wine cup back on the table.

“Please, come with me.” Said the king as he stood up, “There’s something I’d like to show you.” He wiped his mouth with a piece of cloth and led the way, Hashim stood up and walked with him. And so did Nabil and the two guards.

The king took him up to the roof of the palace, where ten more guards stood watch. He showed him a model of the vast land he ruled, laid on a big platform; it showed the great city of Nurok, the capital of Therakania. And many other cities and lands under the king.

“Not as big as thy father’s kingdom,” said the king. “But big enough to be my pride, as it was to my father.” He sighed, “You see, my father...your father’s chum built this great city, and during his reign he shifted the capital after every ten years. This way, he believed would bring development and spread prosperity throughout the kingdom.”

“Wise approach.” Hashim said.

“He was a wise king indeed.” He said, “We Therakanians attach value to loyalty. And the late king, my father, had told me a great

deal about your father. He promised never to stand against his interests in any way, no matter what. My father had great respect for your father.” He nodded, “He always said that your father was more than just a king, but a man with a good and kind heart. I think there came a time when war knocked upon the gates of our kingdom. When Arrazaq, the Gruxian invaded our land and none among my father’s friends came to his rescue. He called for help but they turned their backs on him. The one king that my father didn’t call out to, was the only one that came to his aid. They joined forces and drove out the Gruxians, and fed them to the vultures in the plains.” He laughed, “My father told me that, after the war, this king even offered assistance to help raise the kingdom’s economy back on its feet. Do you know who this king was?”

“No!” Hashim responded, “But I’ve heard stories of King Arrazaq of Grux.”

“Come on, Hashim.” He said, “Don’t tell me your father never told you about how he assisted my father in defeating the Gruxians in the days of old.”

“No!” Hashim answered, “My father isn’t much of a talker. He is more of a thinker and adores his solitude. He did tell me he was expecting a gift from your father, and he sent us to collect it, we didn’t know your father’s son had other plans.”

“Things are not as they appear, Hashim.” King Yuri said, “You’ll find out at the right time, maybe. But your father...he was a great king.”

“No, he is a great king.” Hashim emphasised.

King Yuri walked to Hashim. “King Xhafir Khail III passed away weeks back, Hashim.” He said. “About the same time you were brought.”

“Really?” Hashim responded. “No, you must be talking about a different king entirely. My father...”

“Your father was assassinated, Hashim.” He interjected, “I’m sorry to say but it is the truth.”

“Don’t you dare stir the name of my father with the dead,” Hashim yelled in anger.

The guards made a move but King Yuri signalled them, and they remained calm.

“I did not invite you into my palace to make mockery of you.” He said, “The son of my father’s friend is also my friend.”

“Then what is this unthinkable thing you spat?” Hashim said.

“I have no reason to lie to you.” He said, “I’d gain nothing from it.”

Hashim wrestled the king to the ground. The guards grabbed hold of him and subdued him.

Chapter Four: Veracity.

Hashim woke up in his cell. The excruciating pain from the back of his neck made him lay on the ground without flexing a muscle.

“Here!” Brutus said. His hand stretched across from his cell.

“What’s that?” Hashim asked.

“Loaf,” he replied. “They brought food while you were gone, asked them to keep your portion but they spat on me instead.”

“Actually I just dined with the king.” Hashim said.

“I see,” he responded. “It seem they served you a hot plate of delicious punches.”

“Ha-Ha-Ha! Very funny,” Hashim remarked, “And I thought nice people don’t throw jokes.” He groaned, “Really, I am okay.”

“If you say so, brother.” Brutus said as he withdrew his hand from Hashim’s sight.

“Brutus!” He yelled.

“Yes, Hashim.” He answered.

“You are a good man,” Hashim added. “Thanks for um...looking out for me.”

“Why? We are neighbours,” Brutus stated. “Besides, what are brothers for?”

“Yeah, thanks, brother.” Said Hashim.

“You’re welcome.” He responded, “So, how does the king’s meal tastes like?”

“Trust me,” Hashim replied, “My late grandmother cooked better.”

“You can’t be serious.” Brutus added as he laughed. “Come on.”

“Actually it tasted nice,” Hashim said, “Reminded me of my family; my brother loved roasted turkey, and so does my father.”

“What about you?” Brutus asked.

“Well, I am more of a fried-fish person.” He said, “Oh, and I love fruits.” He cleared his throat, “So um...do you ever miss home?”

“Well, yes!” Brutus said, “Even though what I call home has been destroyed, and the ones I call family have been killed.”

They both went silent.

“It must be hard on you,” he said, “I’m so sorry for...”

“It’s okay.” Brutus interjected, “That reminds me; you never told me where you’re from.”

“Karan!” He said.

“The Tzurian capital?” Brutus asked.

“Yes, friend.” He answered.

They heard some guards approaching.

“Now what?” Hashim whispered.

“You’re a stubborn man!”

Hashim raised his head only to see Nabil standing by the bars that caged him, there was a guard behind her.

“I was born that way, maybe.” Hashim said. “How do you do?”

“The king treats you like a friend and invites you to dine with him yet, you stood up to him in the presence of his royal guards?” She said, “You’re special kind of stupid.”

“Leave me alone.” He said.

“If I had left you alone from the start, you could’ve been killed the very day you stepped on the grounds of this kingdom.” She added, “I vouched for you before you even set foot on this land.”

“I never asked anyone to stand up for me.” He said as he managed to stand on his feet, and walked to the bar.

“You truly are a stubborn man.” She added, “I’ve never seen a...”

“What do you care?” He interposed.

“What do I care?” She giggled. Nabil then asked the guard to open the cell. Hashim gently took some steps back. She walked in and slapped Hashim on the face.

“Did you just hit me?” He said, “You lay those soft fingers on my delicate face again lady and I’d make sure...”

She slapped him once more.

“Oh boy!” Brutus’ voice echoed, “She’s a tough one!”

“Shut up!” They both yelled in unison.

“You look more beautiful when you’re angry.” Hashim said.

She snorted.

“I know you like me,” he added. “Your heart emits a fragrance of...”

“My heart has no affection for a slave such as yourself.” She interjected as she turned her back and crossed her arms.

Hashim took a step forward.

“I’m sorry, I messed up.” He said, “King Yuri said something about my father that provoked me.”

“He spoke the truth.” Nabil said. She turned and faced Hm.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“Your father was killed by...” she paused then looked around as if she sensed something. “I need to go, “King Yuri is on his way down here.” She quickly walked out of the cell and ordered the guard to lock it. They walked away.

Hashim lied down on the floor and pretended to be asleep. As soon as they left, King Yuri arrived with six guards.

“Wake him up!” Ordered the king.

A guard took a bucket of water and poured it on Hashim.

“Oh for the sakes of my ancestors!” Hashim yelled, “Can’t a man have peace?”

“That I’m afraid only your ancestor can brag of,” King Yuri said, “A great king once told me that anything a man owns can be taken away from him, even his own life can be snatched from him.” He giggled, “Peace is for the dead, my friend. Because you cannot steal anything from them, or betray them or backstab them, I guess.”

“What do you want?” Hashim said.

“I came to give you a chance to apologise.” Said the king.

“I did nothing wrong.” He said.

“You rushed a king to the floor,” He snapped his finger, “I could have you hanged, just like that.”

“Well, what stopped you?” Hashim asked.

“Because I know that you despise me, you’re clouded by a wrong notion of who I am.” King Yuri said, “I’ll tell you something very important but it won’t make any sense to you for now; the one who planned the attack on you that made you end up here is the very one who killed your father.”

“Don’t you dare speak such of my father!” He said.

“I know it’s something that doesn’t make sense to you.” King Yuri added, “I won’t blame you for being mad at me. You see, the day you were attacked, the ones who came against you weren’t my men. My men got there just when you were about to be slaughtered. You were unconscious, and my men confronted the ones who attacked you. They brought you back here, because it was dangerous for them to deliver my father’s message after what they witnessed.”

“What are you talking about?” Hashim asked, “Your words don’t even make any sense.”

“Alright,” King Yuri said as he sighed. “My father was old and sick. He wrote to his friends that he would send gifts on a particular day. Your father, was among those friends of his. Now, the truth is, my father intended to hand over the kingdom to me while he was still alive and wanted his friends to be aware, so he sent invitations to those he considered friends. The gift he sent were actually some gold and silver, and a letter of invitation for my coronation. Unfortunately just after the gift bearers left, my father passed away. But all the men have delivered the invitation with the exception of your father’s, and by the time my men had arrived the port of Tashqbal, they encountered some masked men who were about to slaughter you. My men confronted and killed them but one escaped.” He sighed, “You were unconscious when they found

you, and on recognising who you are, they decided to bring you here.”

“Hmm!” Hashim responded, “When I was a little boy, my grandfather used to tell me stories. And believe me, as old and shaky as he was, he told greater stories even in his sleep. You my friend, you sound like a parrot! Well, I’ve got news for you; my father would one day know I am here, you and your entire army won’t find it funny.”

“Nabil warned me about you,” said the king. “She said you’re stubborn spirited. Now listen, I also understand clearly that her heart has grown fond of you, know that she is more than just an adviser, she’s like a sister to me.”

“From what I’ve gathered she’s a seer, eh?” Hashim said, “Guess the future of your kingdom depends on her foresight too.”

“From one man to another man,” The king said “I’d say you do us a favour and keep your hands off of her for now.”

“What do you want from me anyway?” Hashim asked.

“Look, the one who reigns over your father’s throne demands your head on a platter of gold as proof in the next four days or he’d come for mine.” He said, “All I want is to help you regain your father’s throne.”

“That’s it?” Hashim asked.

“Well, yes!” He replied.

“You killed my brother and had me captured.” Hashim said, “Now you come to me about my father’s throne being ruled by a certain someone, and now wants to help me get it back?” He laughed. “And knowing that I am a prince from Tzuria, you had me chained and treated as a slave?”

“When you come before a king and a make a move for his life,” he answered, “What do you expect? You act like a cretin, you get treated like one!” He smiled, “Couple with the fact that we had no idea what went down at Tashqbal, we had to put up with the only option left, and then the next day I received a letter from Tzuria, to deliver you dead or alive, or face the wrath of the new ruler of

Tzuria.” He giggled, “I replied to comply at the same time sent some spies and on their return, the news I received was not pleasing to my ears. I believe that we all make mistakes because when I made the deal, I didn’t know what I bargained for. Nabil tried to warn me but I didn’t listen. Now, she was the one that advised me to keep you alive and safe. She also suggested that I give you and army to go back and retake what’s rightfully yours.”

“Hmm!” Hashim remarked, “How am I sure you are saying the truth? Put your feet in my shoes.”

“Bring him along.” The king ordered, he quickly turned and walked away.

The guards chained him up and took him to the palace, and into the King’s inner chamber.

King Yuri brought out some scrolls from a shelf and threw them at Hashim’s feet. “You are royal,” he said, “I believe you can read. I also believe you know where that seal comes from!”

Hashim picked one of the scrolls and went through it, he threw it away and pick the next one. He lifted his head in disbelief and looked at King Yuri. Hashim’s knees kissed the floor.

“If you agree with me,” Said King Yuri, “I say we set out as soon as possible.”

Chapter Five: Eventide.

King Yuri ordered Hashim be treated well. He was taken to a nice room and offered good clothes to wear and good meal but he rejected the food as he was sober.

As King Yuri and his advisors planned on how Hashim would be assisted to retake his father's kingdom, Nabil brought some fruits and found Hashim standing by the window.

"You have to eat." She said. "You'll need to stay alive, if not for your sake but for the sake of your people...and my people. Yuri is a good man, you need to understand that. But even good men sometimes make the wrong decisions. And a few wise ones get themselves back on the right path when they realise they've erred."

"Ever wondered how it'll be like to have a family of your own?" He asked as he turned to her.

"I have a family!" She said, "King Yuri, the people here and my sisters. They are my family."

"Well, Yuri seem to have a queen, right?" He said.

She nodded.

"We have this beautiful garden in the castle," Hashim added, "I used to go there a lot. I don't know if it's still there, but I think you'd love it."

"Are you trying to woo me by enticing me with a garden?" She said as she smiled, "You can do better than that!"

"I want you to come with me," He said. "You'll love it there!"

"My heart is rooted in this land." She said.

"I will water the roots with my own hands if you agree to come with me!" He said. "And maybe you'll find out that my land is more fertile." He smiled, "Not that I am saying the soil here is bad!"

“You did not just say that.” She responded.

They both laughed.

“I do love to have a garden of my own someday,” she said.

“Does that mean you’re coming with me?” He asked.

“I can’t answer that right now,” she said, “but if King Yuri is giving you an army then he’ll surely ride with you and wherever he goes, my sisters and I go.”

“I know that,” he said. “What I am trying to say is, if this whole thing is over. Would you...”

“I know what you mean!” She interjected. “I don’t know but, I dreamt about you even days before you came.”

“How can you dream about a man you’ve never met before?” He responded.

“Let’s just say I see things.” She added.

“What was the dream about?” He asked.

“In my dream, you struggled with someone with a dark heart and snatched a crown from him,” she said, “You then took me to a garden but the bridge that led to the garden was broken.”

“My father’s garden has no bridge,” he said, “It’s in the middle of a beautiful orchard. With beautiful flowers and trees that bear exotic fruits.”

“I need to get going.” She responded.

“Please stay.” He said as he walked to her.

“We have a long trip ahead of us tomorrow.” She added, “You’ll need to rest too. Goodnight!” She walked out of the room.

“Goodnight.” He said.

Chapter Six: The Foe within the Four Walls.

King Yuri assembled his soldiers and they left for Tzuria at dawn. By sunset they had entered the land and made a camp not far from the capital city of Karan. On their arrival, Hashim disguised himself and prepared to go into the city but Nabil stopped him. As the morning sun shone upon the battlefield, King Yuri's two thousand army stood behind in full battle formation.

"You must remain calm when the representatives from the other side come forth for negotiations." Nabil said. "Keep your helmet on no matter what!"

"I can barely breathe," said Hashim as he pulled down the visor of his helmet. "I don't usually fight with such thick armour, I can barely see with this thing."

"I'll need you to trust me on this, okay?" She said.

"Okay." He answered, "But as soon as it gets rusty out there, I'll take it off!"

"Not a problem, just don't take it off before the battle starts no matter what. Do you understand?"

"Do whatever she says," King Yuri said. "Nabil always knows best, trust me!" He smiled at her with such profound respect. She smiled back.

"I understand!" Hashim nodded.

"I hope you really do!" King Yuri added.

Hashim agreed to heed to her advice.

They mounted their horses; King Yuri, Hashim, Nabil and her sisters rode off. As they approached the centre of the battlefield, so did five representatives from the Tzurian side who galloped to meet them; four soldiers on black horses and their leader wearing a full plate armour along with his white horse.

Hashim and his team had reached the meeting point, they halted their horse in wait for the others. Nabil turned to Hashim and uttered no word, he gasped and placed his hand on his sword.

“Hands off sword!” She said.

Hashim did as told.

“Act natural.” King Yuri added.

“Not on a battlefield!” Said Hashim, “And not when the one who murdered my family is proudly riding on my beloved brother’s favourite horse.”

Nabil and King Yuri looked at each other.

“When the scouts told me of an army riding against my city I thought it was a joke.” Said the one in the full plate armour, “Don’t be threatened by the armour, I haven’t worn it before so I felt today is such a good day to let the beautiful sun shine on this silver, King Yuri.” He laughed, “You’ve got my generals and commanders worried but I reminded them that our new-borns alone outnumbered your army. Funny but a true fact, huh?”

King Yuri smiled.

“So if I may ask out of respect, from one king to another,” he added, “What gift have you brought that’s so special you had to bring it yourself, Yuri?”

“It’s not much,” King Yuri said, “But it sure going to be amazing.”

“Escorted by a handful of boys dressed as soldiers?” He mocked, “Come on!”

“I’ve come not to fight, that is sure, oh great ruler of Tzuria.” King Yuri said, “Gifts? I do bear them but it’s in my tent back there, you know, we had to camp for the night. I told my men we were coming to see a man who believed that the precious life of his family and the ones who loved him stood between him and pleasures of this world, so why not rid himself these eyesores so he’d rule the kingdom and glide on the wings of greed.”

The four men from the Tzurian side pulled their swords.

“Easy! Easy, men!” Said their leader. “We are Tzurians, we don’t cringe when a hog oinks!”

The men returned their swords to the sheaths as their leader took off his helmet. Lo and behold! At that very instant Jamil’s face was revealed.

“Remain calm!” Nabil whispered to Hashim.

Hashim’s legs began to shake and so his hands. He agitated on his horse, he found it hard to believe his eyes. His heart pounded uncontrollably.

“Well,” Jamil responded, “When I was a kid, my friends and I would say things we don’t really mean, you know, boys always do that. Even if it leads to a fight, we always laugh and at the end of the day, we’d let the friendship flourish...but you see,” he sighed, “This thing you just said Yuri is...very-very-hurting, my friend.”

“That’s the whole idea.” King Yuri said.

“Now, I am a merciful king!” Jamil added, “I have already forgiven you but, you see, my men have heard these silly or should I say foolish thing you’ve let slip off that tongue you used to kiss that whore you call a queen, so I shall let this pass on one condition; that you come down your horse and kneel before me.”

King Yuri laughed so hard tears rolled down his eyes.

“I have behind me, three thousand men on foot and on horsebacks.” Jamil bragged, “a thousand and one archers, and if you look up and around you, you’d notice about three thousand or more assembling themselves right now as we speak. They are gift from a friend.”

King Yuri turned and realised that the entire place has been surrounded by soldiers in black uniform. He and his men were besieged and confused at the sight of the sheer number of men that surrounded them, they lost their morale.

“I am not my father’s weakness, Yuri.” Jamil added. “I am not that weakling. We had a deal, yes, if you have come to collect your share of the bargain then we can go into my castle like the men of royal that we are, and I’ll have your gold delivered to you so you’d

go and settle your pathetic excuse for an army the debt you owe. But um...I'd hope you have preserved his dead body or at least his head."

"I require nothing in return for almost...helping you kill your own brother, Jamil." King Yuri said.

"I am that man none of you sons of whores should dare dream of raising your tongues against let alone your swords!" Jamil yelled, "Bow before me or I'll kill you right here, right now, and make that stupid whore of a queen of yours feed on hay for the rest of her miserable life."

"It's obvious you didn't hear the word 'almost' in the last thing he said!" Hashim yelled.

"Who is this leper?" Jamil asked as he giggled, his men laughed along.

Jamil gave a signal, and one of the men beside him raised a flag and wove it. More than a thousand men that surrounded the battlefield began marching downwards. The Therakanians were terrified.

"The Gruxians!" King Yuri yelled, "You coward!" He appeared frightened by their number and size.

The Gruxians charged towards the centre of the battlefield.

"You see, my friend." Jamil said, "I am not as stupid as you think. I am in the business of making friends, making friends with the right people that is, and I offered you that chance which you turned down. Not only have you come before me with an army to insult me, but defiled our soil with your foul presence."

Nabil rode her horse gently and stood between the two sides as the Gruxians approach them.

"Coward of a king you are," Jamil added "You should throw them in the room where meals are prepared not fields where battles are fought!"

"Vina!" Nabil called.

Vina came down from her horse and walked to her sister. Nabil turned to her and smiled. Vina then removed her shoes and sank

her feet into the soil, she lifted her two hands and chanted; tiny roots sprouted from where she stood.

Jamil, his men and their horses drew back.

The roots grew larger in size and many more sprouted from the ground and made their way to the Gruxians' position, the roots ferociously pieced the grounds as it approached them. The spikes impaled them; many were flung into the sky by the roots and landed on bare ground, some on the sharp edges of the roots that appeared to come to life. The Gruxian army began to flee but the roots were faster than their dreaded heartbeats. Jamil watched as the might of his ally was put to shame in a matter of minutes.

The entire Gruxian army were wiped. Fear gripped Jamil's heart as two of his men ran away back to where the Tzurian army stood.

Vina slipped her feet into her shoes and quietly went back, she climbed her horse.

"Shurriah!" Nabil called again.

"No, Nabil!" Hashim said as he got off his horse. He pulled his sword from its sheath and threw it on the ground, then walked right up to Jamil, the two men beside him quickly drew their swords. Hashim took off his helmet and flung it away.

"Brother?" Jamil said as he trembled.

Hashim stared at the two men, they pulled back their horses.

"You fool!" Jamil yelled as he turned and stared at King Yuri. "We had a deal! You betrayed me?"

"Betrayal?" Hashim remarked, "You? Speak of betrayal?"

"Brother, it's not what you think!" He said.

"Sure, I know!" Hashim responded, "You ophidian! Who was the one wearing the Barbute?"

Jamil was bewildered, he turned to his men and then swiftly pulled his sword, "Someone loyal to the course!" He yelled as he delivered a strike; Hashim dodged and dragged the horse down to the ground along with Jamil.

Shurriah evoked a powerful vortex that flung the other men off their horses. Hashim then seized the sword from Jamil and placed

it around his neck. "Let's hear what the king's men have to say about this." He said as he dragged Jamil towards the city.

"Hashim wait." King Yuri yelled.

"You all stay here!" He yelled back. "I'll go settle this alone with my people. Stay-here!"

"I told you this was a bad idea!" King Yuri said to Nabil.

"Stubborn man!" Nabil whispered as she got off her horse and ran after them, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Just go back, Nabil!" He answered, "Don't worry. I've got this!"

"Hashim," she said. "What if..."

"Nothing will happen!" He interjected. "Go back!"

"I can't!" She said. "I am coming with you."

"Oh, brother, this one smells like she is in love with you!" Jamil mocked, "I can see it in her eyes too, and she is wearing your favourite colour!" He laughed then turned to Nabil, "Did he get this dress for you? It looks great on you!"

Hashim continued to drag Jamil along to where the Tzurian army were stationed.

"Brother, you don't have to do this!" Jamil pled, "Hey you!" referring to Nabil, "Talk to your lover here for me okay? I was going to come look for you. I swear on mother's grave."

"You shut up!" He yelled, "You killed father and planned to have me killed?"

"I can explain everything," he added.

"No! No! No!!! Jamil, No!" Hashim yelled.

The entire soldiers pulled their swords, and the archers drew their arrows as Hashim brought Jamil to their position.

"Don't shoot!" Jamil yelled, "You imbeciles!"

"Where are the elders?" Hashim yelled. "Where are the generals?"

The soldiers made way for them to pass. Hashim pulled him to the middle of the Tzurian army.

"It's Hashim!" Some of the soldiers mumbled.

“They said he was killed!” Others grumbled. They whispered his name.

“You call this man your king?” He yelled, “You rested your loyalty on the knees of this traitor and murderer of our beloved king?”

All the soldiers remained mute.

Some elders made their way through.

“Hashim?” Said one of the elders who made his way through the soldiers. “We were told you died in an ambush the day your father was found dead in his chambers.”

“How did my father die?” He asked.

“Heart attack!” Said the elder.

“Lies!” Hashim said, “He murdered father and almost had me killed, King Yuri will testify to his ugly act.” He kicked Jamil to the ground, “And for what? So you’d...”

“Why must it be always about you?” Jamil interjected. “You’re as weak as was father! Weak! Arrest him!”

The entire soldiers stood still. Their silence deadened his command.

“I said arrest this man! Now!” Jamil yelled once more.

“Stand-down!” Said one of the Generals, “This matter shall be treated in accordance to the laws of this kingdom.”

“I am the law!” Jamil yelled, “I say take this man away! Seize them all at once!”

“Prince Hashim,” said the General. “Please, relinquish your sword. You know it deep within you that your father’s soul aches as he watches these happenings.”

Hashim turned to Nabil, she nodded.

While everyone’s attention was on Hashim, Jamil drew a dagger from his right shoe and with great speed quickly stood up to attack Hashim, Nabil blocked him and the dagger got buried in her stomach. Hashim turned and punched Jamil to the ground.

“No!” Hashim cried, “Nabil, please no!”

Vina and Shurriah let a powerful cry out as they rushed toward them, they found Nabil coughing out blood with the dagger in her stomach. They began to chant as they raised their hands up; a thick dark thunderous storm formed a wild tornado over them. A dark cloud blanketed them, and the grounds began to shake.

“Vina! Shurriah! No!” Nabil said, “No! It’s okay!”

The sisters calmed down and so did the storm, the ground stopped shaking as they along with King Yuri ran and knelt next to Hashim.

Nabil managed to stretch her left hand towards Hashim’s face, “I told you about the broken bridge.” She said as she buried her head in his chest, and gave up the ghost.

Hashim, and her two sisters sobbed inconsolably.

Chapter Seven: Arrivederci.

The next day, Hashim was crowned king. And after being found guilty of the late king's murder among other things, Jamil was exiled. He is to stay away from the kingdom until dead or when his brother, Hashim, the new king of Tzuria decides to pardon him.

Nabil's body was laid in the king's garden, on an altar made from two mighty roots like two hands that emerged from the ground, holding her golden see-through casket. She was adorned with a beautiful white silk dress. She laid elegantly and smiled as though asleep.

Hashim stood with his crown and gazed upon her. King Yuri, and her sisters stood by his side.

"Hope it's okay if I keep her here?" King Hashim said, "She'll be treated with all the respects she deserve."

"I have no problem with that." King Yuri said, "And her sister's wouldn't mind either." He turned to Vina and Shurriah. "I believe that if she was alive this is the one place she'd have loved to spend the rest of her life." He tapped King Hashim on his back.

"Thank you," said King Hashim.

They shook hands and hugged each other. King Yuri and the two sisters bid farewell to him and left the garden.

Twenty hefty men were ordered to deliver five big wooden boxes filled with gifts to the Therakanian camp that was set up outside the city.

The Therakanians and their King were set to leave, and as they were about to embark on their journey, they sighted king Hashim fast approaching on a horse.

"Yuri! Yuri!" He called, "Dear friend."

King Yuri ordered his men to halt.

King Hashim arrived and came down from his horse as he smiled.

“I hope your queen’s heart delights in these gifts I offer.” He said.

“She loves shiny things!” King Yuri responded, “She’ll love it. Women,” he snorted, “You can’t blame them.”

“Please, sorry to disturb you.” He added as he panted. “There is a man among your slaves, he goes by the name Brutus Boriah. He hails from Damarus, I’ll be more than thankful if you’d have him brought before me. He’s a nice man,” he nodded, “I can offer you twice what’s in those boxes just for his freedom, if you don’t mind.”

King Yuri nodded and smiled. “Anything for a friend!” He said, “My men and I should be home by nightfall, I’ll make sure he’s set free on my arrival and will have him escorted to your castle before sundown tomorrow.”

“Thank you very much, friend.” King Hashim said. “Oh, thank you so much! This means a lot to me.”

“You’re welcome,” he responded. “I hope you do not seek trouble, my men informed me of a slave that speaks to other slaves about freedom and a certain saviour. I am told of the things he does and says, and I think the name of this man sounds like the one you seek.”

“No,” King Hashim remarked. “I don’t think he is trouble to the kind of kingdoms you think. He was good to me while I was there, and I thought I should return the favour.”

“Well then, expect him by dusk tomorrow.” He said, “Oh, I almost forgot to ask; your brother, Jamil? Where do you think he’d go?”

“To the one man he adored the most?” King Hashim said.

“Arrazaq?” He asked, “Hmm! I guess it means a benighted season awaits our demesne hereafter.” He giggled.

“Good always prevails, my friend.” King Hashim said, “We shall pray and remain ever ready; besides, we’ve got each other!”

King Yuri smiled and bowed. He ordered his men to start moving.

Vina and Shurriah wove at King Hashim, he wove back with a smile.

The Therakanians rode off. King Hashim heaved a heavy sigh of relief then climbed his horse and went back to his city.

To be continued....

Appreciation:

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Richard Shekari.

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Richard Shekari is a writer, singer, rapper and a poet from Abuja, Nigeria. A Humanitarian with the National Emergency Management Agency, Nigeria. He is an alumnus of the Federal University of Technology (ATBU) Architecture department Bauchi State, Nigeria.

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