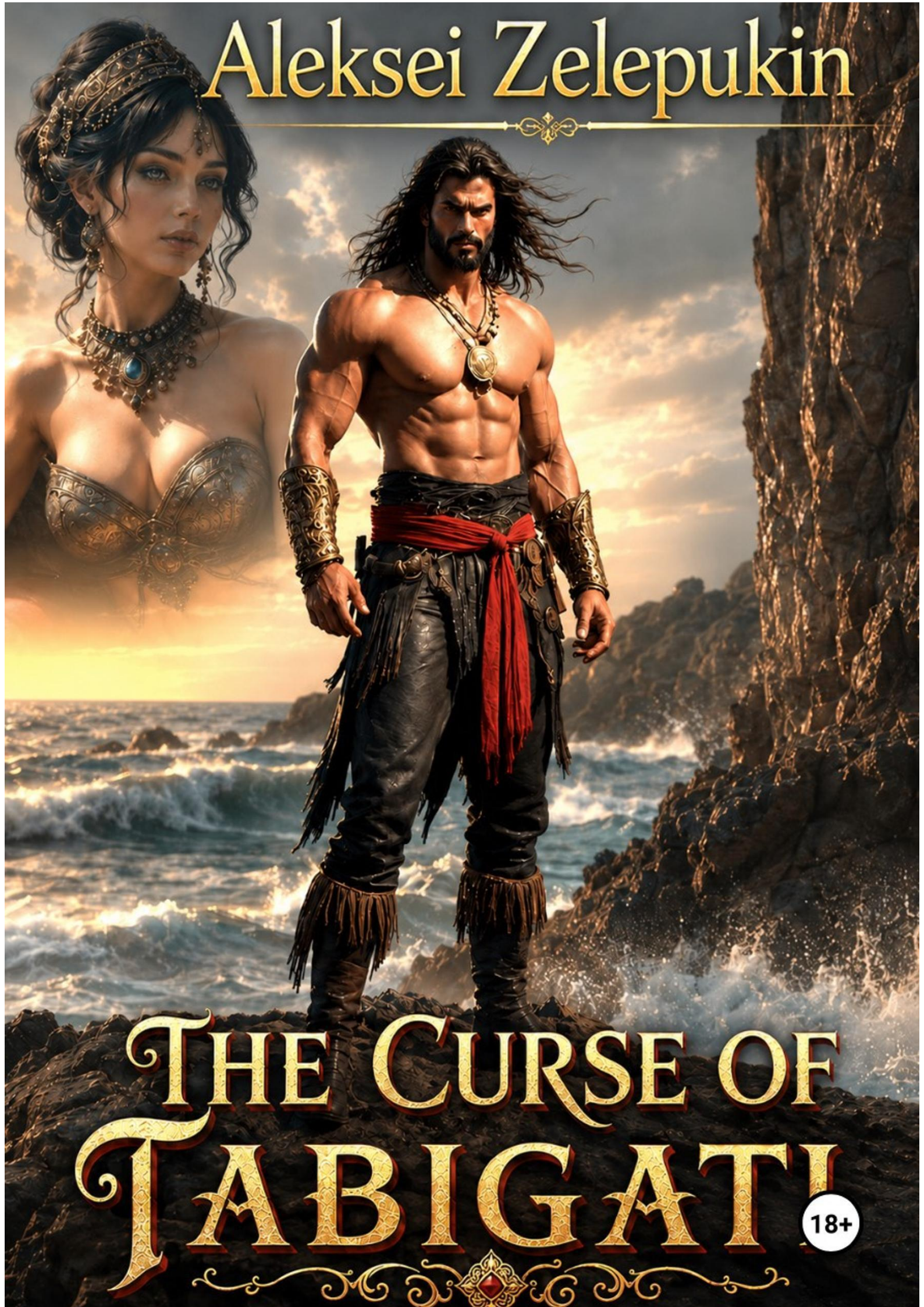




Aleksei Zelepukin

The poster features a man and a woman in elaborate, fantasy-style costumes. The man, Aleksei Zelepukin, is shirtless, muscular, and has long dark hair and a beard. He wears a red sash, black leather pants with fringes, and ornate metal arm guards. The woman is on the left, wearing a detailed metal bra, a large necklace with a blue gem, and a headband. They are standing on a rocky cliff overlooking a turbulent sea under a dramatic, cloudy sky. The title 'THE CURSE OF TABIGATI' is at the bottom in a large, ornate font, with a rating circle in the bottom right corner.

THE CURSE OF
TABIGATI

18+

Алексей Зелепукин

The Curse of Tabigati

«Автор»

2026

Зелепукин А. В.

The Curse of Tabigati / А. В. Зелепукин — «Автор», 2026

He is merely a gardeners son who earns extra coin as a porter in the marketplace. She is the daughter of his master, marked by the Goddesss seal. It seems they could have nothing in common—until a chance encounter by the lake changes everything. Can the power of true love unite two hearts despite the trials set before them? Can mere mortals find the strength to defy the schemes of the Lord of Hell—and the conventions of society? And can a kindhearted young man, hardened by years of suffering into a merciless warrior, comprehend the true cruelty and treachery of Tabigatis curse?

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Алексей Зелепукин

The Curse of Tabigati

Prologue

The crush in Ostos's market square was unimaginable. The fragrance of fruit mingled with the scent of freshly planed boards from the scaffold and the unforgettable smell of newly spilled blood, sharp and vicious in a warrior's nostrils.

Though morning had barely begun, the heat was already unbearable. The white sun had baked the paving stones and brought sweat to the skin of the townspeople gathered to witness the execution of the accursed pirates.

With a perfumed cloth covering his face, the blue-eyed northerner forced his way almost to the barrier—close enough to make out the condemned man's face.

A konung stood upon the platform, prince of the northern lands. Even now, upon his knees, he retained a warrior's majesty and his fearlessness before death.

The copper *karnays* blared. The *doira* drums began to beat. The murmur of the crowd died away. Even the donkeys and mules in their pens beside the stalls fell silent.

"Your last words, wretch," roared Yusuf Bey, ruler of the city. He wore a green satin robe girded with an expensive belt of golden plates, and a broad saber hung at his side.

The konung merely spat with relish and favored the bey with a contemptuous stare.

Several warriors hauled upon ropes, bending the northern chieftain nearly double. Yusuf Bey planted one foot upon him, forcing the konung's head against the massive stump that served as the block.

The yataghan whistled through air and flesh.

The fair-haired head struck the basket with a dull thud.

The berserker only clenched his teeth at the death of his konung. It was time to leave. He had seen everything that brought him to the market, and there was no reason to remain. Besides, stooping and hunching to conceal his towering height and powerful build had become unbearable beneath the fury and helplessness boiling in his soul.

Shoving aside hapless peasants who celebrated the northern pirate chief's death, the Norseman hurried from the square, silently swearing vengeance for his leader.

He swore by the Lord of Flame and in the name of the Faceless One worshiped in these lands, as hot as the furnaces of Hell.

A single tear vanished into the northerner's shaggy fair beard.

"They will pay. They will pay for everything," the warrior whispered like a prayer.

But the moment he passed the butcher's rows, his gaze caught a painfully familiar silhouette.

It is her.

The thought flashed through his mind. The berserker called the girl's name, and she turned.

"Alive..." the eastern beauty whispered, almost soundlessly. Tears glistened in her eyes—whether of joy or sorrow, he could not tell.

"Alive. Me come for you," the northerner said in the language of the Sultanate.

Chapter One

“Long, long ago, at the dawn of the Age of Man, when humanity had only begun to conquer the reaches of the Earth and primeval magic still held great power, wondrous beings inhabited the world. Djinn. Ifrits. Gods and demons walked its surface, preparing Great Yer for the children of Adam. The Great Mother Tabigati personally supervised her servants and judged their work...”

The nursemaid’s voice was monotonous, and the text itself—heard dozens of times before—held no interest for her charge.

The black-eyed young maiden, whose long dark-blond hair was arranged in two braids, fidgeted upon the sofa and continually let her attention wander to whatever was happening beyond the large glass window.

“She approved the forms of the animals and their sizes and devised a purpose for each. Peace and harmony reigned upon the Earth. The Great Creator watched over all through the Eye of Heaven with which He enveloped His Creation. His firstborn disappointed their creator, and He banished them from heavenly Jannat, though He commanded Tabigati to care for them...”

At that moment, a small gray-brown bird landed on the branch outside the window and began searching the leaves with great seriousness.

The girl smiled.

How she longed to trade places with the little creature, spread her wings, and fly beyond the house of Ostos’s ruler.

“Zamira! This is an extremely important text. You must do more than know it—you must memorize it.”

The nursemaid was deeply angered by the girl’s inattention. But after a long breath, she merely turned the page and continued.

“Tabigati sought to create upon Yer a garden like Jannat. But Iblis challenged the Father, determined to prove that humanity was unworthy of such honor. Unfortunately, Tanati the Almighty, the Great Creator, granted Iblis his chance. The gates of Tartarus opened upon Yer, and Iblis’s faithful servants poured forth, defiling Tabigati’s creation. Yer’s face was scarred by waterless deserts, towering mountains crowned with volcanoes that spewed lava, and stinking, impassable swamps.

“Tabigati harbored resentment toward Iblis for what he had done to her garden. She resolved to protect the children of Adam with all her strength. One day, she witnessed the Dark One’s servants luring the first among equals—the great Arnar, forefather of the future sultans’ dynasty—into an ambush. She chose to aid the mortal and saved the future ruler of humankind, who was still a young man then.

“Iblis flew into a rage and unleashed his demons upon Tabigati’s own creations. Thus were werewolves and ghouls brought into the world.”

“And there are evil sorcerers and *ubyr* werewolves who serve their dark queen, Almauz-Kampyr!” the girl blurted, trying to conceal her indifference.

“Zamira, do not confuse ancient legend with nursery terrors.” The nursemaid threw up her hands and shook her head disapprovingly. “Child, please concentrate. Your father will have me flogged to death—or worse, set the dogs upon me—if you fail the history of Tabigati. I beg you, have mercy.”

Zamira turned toward her and ostentatiously rolled her eyes. Then she gave a doomed sigh, settled more comfortably upon the sofa, and arranged her face into an expression of interest.

“The Great Mother and Iblis gathered their armies and met in mortal combat. Their powers were equal. Then Arnar brought the armies of humankind to the Ukbyr Plateau and tipped the scales of victory toward Tabigati. But the damage to Yer was immense. Pangaea, once whole, broke apart into several continents.

“Tabigati came to love her helper with the purest love of which she was capable. She carried the families of Arnar’s clan to the safest fragment of Yer—Aiza—and filled it with animals and edible plants. The people lived and prospered, but their happiness did not last.

“Arnar revered Tabigati as a mother. But when he came before her leading his beloved by the hand, Tabigati learned jealousy. In a fit of rage, she burned Arnar and the woman carrying his child to ashes. Once she understood what she had done, she prayed to the Heavenly Father, Tanati, and begged Him to restore the murdered pair to life.

“But the law of the world is harsh. Life for life. Death for death. Not even Tabigati could violate it. The Creator heard her prayers but left the choice to Arnar. The man chose to preserve the life of his beloved, while Tabigati herself became Faceless.

“An immortal could not die. She condemned herself to an eternal dialogue with Iblis, guiding the dead into his realm. Thus Tabigati lost her name, and mortals began calling her Death. Yet death has always terrified humankind, and so the Great Mother became the Great Faceless One.

“When Iblis learned of the pregnancy of Aisha, beloved of the first sultan, he appealed to the Father against the injustice of the exchange. He had returned three souls from his realm and demanded the lives of Arnar’s unborn children in payment.

“But Tanati rejected the Lord of Flame’s claim, for the woman Arnar loved was the daughter of Iblis himself—the great demigoddess Sigrun. The Creator discerned the trick and spared Belmek in reward for his father’s selflessness and former deeds.

“This drove the god of the northerners into a fury. He resolved to claim the soul of the unborn Aisha at any cost. Then Tabigati placed her sign upon the girl—a mark in the shape of a winged dragon—declaring that the child belonged to her and that she alone might command the girl’s fate.

“In retaliation, the enraged Iblis demanded that the girl serve his mistress and swear a vow of chastity. Tanati accepted the claim and raised the first Temple of Tabigati—the Great Faceless One—upon Mount Aysinush at the very heart of Aiza. Yet He also granted great Tabigati a path by which she might escape eternal imprisonment in the realm of the dead.

“Thus the prophecy was born, and Aisha became Tabigati’s first High Priestess.

“Ever since, a girl bearing the Faceless One’s mark has been born in every generation of Arnar’s descendants. But only one will complete the initiation and succeed the High Priestess...”

The servant turned a page of the sacred book and noticed from the corner of her eye that her pupil—the daughter of the honorable Yusuf Bey—was once again staring out the window instead of listening.

“Zamira? Zamira, you are ignoring me again. How many times must we do this? What has gotten into you?”

The girl started guiltily. Her cheeks flushed when she realized she had once more drifted into her fantasies.

“You’ve read me this story more times than anyone could count,” she said in her defense and rose to her feet. “I’m far more interested in the initiation itself. And Tabigati’s song is beautiful, but whenever I sing it, a terrible longing grows inside my soul...”

The girl wrapped her arms around her shoulders, closed her eyes, and began to sing:

I ask you—love me forever,

even when the rains stand in our way.

Even if love beneath the moon cannot last,

do not believe it.

Just love me.

The little schemer knew that the sacred song melted her nursemaid's heart and turned her iron nature to candle wax. The nursemaid knew it too. The gray-haired woman smiled, caught once again by her young mistress's trick.

"What are you plotting now? Remember, only a chaste virgin who bears the mark may undergo the trial. Iblis's servants will do everything in their power to break the line of service."

"What is it like to be intimate with a man? Have you ever had a man, Akhneya? And you've never told me about the trial itself. What awaits me?" Zamira asked.

The nursemaid looked away, feeling a deep pity for her charge and fearing for the girl's life.

"Tabigati is Mother Nature. The trials will be bound to the elements. The first is water. The chosen maidens will be submerged in the sacred river, and the one who surfaces last will prevail."

"But I can't swim!" the girl cried as fear slid over her body on cold, sticky tentacles.

"There is no need to swim. You must simply not fear the water."

"Why didn't you tell me before? I could have practiced."

"Chastity," the woman pronounced firmly, raising one index finger.

"Oh, Nurse, enough of that. I'm going to the lake."

"But—"

"No buts. I want to try. Otherwise, you'll have to tell me about intimacy. I need to know what to beware of. Men are so treacherous. How am I supposed to preserve my virginity—much less my chastity—if they're as cunning as Iblis himself? And if you argue, I'll complain to Father, and he'll replace you with someone more accommodating."

"I have devoted sixteen years of my life to raising you. I love you as though you were my own," the offended nursemaid stammered, clutching her heart, though she knew Yusuf Bey's daughter's unruly nature perfectly well.

"I don't want you replaced. Don't be angry. I'll be quick, I promise. And when I return, I swear I'll learn the final verse of Tabigati's song and read two more chapters. By the way, can a chaste virgin produce milk?"

"No, she cannot," the woman sighed, surrendering to the irrepressible girl's will.

"Then you do know what it's like to be with a man, Akhneya?"

"Go bathe. I'll bring the towels," the nursemaid replied, closing the book.

"No need. Rest. I'll take them myself. You're the finest nursemaid in the world!" Zamira shouted.

She slipped through the door and raced headlong down the corridor.

The young girl's heart beat fast and loud, anticipating something fascinating and forbidden. The unknown frightened the goddess-marked maiden, yet drew her with irresistible force—for forbidden fruit always seems the sweetest.

Chapter Two

It was a scorching summer noon. The brilliant sun beat down without mercy. *Chilla*—the season of fiercest heat. Even upon the *tapchan* beneath an old, spreading plane tree, the air was unbearably close.

Maruf, well past his youth, had just finished his midday meal and was drinking tea. He watched his only son, Alisher, wielding a *ketmen* in their small plot as he helped his mother tend the garden.

The youth was broad-shouldered and tireless, handling the heavy tool like a child's toy. Alisher was only seventeen, yet many grown men might already have envied his strength. Ordinarily, he earned extra money as a porter at the local bazaar, but the local qadi had forbidden trade during the midday hours because of the heat.

After a while, a gray-haired woman in colorful clothes approached the *tapchan*. Her household work completed, she brought her husband a flatbread and a little *qurt*.

"Don't forget to take this with you." She placed the bundle carefully at one corner of the platform. "Would you like more tea?"

The man tore his gaze from his son, who continued working in the vegetable patch, and turned toward his wife.

"Thank you, but no. I must be going."

The woman sighed and began gathering the dishes onto a tray. Once an irresistibly beautiful eastern maiden, she had lost none of her dignity with age.

"Fatima, tell our son I need his help in Master Yusuf Bey's garden," Maruf said.

The plate of flatbreads nearly slipped from her hands.

"No man under fifty is allowed to cross the threshold of Yusuf Bey's household. The punishment is ten strokes of the cane upon the soles of the feet," she exclaimed, reminding her husband of the inevitable penalty should their son be caught.

"The irrigation channels have dried. The water has fallen. The master's roses are withering. If I cannot put it right, I will lose my head. I cannot manage alone. You know Yusuf Bey's temper."

"Oh, Maruf. I've begged you a hundred times to leave that place. You would be better off joining a caravan. At least I could rest from you while you traveled, and the money would be better."

"Yes, and the *basmachi* and *bashi-bazouks* would attack more often. Do you wish me dead?"

"And what is this? Either our son gets the cane across his feet or you get an ax across your neck. Desert brigands are more merciful than your Yusuf Bey."

"What good is protesting when nothing can be changed? I need Alisher's help. Will you let him come?"

"Of course. If they take your head, how am I supposed to manage the household alone afterward? Don't forget the bundle. Be careful there, and watch our son. He may look grown, but he is still a child inside."

"Thank you, my joy," the gardener whispered.

He kissed his wife on the cheek and began gathering his things with a groan.

Yusuf Bey's garden was magnificent, a true oasis of paradise. It had been established by the great-grandmother of Ostos's present ruler.

The little city stood at a fortunate crossroads of caravan routes. Northern caravans and merchants from the east alike found shelter and rest there. Ostos's bazaar overflowed with wares. Traders hurried to sell perishable goods and replenish their provisions and water.

In time, a wall was built around the impromptu market, and permanent counters appeared. Stables and workshops followed. From early morning until late at night, the place hummed. The

ringing of smiths' hammers mingled with the cries of mules, the neighing of horses, and the whisper of *khan-atlas* silk.

The town grew, and with it grew the treasury of the bey who ruled these lands.

Once, even the sultan himself visited Ostos, but the landscape displeased him.

The resourceful mistress of the household—the first wife of Yusuf Bey's great-grandfather—explained that the city lacked water. No one now remembered how she won the sultan's favor, but a month later an army arrived at Ostos.

The terrified residents prepared themselves for death. Instead, the sultan's warriors dug a lake beside the little Anktara River. Then, under the direction of the present ruler's great-grandmother, they planted a sumptuous garden. Soon caravan drivers themselves were bringing exotic plants to Ostos as gifts for its ruler.

The garden became a wonder—a new Eden, as the northerners called it, or a reflection of Jannat. Unlike its divine twin, it lacked only beautiful houris and peri.

Its roses rivaled the flowers that had once grown in the sacred garden. Every ruler without exception had taken pride in them, which was why Maruf worried so deeply.

The enormous wooden buckets were light enough for Alisher compared with the merchants' bales he carried at the market. And only the chosen few were permitted to see the garden's wonders. Inspired by such unprecedented beauty, the youth carried load after load of water from the pond.

Only the bushes of divinely white roses—white as clouds in the heavens—remained to be watered when Alisher heard wondrous singing along the path.

His footsteps became silent, his movements cautious. Like a wild snow leopard, young Alisher crept through the thickets, afraid of startling the enchanting peri with the bewitching voice. Surely only such a magical creature could sing so freely in this garden.

The water reflected the silhouette of a woman while the voice continued a melody unknown to the porter:

I ask you—love me forever,

even when the rains stand in our way.

Even if love beneath the moon cannot last,

do not believe it.

Just love me.

Holding his breath, the youth stepped closer.

A maiden of impossible beauty stood naked to the waist in the water, washing her luxuriant, waist-long hair. Her lips seemed softer than rose petals, and eyes the color of a warm summer night gazed dreamily into the distance.

Love me when morning

suddenly enters your home.

Do not forget me for even a moment;

remember me, though grief grips your heart.

I ask you—love me forever,

even when we are sometimes apart...

The song flowed above the lake's ripples, and birds joined the enchantress's voice.

The young man lowered his gaze and saw upon the peri's small, still almost childlike breasts nipples the color of buckwheat honey.

Alisher swallowed nervously and stood entranced by the young singer's unearthly beauty.

I ask you—love me forever,

even if another stands beside me.

I ask you—love me forever.

Never dare forget.

I ask you—love me forever,

though the years may pass.

Let every candle gutter out.

Let them tell you I have died.

I ask you—love me forever,

for even as I died,

I still loved you...

The song's final words pierced the youth's soul. Tears filled his eyes, and the bucket slipped from his hands.

The girl cried out and sank into the water up to her throat, though the lake's crystalline clarity did little to conceal her nakedness.

Alisher remained motionless, unable to tear his gaze from her snow-white breasts and the dark mark of a winged dragon between them.

"Who are you? Come out and show yourself at once," the beautiful stranger commanded in a voice that allowed no disobedience.

The gardener's son meekly stepped onto the shore.

His cheeks burned with embarrassment. Excitement spread through his body in an unfamiliar yet pleasant current, stirring his youthful blood.

"Pick up the towel and hand it to me."

He obeyed without protest, still admiring the beauty's charms.

"Haven't you stared enough, shameless creature? Turn around this instant so I can leave the water."

Alisher was genuinely ashamed of his brazen behavior. Reason commanded him to obey, but his heart rebelled.

The stern gaze of her black eyes neither frightened nor repelled him. It drew him closer and filled his soul with warmth and rapture.

"Did you hear me? Are you tired of living? Why are you silent? Are you mute?"

"No, I only... I..." His tongue seemed to have forgotten every word, or perhaps they were lodged together in his throat.

Alisher stole one final glance at the beauty, turned his head, and extended the towel toward her.

"Lost the power of speech?" The peri's tone softened, curiosity entering her voice.

“You’re simply so beautiful. I... forgive me, most radiant peri,” he breathed, trying to master the emotions raging within his chest.

“Truly?” the girl asked playfully as she took the towel from his hands.

She stood so close that Alisher felt her breath upon his chest. He squeezed his eyes shut, though not from fear.

He desperately wanted one more glimpse of the girl’s fragile figure, as if some ancient master had carved her from ivory.

“What is your name, at least, you statue?” Zamira asked mockingly, deeply pleased by the impression she had made upon the strange youth.

“Ali... Alisher. Son of Yusuf Bey’s gardener,” he stammered, still struggling against the desire to open his eyes.

“How did you get in here? Men are forbidden to enter the garden. I could tell my father, and he would cut off your head.”

Alisher drew a deep breath, realizing he had mistaken the girl for a peri. He sank to one knee and bowed his head. His gaze came to rest upon the charming feet of Ostos’s ruler’s daughter.

“If I am to die anyway, allow me one last look at you before my death, beautiful lady,” he said, summoning his courage.

The girl snorted with amusement.

“That is all you ask before dying?” Zamira narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

“Yes, my lady,” he answered firmly.

“You are brave and honest, gardener’s son. Very well. Rise and look.”

Without wasting a heartbeat, he straightened and looked at her.

She stood before him wrapped in nothing but a towel, and Alisher drowned in eyes as dark as a moonless night, as clear and bottomless as fissures in the western mountains.

“Do you like me?” the beauty asked playfully.

“Beyond reason. Thank you, my lady. I am ready now to accept punishment for my insolence.” He bowed his head obediently and lowered himself to one knee again.

The young man’s honesty and courage touched the girl’s heart, and Zamira realized she did not want Alisher to die.

“I won’t tell Father what happened, and I assume you won’t chatter about it either. Let it remain our secret. As punishment for your offense, you will come here in the evenings, tell me about the city, and answer my questions. Agreed?”

The youth’s heart nearly burst with happiness. He would see her again. Let the garden guards break the soles of his feet—Ali longed to behold her beauty once more, even at the cost of his life.

“As you wish, black-eyed one.” He nodded, already knowing that he would fulfill any desire of Yusuf Bey’s daughter at any cost.

“Then every Friday, after the holy man sings from the minaret, I will wait for you here. Now go.” She pointed toward the path leading out of the garden.

“But, my lady... If I don’t bring the water, the white roses will wither, and my father will lose his head.”

“Very well. Draw the water and leave without looking back. Turn around even once, and you will lose your head after all,” Zamira commanded capriciously, though the gardener’s son’s words had sunk deep into her soul.

Yusuf Bey’s daughter desperately wanted him to look back after filling the buckets. Not because she wished him dead. Zamira merely longed to feel the warmth of Ali’s admiring gaze once more.

She even dropped the towel deliberately and made no hurry to pull the sun-warmed fabric of her clothing over her body.

Alisher remembered her threat but could not resist turning around.

Zamira stood upon the shore, no longer concealing her nakedness with the towel.

Instead of growing angry and calling the guards, she winked. Alisher broke into a joyous smile and galloped away along the path into the garden.

His father greeted his delayed return from the lake with a magnificent torrent of abuse.

“Where have you been? The guards make their rounds every four hours. Do you know what will happen if they see you?”

“Forgive me, *ota*. I fell into a daydream. I heard the birds singing and stopped to listen.”

“Grown as tall as a poplar, strong enough to wring a buffalo’s neck, and with no more brains than... Ah, he stopped to listen to birds. Hurry. The patrol will be making its rounds soon.”

“Do the guards patrol after the evening prayer too?” Alisher asked, pouring a quarter of the bucket beneath another rosebush.

“Of course not. What fool would enter the garden then?”

“Why not?”

“They say that before the pond was dug and the garden planted, a thousand enslaved women were sacrificed to the Faceless One—one hundred from each *vilayat*. But the Faceless One rejected the offering because not all of them were chaste virgins. The rejected souls became *Ten Urtasy*—the Restless Dead. Their ghosts still wander the darkness, thirsting for vengeance. No true believer would stick his nose into these labyrinths at night.”

“What do you mean, they weren’t chaste virgins?”

“*Vay!* I’m going to kill Fatima. My son cannot possibly be this stupid.” Maruf threw up his hands. “Chastity and virginity are not the same thing, you blockhead. Virginity is purity of the body. Chastity is purity of the soul. They say some of the enslaved women were dragged from their homes and torn from the men they loved. Their hearts had already known love for a man, and they could no longer serve the Faceless One. Understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Alisher muttered as he emptied the remaining water.

“If you understand, move. Another ten trips or so and we can go home. Your mother has surely prepared a magnificent supper.”

The youth seized the buckets and hurried toward the lake, but the shore was already empty. Yusuf Bey’s daughter had gone, leaving behind only echoes of her beautiful song. Its melody lingered in the garden for a long time, carried onward by the birds’ singing.

Chapter Three

Until nearly the middle of Bilek, the first month of autumn, the gardener's son slipped away from home every Friday. Each time, he brought a gift for his companion—a handful of dried fruit, a delicacy from across the sea, or some exotic sweet from the southern lands.

The young pair spent hours watching the Faceless Svir kindle stars across the night sky. They watched the majestic moon change her face and narrow into a crescent, talking for hours at a time—sometimes until dawn.

Born with the Faceless One's mark and raised beneath the strict supervision of nursemaids, the bey's daughter found everything fascinating. Alisher learned that Zamira had never ventured beyond the walls of her father's residence, so he took pleasure in describing Ostos, its bazaar, and its streets of craftsmen in rich detail.

The girl listened to his stories, while the youth bathed in her gaze—bottomless as fissures in primordial rock and warm as a summer night.

Alisher did not even dare dream of touching the beauty's snow-white skin. Thoughts of her drove him mad. Only beside her did he feel that Yusuf Bey's garden truly was Jannat.

Sometimes—especially when Alisher made her laugh with an amusing tale—Zamira sang him the song of great love: the Faceless One's plea to Ibrahim, first sultan of humankind, before he rejected her and she descended into the underworld, veiling her beauty beneath the hijab of death.

Her voice murmured like a waterfall of pearls through the stillness of summer nights, accompanied by cicadas and the croaking of frogs upon the lake. To the young lovers, it seemed that nothing and no one could disturb their idyll.

But nothing beneath the moon is eternal, and even gods often envy the happiness of lovers.

Fatima wrapped a heated stone in a towel and placed it beneath her husband's feet. The fire barely illuminated the mud-brick walls of their hovel as damp wood crackled in the hearth.

Maruf coughed.

"How do you feel, my lord?"

"Cold. Where is that good-for-nothing wandering? When the fool appears, tell him to chop firewood."

"Alisher still hasn't returned. I'm worried about him. Ever since you took him into that accursed garden, he has not been himself. He disappears for entire days. He has grown thin and hardly eats."

The woman added another pair of logs to the hearth.

Maruf pulled the sheepskin more tightly around himself.

"I did not want to upset you, my love, but I am already ashamed of him before the neighbors. Khatuna, the carpet seller, asked where we found buried treasure. Your darling spends piles of coins on trinkets, while we have no firewood and the roof leaks. Winter is coming, Fatima. What if it is cold and snowy? Alisher must contribute more to the family."

The woman sighed heavily but did not dare contradict her husband. Age was taking its toll, and supporting the family had become increasingly difficult for Maruf. Yet denying her son the chance to save for a bride-price hardly seemed right to a mother.

"He is grown, Maruf. It is time he thought about a family of his own."

"He thinks about nothing at all. He scatters coins like a merchant from Khmarg. This way, at least everyone would benefit. They say he has taken an evening position as a striker in Tabir's smithy."

The mother's heart missed a beat. Tabir was a famous master and paid his apprentices and hammermen very well.

“My heart senses trouble, Maruf. What if the boy is in danger? What if he has become involved in something wicked—or fallen in with the servants of Iblis?”

“The servants of Iblis are all blue-eyed, just like your son.” The man’s voice grew irritable. “He simply has extra money, and it burns a hole in his pocket. Listen to me, woman. We must demand more from him. He is obliged to help us, not squander his earnings on unfamiliar fruit and useless baubles. Faceless One forbid he takes to the bottle or starts visiting the harbor *sharmutas*.”

“He isn’t like that.” The mother brought a teapot and *piala* from the kitchen. “Drink your tea, Maruf. Alisher bought this blend from the *tabib*, and the honey from traders out of Bakashma.”

“I am not so old yet, my beauty.” Her husband turned and accepted the bowl from her hands. “I still remember being young. I remember turbulent nights. That is why I want you to take our son’s excess earnings. The coins will be safer with you, and I will have peace of mind. Bilek is already here. Winter will come soon. We need a reserve. Speak to him.”

Fatima nodded and poured more tea.

The day leaned toward sunset. Evening approached.

Alisher threw the final sack onto the *arba*. His body groaned and ached from brutal labor. But today was Joghma—Friday—which meant he would see her eyes again and hear her voice.

Despite her rank, the ruler’s daughter treated Ali without condescension. She looked at him as an equal, a friend. And when she sang Tabigati’s song, it seemed to the youth that they shared something greater than friendship.

For that, he worked sixteen-hour days—carrying burdens, swinging a sledgehammer in the forge. The light in Zamira’s eyes was dearer to Alisher than every treasure in the world. She had become special, unlike the other girls who first measured his purse and the size of the bride-price he could pay.

The merchant counted out the agreed copper coins.

“Exactly five, as promised. Will you come for the night unloading? A galley from Sogdinia arrives tonight. Magriskans. Spices and nuts. We need strong hands.”

“Forgive me, honored sir. I cannot tonight. Any other time, gladly. Perhaps for loading?”

“Those galleys do not take return cargo. Their goods have legs. But I will let you know if help is needed.”

Alisher bowed to the merchant and raced like an arrow toward the northerners’ stall on the opposite side of the bazaar.

The seller had kept his word and was waiting. The precious berries inside the cloth pouch were still fresh.

Clutching his treasure, Alisher did not slow as he ran through the familiar streets toward Yusuf Bey’s garden. Everything was as it always had been, and his heart sang with the joy of their approaching meeting.

The youth slipped through the opening. But this time, one of the garden guards had lingered at the tavern longer than usual and saw someone enter the holy of holies.

He followed the intruder. The moment Alisher seated himself upon the trunk of a weeping willow bent almost to the ground, the bey’s *nukers* fell upon him.

Yusuf Bey was furious that anyone had dared trespass upon his domain. Abandoning his supper, he went personally to the lake to question the insolent intruder.

At first, he meant to flog the youth to death. But greed prevailed. By the time he reached the shore, Yusuf Bey had already decided the criminal’s fate. He needed only to learn why the trespasser had entered the garden.

The guards twisted Alisher’s arms painfully behind his back, bound them, and forced him to his knees before the master of the household.

“Who are you, and why did you come here?” Yusuf Bey weighted the question with a kick to the ribs. The gardener’s son lost his breath as pain seized his lungs. “Answer, or I’ll have you skinned alive.”

To demonstrate the threat, they stretched Alisher’s arms apart and tied him to the willow.

“Speak, and your death will be easy,” the bey roared, infuriated by the boy’s stubbornness.

The ruler’s threats did not frighten Alisher. He desperately sought a way to protect Zamira without bringing disaster upon his own family, but the guards’ blows kept his thoughts from forming into anything logical.

They tore the shirt from his shoulder. The captain of the guard cut deeply into the flesh.

The youth knew what would come next. He had watched a condemned man flayed in the square and could imagine the torment.

Fear enveloped his mind. Unbearable pain might force him to betray their secret.

“I heard a nymph of incomparable beauty lives in the lake,” the porter babbled, hoping the bey would not hear the lie. “Her songs are gentle and beautiful. They say that if you surprise her, she must grant any wish. I am the son of your gardener, Maruf. He fell ill. I wanted to catch the nymph so she would restore my father’s health.”

Yusuf Bey raised one hand. In the sudden silence, Alisher heard a girl’s relieved breath from the bushes.

The porter’s heart faltered. He could not have been the only one to hear it.

Zamira was desperately anxious. One rustle or awkward motion might betray her.

The youth resolved once more to save his beloved and shouted as loudly as he could, feigning repentance.

“Forgive me, my lord. I did not come from greed. My father doesn’t even know I entered the garden.”

“Have you lost your mind? What damned nymph? What devil’s nonsense is this? Are you an idiot?” The bey could not decide whether the boy was mocking him or speaking sincerely.

He was about to order the insolent youth’s execution when the Faceless One decided Alisher’s hour had not yet come. Help arrived from where he least expected it.

“He truly is a holy fool. I know him. He works as a porter in the bazaar. Strong, but Heaven did not bless him with a mind. Yesterday, I saw him bargaining with northerners for exotic berries and promising nearly five coins. He said they were ‘for the nymph.’ Five coins—half a week’s wages. Enough to buy flatbread for a week.”

The guard’s speech ended beneath his lord’s hard stare. He lowered his head.

“See whether he has the berries,” the bey commanded.

They tore the rest of the shirt from the youth. The bundle of berries—crushed beneath the guards’ blows—fell at Yusuf Bey’s feet.

“Sell him to the Magriskans. They pay well for strong slaves.”

The man spat toward the porter and walked away.

The slave market occupied the farthest corner of the bazaar, beside the livestock yard and latrines.

The sultan did not encourage the slave trade, but neither did he hurry to prohibit it. He preferred collecting tribute to driving the traffic underground.

Alisher was dragged directly from the cellar into the market.

The youth had accepted his fate. He no longer noticed the crowd’s cries or the appraising stares of merchants in human flesh. Heavy shackles replaced the stocks, restoring some movement to his arms. His body still ached from the previous day’s beating. He stood in a row with the other unfortunates.

There were few enslaved people and equally few buyers, so the auction Yusuf Bey had expected never occurred. A merchant from Sogdina bought the entire lot in bulk.

Once the paperwork was complete, the captives were chained in pairs and marched through the entire city toward the wharf on the Daryo.

When Alisher glimpsed his mother's face in the crowd—aged in a single night—he jerked toward her and received his first blow from a slave driver's whip.

The lash cut deeply across the youth's face, further disfiguring the porter's already unhandsome features.

His mother watched her foolish son for a long time as they led him away. Alisher felt her stare in his skin and in his soul.

He did not know how to answer her silent question: *Why?*

"You are Beaten now. That is your new name. Call me Aksak," said the bald man chained to Alisher. "Believe me, it will be easier. Forget your true name—or, if you have the courage, preserve it and tell no one. Then you will possess a secret of your own. A treasure. Your old name will always remind you of what you lost, of who you were and what you possessed. That memory drives men mad. We are slaves now. Property. Better to forget the past."

"How did you come here, Aksak?" the youth asked, trying to distract himself from his dark thoughts.

"Never ask a slave that question. It is forbidden," the man snarled, and said nothing more.

The burning ache of the wound across Alisher's face gradually eclipsed the pain of his beating. Yet he did not regret what he had done. He understood that he could not have escaped his fate in any case.

At least he had protected the honor of Yusuf Bey's daughter—the girl who bore Tabigati's own sign and had captured his heart. He hoped he had performed a noble deed and would receive a swift death as his reward from the Faceless One.

Burdened by these thoughts, he failed to notice when his feet stepped onto the deck of the Sogdian galley.

The new arrivals were given a waterskin apiece and two boiled tubers of *chalbar*, a local rutabaga. Then the captives filled the empty places at the oars.

Alisher was seated beside the central passage. His shackles were looped around the oar, and a hammer drove an enormous pin deep into the wood, binding him completely to the two other unfortunates seated nearer the side.

The man closest to the porter snatched a tuber from his hands and stuffed it hastily into his mouth.

Before Alisher could protest, the whip sliced across his body again—this time striking his bare, sweating back.

The thief's punishment was worse. He shrieked and seized his cheek.

"No order was given to eat. Try that again and we'll use your *chuchak* for *zheena* bait," the overseer thundered.

Ali's neighbor shrank against the bench, nodding frantically.

"And you, newcomer—remember: whoever gawks goes hungry."

A drum began to beat, and the captives leaned into the oars.

Alisher quickly lost all sense of time.

The fierce sun burned his back. His sides were covered in dark purple bruises from the boots of Yusuf Bey's nukers, and the whip wounds bled and caused unbearable pain whenever sweat entered them. His mouth went dry.

The youth released the oar and found his waterskin. He managed only two swallows of life-giving water before the whip cracked and opened another wound upon his back.

Alisher nearly dropped the precious vessel as the fresh agony stole his breath.

The overseer raised his arm with a malicious grin, preparing another stroke, but froze at the captain's commanding voice.

"What are you doing, you idiot? He is the only acquisition worth anything. These are my slaves, not your oarsmen. Touch another and I'll have your filthy carcass nailed to the ship's prow. That will teach the rest to respect a merchant's property."

"Ca... Captain..." the brute with the whip bleated, drawing his head fearfully into his shoulders.

"Give them food and water. Put them in order. My name is on the contract. What will you do when his wounds fester?"

"But I..."

"If he does not reach Sogdinia alive, you will take his place on the platform. Understand? They are not merely slaves. They are my wealth—and that wealth becomes gold only at the market in Sogdia. Who will pay for the dead and crippled? You witless fool. Treat his wounds at once."

"With what?" the overseer asked, turning still paler.

"Lick them clean if you know nothing better, imbecile. Have him piss into something and wash them with it. Useless moron. You're fit only to drive donkeys. Is this your first time aboard?"

"Second..."

"And apparently your last. See to my money."

The captain vanished into the shade of his cabin. The overseer hurried to obey.

The vessel hove to without dropping anchor and drifted helplessly with the current.

Chapter Four

After the night's events, everyone in the palace seemed to have gone mad. Yusuf Bey ordered an extraordinary inspection of his servants, though his outrage gradually subsided once the guards took the trespasser away to the market.

Even so, the consequences of his fury were plain in the number of dishes served at his daughter's breakfast.

Akhneya did not touch the food while she waited for her charge, but the girl was late. The tea had grown cold, as had the eggs and pastries, and the fruit had lost the gleam of perfect freshness.

Yusuf Bey's daughter's absence from breakfast deeply troubled the nursemaid. The woman's heart told her that Zamira was somehow connected to the previous evening's incident.

She had also sensed for some time that something was wrong with her charge. Those Friday-evening escapes could end in disaster, yet willful Zamira ignored her warnings and did not fear provoking her father's anger.

Something had to be done. The old woman's heart bled at the thought that her stubborn girl had entangled herself in something dangerous.

Summoning her courage, the nursemaid climbed to Zamira's bedchamber and found her hysterical and weeping.

"What happened, darling? A terrible dream?"

The girl flung herself around her nursemaid's neck, unable to contain the pain that had gathered within her since the previous evening.

"I only wanted a little amusement. I made him come to the garden, and he... I honestly didn't know how much his gifts cost. He spent his last coins at the bazaar buying me rare things. What a fool I am. Not everyone lives in luxury."

Zamira sobbed uncontrollably, her forehead pressed against the nursemaid's shoulder.

"They caught him yesterday. They beat him and demanded to know why he came into the garden, and he protected me. Father threatened to have him skinned, but he still didn't betray me. Why? I was the one who ordered him to come. I thought every man was cruel and cunning like Iblis, but he..."

The girl's words dissolved into an incoherent howl. Akhneya stroked her hair tenderly, barely containing her own tears.

"When Father asked why he was there, I was so frightened. I thought I was finished. But he told them about a fairy in the lake, and Father sold him into slavery. It's my fault. I destroyed his life. Why did he do it? He knew what would happen, and still..."

Zamira wept and struggled to understand why the boy had sacrificed himself when he could have revealed the truth and returned to his family.

Alisher would not have escaped brutal punishment, but he would have remained alive and retained the chance to see those he loved.

Did his sacrifice mean something special?

Had the same strange, pleasant feeling settled in his heart—the feeling that made Zamira's soul grow still with happiness whenever she met him?

"Were you intimate with him?" the nursemaid asked almost inaudibly after the bey's daughter had calmed a little.

"No!" the girl cried, her expression plainly wounded in both pride and dignity. "How dare you think such a thing of me? He never touched me with so much as a finger."

"Not all men are treacherous and cruel like Iblis. Some are worthy. When such men love truly, they will face death, Hell, or the entire world at war for the woman they love. For their other half, they are prepared to fight not only enemies, but gods."

“Then perhaps he is my destiny—and I condemned him to slavery.” Fresh tears poured from the girl’s eyes.

“No, my darling. You never understood the parable of Tabigati. You learned the words but missed their meaning. Those she has chosen possess no other half among men. Your destiny is service. You are the future High Priestess of the Faceless One. Your mark lies over your heart for a reason, and even your name means honor and support.”

Akhneya drew the girl to her breast as if trying to shield her from every evil in the world.

“Only you can beg Tabigati to save that unfortunate boy. But you must become perfect, for the Faceless One is deaf to everyone else. Become what fate intended. Tell no one what happened—do you hear me? Otherwise, they will question your chastity, and the boy will perish.

“Forget everything else. Had he been your destined husband, the Faceless One would have brought him as an infant into a worthy family equal to your own. Forget it. I will forget it too. This conversation never happened. Never.”

The nursemaid held Zamira still more tightly, doing everything she could to conceal the emotions struggling to escape.

Akhneya loved Yusuf Bey’s daughter as her own and sincerely wished her happiness. Yet the woman understood that a marked path could not be changed. Tabigati’s sign would not disappear, and Zamira was destined to devote her life to the glory of the Faceless One.

The captain’s threats had not been wasted. The overseers’ whips disappeared, replaced by lengths of rope whose separated strands were knotted at the ends.

Such a weapon did not tear the skin, but its blows were no less painful.

Irnam had not forgiven Alisher for the humiliation he believed the negligent slave had unjustly brought upon him. Whenever he passed, he kicked the youth, or accidentally-on-purpose stepped upon his hand.

Given his own will, Irnam would long since have decorated the ship’s prow with the boy’s remains. But he possessed no authority over the captives’ lives, and that limitation drove the overseer nearly mad.

It was the third day of the voyage. Having safely cleared the river shoals, the vessel emerged from the mouth of the Daryo. The last island lay ahead. Beyond it stretched the boundless reaches of the Yarsula, the violent sea between the Sultanate and Sogdina.

The helmsman was already dreaming of wrapping his fingers around a cup of *sherabi* from the captain’s private cask when lateen sails appeared from behind the island to port.

“Norsemen!” the lookout shrieked, spreading panic across the deck.

The guards hurried into their armor and began taking down the shields hung along the sides. The captain emerged from his cabin to oversee the situation personally. The drummer froze, awaiting an order, while the helmsman seized the tiller.

“Belay the sheets. Raise sail. Turn to starboard,” the captain shouted to the handful of sailors. “Starboard bank, oars up. Port bank, faster. Keep the rhythm.”

The drummer hammered the stretched hide. Overseers rushed toward the captives along the port side. The starboard oars hung motionless above the water, granting the wretches an unexpected rest.

The galley groaned and began turning, but the headwind fought them. By the time the crew found the proper tack, the northerners’ ship had closed to bowshot.

A few more strokes, and the longship rammed the slaver’s side, shattering oars. Some of the captives nearest the hull died instantly.

The oar to which Alisher was chained snapped and leaped from its lock. The impact hurled the youth—now shackled to a heavy length of broken timber—nearly to the center of the deck.

Grappling hooks flew.

Iron and rope bound the two ships together.

Alisher had barely regained his feet when he saw Irnam charging him with a drawn saber. The porter's hands still gripped the fragment of oar chained to him.

He understood what was about to happen. He craved death—but not at this monster's hands.

All the rage accumulated within him found release.

The broken oar swept through an arc and crushed his tormentor's shoulder guard. The heavy blow dropped the overseer to one knee and knocked the saber from his hand.

The second stroke caved in his skull.

Alisher howled like a wild beast.

Several guards rushed toward that inhuman cry, but the youth's labor-hardened muscles drove the oar fragment with ease. In his mighty hands, it had become a deadly weapon.

One attacker after another flew beneath the improvised club. Then a bearded northerner swung an ax at him.

Underestimating the timber's weight, the berserker took the blow upon his shield and was immediately thrown into the rowing pit.

Iron-clad Norsemen surrounded Alisher.

"Stop!" The captain's voice rose above the battle, and the slavers lowered their weapons.

"I am Captain Hasym al-Batum, owner of this galley. My men and I surrender to the victor's mercy and appeal to the unwritten law of sailors."

An enormous bearded man in scale armor climbed aboard the merchant vessel, a massive ax across his shoulders.

"I am Yorik Storm Wind. I accept your surrender and promise mercy. Order your warrior to lower his weapon." The barbarian chieftain pointed toward Alisher.

"That is no warrior, honored sir. You are mistaken. He is a rebellious slave."

The bearded man laughed loudly and motioned his warriors away from Alisher. Unsure how to behave, the youth lowered the bloodied timber.

"Very well, Hasym. We are more numerous and stronger. Give me half your cargo, share your provisions and water, and you may continue your journey. There will be no more bloodshed. Your nukers have already pissed their breeches, so the arrangement is fair."

The man laughed, and his warriors joined him with loud guffaws.

"Valiant..." The captain faltered and bent in a bow. Perhaps he had forgotten the pirate's name or had no hope of pronouncing it correctly. "Chieftain. We possess neither gold nor valuable cargo. We are carrying slaves to Sogdinia. All our gold remained in Ostos's market, but I will share provisions and water."

"Good. But slaves are cargo too, and worth money. A slave who knocked Asard himself from his feet is worth a great deal."

The captain ground his teeth but nodded.

The bearded Norseman approached Alisher.

"What is your name, slave?"

"Vatyq," Alisher answered, remembering his fellow captive's advice.

"Beaten, then." The barbarian chieftain laughed again. "Among my people, we say one beaten man is worth two unbeaten. Very well, Hasym. I will take this one and three women of my choosing, along with the food and water we agreed upon."

The captain waved one hand. Several sailors hurried into the hold to carry out his wishes before the bloodthirsty Norsemen changed their minds.

The conflict appeared settled, but Alisher raised his timber again.

"I will never be a slave again—neither yours nor anyone else's," the youth said through clenched teeth, prepared to accept an honorable death.

The chieftain's expression changed sharply. His voice became furious and promised nothing good.

“And you are prepared to die?”

Alisher set his feet and readied himself to fight.

“Yes.” His answer was so quiet that only those nearest heard, but his resolve did not waver.

Yorik stared in surprise at the slave, then at his brother climbing from the rowing pit. Rage boiled inside the clan's finest champion. But the chieftain's signal made Asard offer the captive his ax.

“Love chained me to an oar. Fate made the oar my weapon. With it, I will meet Tabigati,” Vatyq rasped. He spat into his palms and tightened his grip upon the timber.

“So be it!” Yorik roared.

Snatching a battle-ax from one of the Norsemen, he charged Alisher.

Despite his age and heavy armor, the chieftain moved with astonishing speed. He easily avoided the porter's sweeping strike and countered at once.

The battle-ax passed over Alisher's head as he barely ducked. The northern steel curved through the air and crashed down upon Vatyq from above.

The youth not only blocked the heavy ax stroke but stood against the chieftain's strength and knocked the weapon from his hands.

Elated by his success, the captive raised his timber for the finishing blow. But the chieftain drove one shoulder into his chest and knocked him from his feet.

The youth crashed onto the planed deck boards, polished bright by years of wear.

A heartbeat later, the barbarian's belt ax bit into the planks beside his head.

“Vatyq is dead. Rise, Thrasing the Unbowed.” The man extended a hand and helped him to his feet. “I, Yorik Storm Wind, jarl of Windale, name you brother and warrior of the Storm Winds clan.”

Chapter Five

Alisher-Thrasing's life changed little when he changed ships. Discipline aboard the longship was harsh and enforced through punishments no less severe.

True, training in the warrior's craft was added to rowing. Alisher was beaten constantly—with fists or wooden copies of battle weapons.

Asard struck him especially hard, seeking revenge for his defeat more than teaching anything.

It seemed every inch of the former captive's body had received its share of blows and could hurt no worse. Then morning came, and everything began again: training, breakfast, rowing, more training, and lessons in handling the ship's rigging.

The former porter had already learned what a sheet and sternpost were and where to find the mainstay.

Despite the provisions taken from the slaver, food and drink were scarce among the Norsemen. Water was their greatest problem. Despairing of finding another merchant ship, Yorik turned toward home.

Thrasing felt the northerners' hostile glances constantly.

Everything became worse one night when a wave covered the Beacon of the Lord of Flame—the ship's ward and talisman—with seaweed.

Jochen, a distant kinsman of Asard's wife, especially despised the foreigner who had taken what the Norseman considered his rightful place. Whether deliberately or by accident, he handed the lamp to Alisher. Wet weed made its bronze surface slippery. The Beacon fell to the deck and went dark.

Angry rumors spread among the northerners.

The crew blamed the failed voyage upon the black-haired youth with the scarred face. When a violent storm struck as they approached their native fjords, the grumbling reached the captain.

Yorik was furious.

He promised to leave every malcontent at home on the next voyage—and throw anyone who refused to be silent overboard.

"You would raise an ax against your own kinsman?" Jochen growled. "First you publicly accept an outcast into the clan and name him your brother, and now you're ready to murder your own people. Is this not the old witch's sorcery?"

"Astrid? You lack the courage to speak her name, yet accuse her of witchcraft? Have you forgotten that famine and plague passed Windale by last winter?"

Yorik turned toward the crew.

"Which of you volunteered when disaster threatened the clan? Have you forgotten where the gold for this raid came from? Or is one of you prepared to challenge me and contest the chieftain's mace?"

The Norsemen remained silent.

"You do not know the price the old sorceress demanded, because not one of you dared accompany my brother and me. Yet now you whine like jackals at my sworn brother?"

"He isn't even a northerner," Jochen persisted, though his voice had grown much quieter.

"And you? Are you a man of Windale? If you were not my wife's kinsman, I would have fed you to the crabs long ago for that filthy tongue. Did the elders not choose you as Keeper of the Beacon? Who is to blame when the guard dog sleeps through a fox's visit to the henhouse? Contradict me once more, and I will cut out your tongue. Thrasing is my brother. Heaven decided it."

The arguments stopped, though resentment remained within the Norsemen's hearts.

When women in mourning clothes came to meet them at the wharf, Alisher seriously wondered whether he should have allowed the overseer to cut him down.

As soon as the crew disembarked and dragged the longship onto the shore, the waiting villagers surrounded Yorik. They spoke for a long time, explaining something, and many had tears in their eyes.

Unable to understand their language or find anything useful to do, Alisher studied the land that was now to become his home.

After Ostos's blazing sun, Windale's overcast sky and piercing northern wind planted sorrow in the new Thrasing's heart.

Rocky soil. Sparse vegetation. Low huts beside the shore. Neither palace nor castle. Only upon the hilltop stood a large building whose roof resembled the upturned hull of a longship.

He remembered Yusuf Bey's garden and the gleam of Zamira's black eyes. Grief tightened still further around his heart. Now the brand of slavery was not the only thing separating them. Hundreds of leagues of lifeless sea stretched between them.

After a time, Asard approached. He pushed the youth's shoulder, pointed toward the large building, and mimed walking.

"You and us go there. Understand? All ours go there."

There was neither hatred nor anger in the northerner's eyes. He slapped Alisher's shoulder once more and started along the narrow path between enormous boulders.

All Windale had gathered inside the building—men, women, elders, and children. The hall was noisy. Everyone spoke, unfamiliar words merging into a strange, anxious melody.

Alisher understood none of it, but their gestures made one thing clear: something terrible had happened, and Yorik would have to do something equally terrible in response.

Storm Wind's face became grim and serious. The Norsemen shouted for a long time, then wept. At last, Yorik beckoned Alisher closer.

The youth obeyed.

Though it was only September, Alisher was thoroughly chilled and gladly approached the fire burning at the center of the hall.

A long speech followed. The former captive understood only the names Yorik, Asard, and his own—Thrasing.

The chieftain turned toward the man from Ostos and continued in the language of the Sultanate.

"I presented you to my people. But disaster struck while we were away. A terrible affliction has fallen upon Windale. Nearly all the livestock died. Now hunger and sickness are killing the people. It is a strange disease. The animals first cough blood, then perish. The women say thick fog covered Windale before it began.

"I must go to the wise woman, but she will not receive us without a human sacrifice. That is why I took captives from your ship. Lately, I have had to visit the mountain witch far too often. Death in the ritual is kinder than a slave woman's fate in Sogdinia.

"I also told them of your courage. They will accept you as one of their own, Thrasing."

"Must all the women die?" Alisher asked, hoping the chieftain had simply expressed himself poorly. In Ostos, only lambs were sacrificed.

"Of course not. Only one. I will choose the oldest. The others will have a chance to please local men, bear children, and gain families. Otherwise, sooner or later, all of them will end beneath the knife of ancient, all-seeing Astrid. But why are you troubled? Has one of them caught your fancy? Tell me, and I will allow you to take her as your wife."

"The woman I love remained in Ostos. I am not her equal, and they sold me into slavery while trying to force me to reveal her name. So no."

"Love is love, but a man needs a woman's tenderness. Without it, he hardens into a cold, heartless creature."

"Without her eyes, life holds no sweetness for me. That is why I longed for death. My heart breaks at the thought that I will never see her again."

Alisher looked at Yorik.

“Take me to the wise woman instead. Give the girls a chance. I’m not even a warrior. I spent my life carrying bales through the bazaar. I was never handsome, and now I bear this scar and a slave’s brand. Your warriors think I bring disaster. Remember how close they came to mutiny.”

“So be it, Thrasing. I understand. A slave’s collar is much lighter than a warrior’s armor, and death is release. But we believe only a warrior fallen in battle can find peace in his heart. You possess a warrior’s heart.

“It is a pity to surrender it to the old hag, but I will not dissuade you. She foretold that I would meet a great warrior. When you felled my brother and then knocked the weapon from my own hands, I honestly believed you were that warrior. Perhaps she was simply mistaken. Or perhaps I saw only what I wished to see. Either way, it shall be as you ask, Unbowed.”

The chieftain turned toward his people and spent a long time translating their conversation for the now-silent villagers.

They made a bed for Alisher in the great hall and brought him an enormous piece of veal roasted over coals and a piece of baked dough that served northerners in place of flatbread.

He felt wretched. His full stomach reproached him for his choice.

So what if the sky was gray and sullen? So what if the air was cold? The land around him was beautiful. Black-and-gray mountains stretched far into the sea’s blue like the tentacles of some unknown ocean creature.

Something white lay upon their peaks, strange as the local people’s skin. Their eyes were blue—blue as the sky above Ostos—and their hair pale as ripe wheat.

The girls were beautiful too.

Not as beautiful as Zamira.

Zamira...

His heart shattered into tiny pieces again. To her, he was only a contemptible slave.

No. His decision was right. If he could not give Zamira happiness, he could at least give three women from the ship a chance.

The thought of meeting the Faceless One held little terror for his young, courageous soul. After all, his beloved was destined to become her priestess. Surely the goddess could not be cruel or terrible.

The strain of recent days and the ordeals Alisher had endured finally claimed him, carrying the youth into the land of dreams and interrupting his thoughts.

He went where he could once more gaze upon the stars beneath the gentle murmur of sweet-voiced Zamira’s words.

Chapter Six

Alisher was awakened before dawn. They brought him snow-white sacrificial clothing and the hide of an *ayu*, a polar bear. It was enormous, large enough for the youth to wrap himself completely inside it.

No breakfast was served. No one feeds a dead man.

They offered only a cup of peculiar liquid smelling of honey and hops. Detecting alcohol, Alisher refused. He had never drunk in his life, and beginning just before death seemed foolish.

He stepped into the yard. A strange *arba* waited outside the doors. Instead of two large wheels, it had four smaller ones, and an enormous draft horse stood in its traces. Alisher had never imagined a horse could grow as large as a camel.

Yorik sat upon an almost identical mount. Even his enormous figure seemed small against the black giant.

“It is time, my brave Thrasing. Blood must be spilled at sunrise. Windale will remember your sacrifice for its salvation. The first boy born after the plague disappears will bear your name.”

Asard pointed toward the wagon, then took the reins.

The road climbed constantly, forcing the youth to hold the rails so he would not slide backward and tumble ignominiously to the ground.

Once Windale’s torchlights vanished behind them, the low northern sky opened above Alisher, strewn with stars. He had never imagined there could be so many.

The youth studied the gemstones scattered across the heavens, searching for familiar constellations. Ahead shone the dipper of the Great Bear, with the Little Bear nestled above it.

Alisher remembered Zamira’s charming smile as she spoke so eagerly of Tabigati’s stars—and sang.

Fear of the inevitable end paralyzed his reason, yet his heart tried to distract him from dark thoughts with sweet memories.

He recalled the strange song Zamira had sung when they first met. His lips whispered the words like a prayer—his final message entrusted to the wind for the woman he loved.

I ask you—love me forever,

even when the rains stand in our way.

Even if love beneath the moon cannot last,

do not believe it.

Just love me.

Love me when morning

suddenly enters your home.

Do not forget me for even a moment;

remember me, though grief grips your heart...

The wagon stopped at the entrance to a small cave beneath a mighty granite cliff. Neither damp nor mildew breathed from its dark interior. Only a gentle fragrance of herbs filled the air and carried his cares away.

Yorik shouted something in the Norse tongue. The shaggy hide covering the entrance, burdock burrs clinging to it, was pulled aside.

A stooped old woman emerged, leaning upon a crooked staff from which a candle burned inside a glass enclosure.

She spoke with the chieftain for a long time.

Meanwhile, scarlet light from the approaching dawn had begun staining the eastern sky. Alisher watched the stars go dark one by one, hiding from the face of day.

“They are like people. They are born and die. Some shine for ages. Others kindle before dawn and fade before they understand what is happening. But each has a purpose.”

The old woman’s voice was creaking and unpleasant, yet she spoke the Sultanate’s language with almost no accent.

Alisher started. He had not noticed her approaching the wagon.

“One cannot escape fate, and living without love is like living as a stone. The years may be long, but they hold no joy.”

The youth jumped down.

“Come inside. Winter is approaching, and the winds grow crueler. You could easily fall ill. Come, dear boy. What is your name, my falcon? And why did they place a slave’s mark upon you? It is still fresh, like those welts and scars. Come. I have tea—not jasmine, certainly, but lingonberry is very good for you.”

Convinced the old woman was merely distracting him before a sudden killing blow, Alisher cast off the hide and stepped boldly into the cave, allowing the wise woman a clearer target.

He had heard caravan guards at the bazaar say that when a blow was true, there was no pain at all.

The wind tousled the porter’s hair again, as though demanding the song’s completion. Answering his heart, he sang once more.

I ask you—love me forever.

Never dare forget.

I ask you—love me forever,

though the years may pass.

Let every candle gutter out.

Let them tell you I have died.

I ask you—love me forever,

for even as I died,

I still loved you...

Something struck the stones behind him with a loud clatter. The boy flinched and fell silent.

“Yorik! You said you did not find him,” the old woman exclaimed, pinning the chieftain beneath an angry stare.

“There was no treasure. A galley, yes, but no cargo. All we gained were three slave women and this youth who longs for death. Not a coin. Not even meat. We ate rutabagas on the voyage home.” Asard spread his hands.

“If treasure means nothing to you but glittering stones and metal cursed by the demons of Hell, so be it, Asard. From this day forth, that is the only plunder you will find.”

The old woman looked toward Yorik.

“He is the Unbowed, as you commanded. I named him brother. But his heart is shattered into splinters, and he volunteered to come here. He will never become Windale’s pride. That is why I said I had not found him,” the fearsome Norseman whispered, defending himself before her.

“Very well.” The witch waved Yorik away and took Alisher by the elbow. “Wait here.”

“And the plague?” Asard demanded, suddenly alarmed.

“Wait here, I said.” Astrid barked the final words in Norse, but Alisher understood from her tone alone.

The wise woman angrily pulled the hide across the entrance. The fire in the hearth swayed in perfect time with the curtain.

The cave proved quite small inside. Shelves in the corners held simple utensils and crockery. A rope stretched diagonally beneath the ceiling, hung with drying bundles of herbs. Against the back wall stood something like a tapchan piled with mattresses and cushions.

“Will you have tea?”

Alisher shook his head.

“Don’t be afraid. I won’t poison you.” The old woman laughed hoarsely and patted the bewildered youth’s shoulder. “Sit, dear boy. Where did you learn the secret song?”

“If it is secret, how do you know it?” Alisher asked warily, unwilling to betray his beloved even now.

“Clever and courteous. Well done.”

The gray-haired woman exposed one sagging breast. Directly above the nipple, darkened with age, lay the dragon mark.

“I am a former High Priestess of the Faceless One. Since you know the song, surely you know that the High Priestess serves the goddess for only ten years before another takes her place.”

“No, I didn’t know. Why?”

“Then you remain ignorant of the most important truth.”

Saddened, the wise woman poured tea into two bowls and offered one to the youth.

“Until I hear your answer, I will not decide whether you deserve that knowledge.”

Whether from strain or stress, Alisher suddenly decided to tell the old woman his story.

He recounted everything, beginning with the moment he saw the girl and mistook her for a lake peri. He spoke of their secret meetings and long conversations beneath the moon.

Only the name of the woman who had settled forever within his heart remained unspoken.

“Yorik truly is fortunate. He found you after all.” The old woman smiled and placed one palm against the youth’s chest. “May I?”

The porter did not immediately understand what permission she sought, but he nodded.

The wise woman remained silent and motionless for a long time, as though in a trance. Alisher did not dare disturb her. Then a peculiar smile blossomed across the old witch’s wrinkled face.

“Yes. That is it. That is exactly how the Chosen One’s heart sounds. What did your peri tell you of Tabigati?”

“About the contest with Iblis. About how she restored the children of the first sultan and his wife, Syar... Ser...” Thrasing struggled to remember the name, as if someone had stolen it from his memory.

“Sigrun,” the witch corrected, shuddering at the name. “She received her share as well, and rightly so. She tasted her own poison at last. But that is another story. What else?”

“The daughter with the mark. Aisha, first among the Chosen...”

“And that is all?”

“That is all.” Alisher nodded firmly.

“Drink your tea. You need strength, and it will help your wounds close faster. I will wrap some of the blend for you to take. I gather it here in summer. It would raise a dead man to his feet, and on a young fellow like you it will clear away every illness and sore at once.”

Alisher swallowed the infusion. Calling it tea was generous, but the fragrance of herbs and dried berries was unique and surprisingly delicious. The youth drained the bowl in one draught.

“I told you that you would like it. More?” the wise woman offered kindly.

Alisher nodded, deciding refusal would be rude.

“Then listen. That is not the entire story. Tabigati and Iblis have contested one another for centuries. But sooner or later, the prophecy must be fulfilled. Otherwise, it is not prophecy at all, merely a tale.”

The fire in the hearth twitched strangely and turned scarlet.

The old woman only grinned again, tossed another log into the flames, and added, “He must know. It is only fair.”

The flame embraced the offering and turned yellow. Astrid returned to the table.

“Sooner or later, a man will appear before whom the High Priestess’s heart will crumble to ash in the blaze of true love and passion. She will desire him, and from their union a child will be born—the greatest ruler, destined to unite the lands chosen by the Faceless One for Arnar’s people.

“Whether that brings ruin or blessing will be for the Chosen One to decide. If the priestess is seduced by a heart warmed by the Song of Love, a golden age will begin. The Faceless One will become Tabigati once more and regain the power of Mother Nature.

“But if the man’s heart burns with thirst for revenge, nurtured by the Song of Iblis... Wait. I must remember the words. Ah, I am old, and Yorik has been stingy with sacrifices lately. This is the result. Just a moment...”

After several minutes of thought, the woman straightened and recited:

In the distant days of youth,

I was ensnared and taken captive.

The gaze of a lovely maiden

clouded my reason

and chained me to her forever.

But life is cruel.

We were torn apart;

that torment is better left unspoken.

Only pain remained inside my pierced heart,

and thirst for vengeance—the worst of evils.

The transformation did not take long.

The young boy vanished without a trace,

and a Monster was born within his flesh,

a spawn of love trampled underfoot.

I am worse than any messenger of Hell.

Debauchery and lust are my two wings.

I am the sword of vice,

the spear of temptation,

the stiletto of sin that cuts the flesh of virtue.

The armor of love will not protect you;

all will collapse before the assault of burning passion.

For only upon the shards of a maiden's heart

will a corrupted soul find peace again...

The old woman whispered the final lines, yet the words still struck the cave's stone walls and returned as a booming echo.

"If black evil settles inside the Chosen One's soul, Tabigati will remain Faceless forever. That is why the High Priestess must be chaste and innocent before assuming her rank. Her service is expectation. She is an empty vessel longing to be filled.

"But filling that vessel is not simple. Both sides will do everything possible to prevent the prophecy's fulfillment. The descendants of the first sultan have ruled Maverranahr for nearly four hundred years, and still the priestesses wait to learn how the contest between the Mother and the Devil will end.

"A girl assumes the rank at eighteen and waits for the Chosen One until twenty-eight. Then another takes her place. The former High Priestess chooses where she will go and departs in search of candidates, intending to prepare him.

"Some priestesses resented the Faceless One and entrusted men only with the Song of Iblis. Others believed blindly in goodness and carried only Tabigati's song. Still others spread their legs for anyone willing, hoping to fulfill what had been foretold.

"The Chosen One's path is hard. Trials and deprivation await him. Even gold is purified by fire. Imagine the heat of the furnace that purifies true love. The songs are the result that—"

The hearth erupted with a roar, flames rising almost to the cave's vault and cutting the witch off mid-sentence.

She waved one hand, and the fire shrank to its ordinary size.

"The accursed creature is watching. Very well. In this, he is right," the old woman muttered. She swallowed some infusion and continued.

"Only the Chosen One can decide how to build his bond with the High Priestess and how their descendant will be raised. Candidates who know only one song usually die halfway along the path. Men now find the Lord of Flame's song more familiar, which is why you surprised me by speaking other words.

"You haven't eaten breakfast, have you? That seal surely didn't feed you. Why feed a dead man? I know his habits. That is why I look so decrepit, though I am only seventy-five." The old woman

smiled with her nearly toothless mouth. “Do you like eggs? How shall I cook them—sunny-side up, folded, or scrambled?”

“Folded,” Alisher blurted, without entirely understanding his choice. For a gardener’s son, eggs were an expensive luxury.

The wise woman pulled a frying pan from beneath a heap of bowls and set it upon stones above the hearth.

“Grandmother, why do you need sacrifices?” the youth asked, having developed warm feelings toward the old woman.

“Ah, you don’t need to know. It is dark business, unkind magic, but necessary. Tanati’s laws are harsh, yet we cannot do without them. Balance and equilibrium. To receive something, one must always give something.

“But let us not become distracted. I have accomplished the most important task. Now we may bring some joy to the soul.”

A small piece of butter hissed and melted across the metal. Muttering to herself, the witch poured four beaten eggs into the pan.

The cave filled with a marvelous aroma. Thrasing’s stomach growled, and his heart lurched. The old woman no longer looked frightening. She reminded him of his gray-haired mother, who likewise spent hours beside the hearth.

“There.” A bowl of eggs appeared before the youth. “Eat, son. Eat. You’ll feel better at once.”

“And you?” Alisher had seen that nothing remained in the pan.

The old woman smiled and patted the Asian youth’s shoulder.

“The important thing is not to lose it.”

“Lose what?” Thrasing asked through a full mouth.

“The way you regard other people.” The witch sat opposite and studied the Chosen One. “Remain yourself. Even when you change names, do not betray who you are.

And the mighty of the world

will come to the crossroads

to behold the stranger

with their own eyes,

not knowing

who stands before them.

He will reveal a power

forgotten long ago,

and the rock that stood for ages

will fall.

The verse made Alisher push aside the last of the eggs.

“What about Windale? They are suffering from plague. Will you need another life? You did not take mine.”

“They must harvest thistle at dawn. Feed it raw to the animals and brew it for the people. Everything will pass in a few days. A volcano recently awakened and poisoned the air with ash and

sulfur. I would have warned them, but Yorik and Asard sailed away, and no one else dares come here. I am too old. Windale is half a day away downhill. With this staff, climbing back takes three times as long.”

The old woman sighed heavily.

“But that is the only reason you came to me. As for who awakened the volcano—Mother Nature or the Lord of Flame—who can say? Memorize both songs. Only then will you reach your destination and regain the woman you love.

“Better still, if you have enough courage, save your beloved from becoming High Priestess. Believe me, it is a wretched occupation. Then you may live an ordinary human life and have ordinary children. I am clairvoyant, after all.” The old woman winked conspiratorially. “Take this healing blend, and send that blockhead Yorik inside. I’ll knock some sense into him.”

The youth accepted the bundle and bowed.

“One last thing. Remember: anyone can swing an ax. Right now, you are a grain of sand, a leaf borne toward an unknown destination by the will of the waves—merely a piece in someone else’s game, a game played by the mighty. To be Chosen is to become legend.

“Ah, I nearly forgot. Rukh birds have built their nest in the hair of the sleeping maiden in the Krintau Mountains. Two eggs to a clutch, usually. The egg must never cool below the warmth of your body. It should always feel hot to the touch.”

“Ah... Thank you, Grandmother.” Ali sincerely thanked the wise woman, decided not to ask about birds unknown to him, and bowed.

“Take care of yourself, Alisher ibn Maruf,” the old woman whispered as she watched him leave the cave.

Chapter Seven

Yorik remained with the sorceress long enough for Alisher to grow thoroughly chilled. Though the trembling that shook the youth was more emotional than physical.

He felt reborn. The old woman had not taken his life. She had given him hope.

He was prepared to do anything to protect his lake peri from the fate awaiting her.

The youth had never dared dream of a shared future with Zamira, much less happiness and family. But if the northern witch said it was possible, he would find a way.

Plans began forming in the former porter's mind. He must persuade Yorik to take him on the next voyage to the shores of Ostos. And if that required becoming the finest warrior among them, Alisher resolved to do exactly that.

His thoughts were interrupted by the chieftain speaking to his brother.

"The young fellow is no fool. Take him into your household as my sworn brother. Teach him our customs, our language, and the warrior's craft. Perhaps you'll improve your own speech at the same time. How long do you intend to walk in my shadow? It is time you bought a longship of your own."

"Buy one with what? Especially after that last plunder—and now this plague. We'll be fortunate if we don't starve," the younger brother replied in the northern tongue.

"Look what the witch gave me for the boy."

The chieftain opened his fist. A gemstone of incomparable beauty shone upon his palm.

Asard froze with his mouth open.

"What did he do to her in there? How did he please her? Did he fuck her?" the man babbled once he recovered, unable to imagine what service could have earned such an immense payment.

"I have no idea. But even if he did, that is a kingly gift. Well done, brave youth."

"No. I didn't even—" Alisher broke in, trying to defend himself, but the chieftain would not let him finish.

"Enough. Your business. As my father used to say, never refuse a woman who has set her eye upon you."

"There is someone I love, and I intend to ask for her hand," the porter blurted, deeply offended by the chieftain's words.

"Then everything rests in your hands, Thrasing. I promised the old woman I would take you with me, but no one will protect you in battle. Depend upon yourself and train properly.

"But time will not wait. You are right, Asard. Winter is near. We must go to Holsting immediately and learn how much Konung Bjorn will pay for the stone. Then back to Windale. The villagers must harvest thistle.

"And the boy is probably frozen. We must protect him now. The witch said he would bring glory to Windale. You will teach him the warrior's craft as you teach your own sons. Understand?"

"She truly said that?" Asard switched to the Norse tongue.

"Yes. She also said he was her treasure and that she would reward us for bringing him. Then she tossed a pinch of salt into the hearth. Smoke rose so thick I thought I would choke. When it cleared, the gemstone lay upon the bench where she had been sitting."

"But that is..."

"A Witch's Soul. To defy her final will would be to seal the gates of Valhalla not only against ourselves but against our descendants."

Asard nodded in agreement.

Alisher was no longer listening. He had retreated into his own thoughts.

Now he knew he would have a chance to ask for Zamira's hand. Nothing else mattered.

The konung valued the gemstone highly. The men drove a large herd of goats, two bulls, and seven cows back to Windale, along with a considerable sum for the treasury.

By then, the thistle infusion had already driven the sickness from the settlement.

Thrasing was welcomed as family into the home of the chieftain's younger brother. But scarcely had the man from sunny Ostos grown accustomed to mud and endless rain when the long northern winter covered Windale.

Alisher had once believed heat was dangerous. Now he learned that savage cold was worse.

The short days passed one after another. Training became still harsher. By midwinter, Asard dressed the former captive in immensely heavy mail and forced him to fight with real weapons.

At first, Alisher was terrified. Yet after only a few weeks, Thrasing wielded a razor-edged sword without fear. He met attacks, slipped from their path, and spun through the deadly dance called combat.

Again and again, he lost to Windale's finest axman. But each time, victory came harder to Asard.

Youth and agility, extraordinary strength and endurance hardened by labor in Ostos's bazaar, made Thrasing a fearsome opponent.

Alisher learned to speak the northern tongue with growing confidence. The household trusted him to travel into the settlement alone. Asard took him fishing several times. There, Alisher saw real ice for the first time—and felt its treacherous slipperiness beneath his backside.

He joined hunts as well. The first was a drive against wolves that had settled in the hills near Windale. Later, Yorik invited Asard and Thrasing to drive an elk. But the man from Ostos could not run in snowshoes and nearly fell through the river ice while pursuing the beast.

The northerners did not use bows. In such cold, holding a string at full draw was nearly impossible, and even then an arrow could scarcely pierce a wild animal's heavy hide and fur. The Norsemen preferred spears.

When the blizzards ceased howling for such long stretches and something magical entered the air, Asard brought Thrasing to the smithy.

For days on end, the youth hammered red-hot iron while listening to the smith's stories.

At last, when the bay's waters broke free of ice and the first flowers bloomed in clearings among the hills, Alisher received his own battle-ax and scale armor lined with wolf fur.

In a conical helmet, with the ax upon his shoulder, he already looked like a true northerner.

The name *Alisher* faded into forgetfulness. Only his dreams still connected him to the past—dreams in which Zamira continued to come to him and sing her song.

Chapter Eight

Despite the promise she had made her nursemaid, Zamira could not forget the gardener's son—his sacrifice, or the way he had looked at her. It was like the tales of great love found in books.

She was forbidden to read such stories, but youthful curiosity prevailed. Until late each night, Zamira read by uneven candlelight of brave knights and overwhelming devotion. In the mornings, sleepy and unrested, she prepared for the trials.

At the end of September, escorted by Yusuf Bey's nukers, the nursemaid brought her charge to Ostos's temple of Tabigati.

The temple priestess ordered the ruler's daughter to bare the upper half of her body. She examined Zamira's breast for a long time, rubbing at the mark, wetting a cloth with an aromatic dark-green liquid, and rubbing again. Once satisfied that the sign was genuine, she knelt before Zamira and led her into the holy of holies—the temple's inner chamber and Tabigati's altar.

There, for the first time, the girl mentioned Alisher in prayer to the Mother. She begged the Faceless One to watch over the courageous porter who had become a slave through a cruel turn of fate.

Afterward, warmth and peace filled Zamira's heart. Surely this meant the Great Mother had heard her. Alisher would be safe, and Zamira must return to her destiny.

The priestess spoke with her deep inside the temple for many hours. By evening, exhausted and tormented, the girl emerged to meet Yusuf Bey.

"Your daughter has been recognized as one marked by Tabigati. She demonstrated excellent knowledge and preparation. I will send letters to the High Priestess and the sultan immediately. But you will receive the bride-price only after the girl has spoken with the High Priestess in person.

"From this moment, your daughter stands beneath the Faceless One's protection. At the New Year festival, I will conduct the initiation and verify her virginity. Until then, the temple doors remain open to her."

The priestess gave a restrained smile and turned toward the girl.

"The house of the Faceless One is your house, Marked One." She bowed deeply to Zamira.

Thus the girl's world expanded beyond the walls of her father's residence. The priestess convinced Yusuf Bey that daily prayer was essential, and Ostos's bey had no choice but to accept it.

Traveling across the city to the temple required guards. Yusuf Bey would not entrust the life of his treasure—for whom the sultan had promised immeasurable wealth—to elderly warriors. Stern, courageous, and gallant nukers from Ostos's noble families entered the young woman's life.

The painful memory of the brave youth gradually faded beneath skillful compliments and the attention of experienced men.

The nursemaid protested. Fearing for her charge's chastity, she even complained to Yusuf Bey. The girl's father merely waved her away. Eunuchs were useless in battle, he said, and there was no difference between chastity and virginity. He saw no reason to shield his daughter from the admiration and courtship of sons from Ostos's finest families.

Akhneya understood that greed had taken possession of Yusuf Bey. He was preparing a second possibility for himself: a less impressive bride-price, but a bride-price nonetheless.

Soon, word of the future High Priestess's beauty spread across the country. Sons of the Sultanate's greatest families traveled to Ostos, hoping to win the young beauty's favor.

Yusuf Bey remained true to his ambitions. He ordered the nursemaid to guard only his daughter's virginity. After the temple initiation, he reasoned, even that would no longer matter; the High Priestess herself would take it from Zamira.

His calculations proved sound. By the New Year, an enormous flock of gallant suitors from throughout the Sultanate circled Zamira.

He treated his daughter's initiation as a profitable enterprise and spared no expense in spreading praise of her beauty or bribing the necessary people.

Coins and promises were joined by threats and calculated temptations. Yusuf Bey understood that false hope alone was often enough to control a person. The greed of possession makes people blind—and, more importantly, obedient.

By the time of the trials, the exotic creatures meant to carry out Mother Nature's judgment and expose the unworthy had been made well-fed and indolent.

The piranhas from the western seas were fed an entire ram in exchange for several gold coins. Maruf the gardener, threatened with his wife's death, threw the meat into their pool.

The snakes cost more. In exchange for permission to double the size of his stall in Ostos's bazaar, the local apothecary mixed wormwood tincture into Zamira's perfume. Her nursemaid sprinkled it over the girl's shift.

The lion keeper was intimidated by the nukers and bribed with the opportunity to spy upon the maiden's bathing. The lion was fed and allowed among the lionesses. Sated and exhausted, the king of beasts scarcely twitched a whisker when the terrified future High Priestess passed him.

Zamira knew none of this. To her, every danger was real.

The Path of Trials had been laid through the garden of Ostos's ruler. Beside the old weeping willow that leaned over the lake, carpenters erected a large barrel-shaped pool.

Standing before it, Zamira remembered her secret misconduct and her growing attachment to Ibrahim, captain of the guard. His quiet, confident voice and practiced compliments had overcome her caution. What began with a stolen kiss had developed into an intimacy that stopped short of taking her virginity but plainly violated the spirit of the vows expected of Tabigati's chosen servant.

Forgive me, Faceless One.

Zamira submerged herself completely in the pool of bloodthirsty fish. They ignored her.

She climbed from the water, dressed in a dry shift, and stepped onto the Path of Serpents. Enclosed by mesh on every side, it wound between thorny rosebushes that formed an unbroken wall.

As she took her first step, memory returned to a night when a nightmare had sent her fleeing toward her nursemaid's room. She had encountered Ibrahim instead. He listened without mocking her fear and comforted her. His touch became increasingly intimate, and Zamira—frightened, curious, and powerfully drawn to him—allowed boundaries to fall that she had once believed unshakable.

Forgive me, Faceless One. I care for him deeply.

Zamira stepped firmly onto the paving stones. Tabigati appeared to forgive her: the snakes withdrew and opened a path.

A lion waited ahead, fearsome guardian of forest and desert. The immense beast lay in one corner of the pavilion. Zamira froze.

She remembered allowing Ibrahim into her private rooms and surrendering further to his caresses. He had awakened desires she scarcely understood, though their intimacy still preserved the physical proof demanded by the ritual.

Her heart thundered. The memories filled her with shame and longing in equal measure.

The lion caught her scent, moved one ear, and turned away without granting the Chosen One so much as a glance.

When Zamira reached the temple dressed only in her shift, the people greeted her with an ovation.

The local priestess and the High Priestess led her to the place of sacrifice and bound her hands to the altar. Then attendants brought forth the ritual instrument fashioned from pure gold.

Zamira stared at the gleaming relic in terror. The rite that followed was clinical, public, and humiliating. The priestesses anointed both the sacred object and the initiate with fragrant oil before using it to take the virginity required as proof of her passage.

Zamira cried out more from humiliation than pain. Blood stained her shift.

The High Priestess raised the bloodied relic toward the altar and began the prayer.

Yusuf Bey smiled. It was done—and for less than he had been prepared to pay. All that remained was to wait until Zamira turned eighteen and send her to the capital.

The greedy man was already spending his expected profit in his imagination.

The people inside the temple rejoiced. The Sultanate had gained a new Chosen One at the New Year itself.

It was considered a very fortunate sign.

Chapter Nine

The feast celebrating the Sultanate's new Chosen One flowed seamlessly into the New Year festivities. Wine ran like water. Salutes and fireworks repeatedly climbed into the sky, and tables sagged beneath food.

The celebration was at its height, but Yusuf Bey had no heart for it. A strange premonition of disaster gnawed at him.

He was an experienced man. A promised reward could not guarantee that a secret would remain buried. The death of everyone who knew it could.

And so he made his decision.

On the evening of the third day after the initiation, the bey went to the chambers of his daughter's guard captain. Ibrahim hungered visibly for Zamira, which meant he would carry out the task Yusuf Bey intended to give him.

Without knocking, Yusuf Bey threw open the captain's bedchamber door—and roared in fury.

He had found Ibrahim in bed with his daughter.

The guards rushed in at their master's cry. They dragged the captain away from Zamira and wrapped the girl in a blanket.

Ostos's ruler was incandescent with rage. Ibrahim curled into himself with terror. Nothing remained of the warrior he had once appeared to be.

"M-my lord, it was all her doing. I refused her, but she threatened me with death if I disobeyed," he stammered, pressing his forehead against the toes of the ruler's boots.

Zamira stared at the man she had believed she loved and could trust neither her eyes nor her ears. Her heart stopped with horror. The same mouth that had praised her now spewed filth without mercy.

"Ibrahim, how can you say such things?" she whispered hoarsely.

The guard seemed not to hear. He continued his agile lies, recasting every encounter as coercion by a willful young mistress and every one of his own advances as reluctant obedience.

"What?" Zamira cried. She looked toward her father, whose face was frighteningly grave. "I was afraid, and he... You cannot believe him."

She turned desperately back toward Ibrahim.

"Why are you doing this? None of it is true."

"You will have your chance to speak," Yusuf Bey cut her off. "Continue, Ibrahim."

The man flinched at his master's command and resumed his account, becoming more elaborate and obscene as he placed every act and demand upon Zamira.

"You animal. You seduced me. Have you forgotten?" Zamira could no longer restrain herself. "What kind of creature are you? How could I ever have believed I loved you?"

She lunged toward the guard with clenched fists, but the nukers intercepted her and forced her onto the bed.

One scraped the girl's shoulder against a plate of his armor. A scarlet bead appeared upon her snow-white skin, and the bey's eyes flashed with anger.

"I told you to be silent. He is speaking." Yusuf Bey's saber touched the captain's forehead. "What happened next?"

The cold steel made Ibrahim lose the thread of his story for a moment. Then he continued his self-serving confession, pleading for mercy and claiming that every boundary crossed between them had been crossed at Zamira's command.

Tears streamed from the girl's eyes.

All the curses of the bazaar struggled from her chest but lodged in her throat.

The betrayal hurt beyond endurance. How could a warrior like Ibrahim prove such a coward, while the nameless gardener's son had shown such honesty and courage?

She had never even allowed that boy to touch her. He had only looked upon her with wonder. Remembering Alisher's gaze, Zamira understood that he had felt more than admiration.

He had sacrificed himself for her. She had forgotten him for the whimpering puddle at her father's feet. She had betrayed her promise to pray to the Faceless One for him and instead pursued forbidden pleasures with this wretch.

Ibrahim's voice grew louder and more confident as his tale became still uglier.

Yusuf Bey's boot smashed into his face and finally silenced him.

At that moment, Akhneya rushed into the bedchamber.

"What happened?" she asked.

Then she saw her charge wrapped in a sheet amid the guards and understood everything.

"I failed to protect her..."

"Where were you?" the master of the household growled, sheathing his blade.

The nursemaid bent into a bow and answered without straightening.

"You ordered me to leave Zamira alone after the initiation. Before that, you commanded me to guard only her virginity."

"You knew of their relationship?"

The saber scraped free again and stopped above the bey's raised hand.

"I knew. You may kill me, my lord, but I tried to shield Zamira from his schemes. I even attempted to warn you, but you were occupied with preparations for the trial. I am only a weak woman. Everything that happened is my fault. I beg you—spare your daughter. I know she is not what he says. This Iblis is only trying to save his own skin."

"So be it."

The father struck.

The blade whistled into its victim. The nursemaid's head struck the floor heavily. A moment later, her body fell upon the granite slabs as her departing soul seemed to whistle away.

"No!"

The savage cry tore from Zamira, carrying away a part of her soul and burying the carelessness of childhood forever.

Even through her horror, she understood that only love made one willing to sacrifice oneself for another.

The girl rose and cast aside the sheet. Her tears were gone. Akhneya's death had severed something inside the young servant of Tabigati—something vital and precious.

Where wounded pride had burned only moments before, there was now a terrifying silence, as though her body had lost sensation and her soul had charred and fallen to ash.

"Cover yourself, shameless creature," Yusuf Bey roared.

"Why? Did you not permit them to watch me bathe? I know why you killed Nurse. She noticed them that day. What did they do for you? What did he do? Why didn't you kill him immediately?" Zamira asked with cold indifference, folding her arms.

"Be silent."

"Or what? Will you murder the Chosen One? My love for Ibrahim preserved me along the Path of Trials, and he was only a piece in your game." She smiled bitterly, knowing her father would not dare harm her for insolence.

"I preserved you. I did. And you behaved like a harbor whore. Lock this creature in her room."

Several men seized Zamira by the arms and dragged her away.

Yusuf surveyed those remaining.

"This is what will happen."

The saber whistled once more, ending the guard captain's moans.

“Bury him in the gardener’s plot, but dress the body first. Kill the apothecary from Flea Corner and the animal trainer with knives. Make it appear they murdered one another. You will oversee it. You are captain of the guard now.”

The chosen nuker bowed. At his signal, the others left the bedchamber.

Yusuf Bey dropped the bloodied saber beside the nursemaid’s body and went to the guardroom, where an old and trusted servant awaited him.

The morning brought no joy. Moans and weeping sounded from the palace, but every voice fell silent when Yusuf Bey came out to address the people.

“My brothers and sisters, people of Ostos. Last night, Iblis entered my house and tried to murder Tabigati’s Chosen One. He clouded the mind of my gardener, who attempted to poison the guards in revenge for his son.

“We all remember how that man’s offspring tried to attack me beside the lake. Folk wisdom speaks truly: the apple never falls far from the tree.

“The gardener murdered the captain of my guard and buried his body in his own vegetable plot. He and his wife confessed everything.

“Using magic, the witch who concealed her face beneath the name Fatima bewitched the guards with Ibrahim’s key. They attacked Zamira’s nursemaid. But the woman loved my daughter and accepted a terrible death without fear.

“A battle began between those possessed by Satan and the household guard. The nukers prevailed, though seven ended their service forever. May the Faceless One reward them according to their merit.

“Moreover, at the apothecary’s shop near Flea Corner, the lion trainer attacked the proprietor. Both died. The guards arrived too late because they were repelling the demons’ assault upon my household.

“This is a sorrowful day. But let the great joy of receiving a new High Priestess eclipse our grief. Remain vigilant. Iblis and his servants are near. May the Father and the Great Faceless One aid us.”

Yusuf Bey finished and brushed a single tear from his cheek.

“What of the Chosen One?” someone called, and the crowd responded at once.

“She is safe and unharmed. The Faceless One protects her. But the girl suffered great distress and slept poorly. In a few days, you will see her once more upon the road to her true home—the temple of the Faceless One.”

The crowd erupted in cheers and applause.

Chapter Ten

The moment the fjord's turbulent waters broke free from their chains of ice, the Varangians prepared to sail.

The southern waters were a crowded artery connecting the Sultanate to the rest of the world. The region's only affliction was the fast, maneuverable ships of the north. Merchants tried to move their cargo before the northern fleet blockaded the routes.

The sultan had sent his own fleet several times, but enormous galleys built for naval battle were ill-suited to patrol duty. Besides, the Norsemen were too skilled upon the sea and easily escaped the sultan's armada.

That was why Yorik hurried.

He had the longship dragged across the bay's still-solid ice to open water and became one of the first to reach the sea.

Every man aboard had proved his right to stand upon the longship, Thrasing included.

After a winter training beneath Asard, Alisher defeated every challenger with surprising ease. Now the free northern wind carried him toward the Sultanate's shores and the mouth of the Daryo.

The youth was nervous. He constantly rehearsed what he would say to Yusuf Bey and Zamira.

The winter in Windale had cooled his anger toward the bey. Yusuf had been protecting his home and family. The northerners' legends taught warriors to do the same. Thrasing found words for him readily enough.

But he had none for Zamira.

Nor did he know how to make his request of Yorik. He could imagine nothing that would persuade Storm Wind to enter Ostos's harbor. The uncertainty haunted him, destroyed his concentration, and made it difficult to breathe.

His goal was so close—and still unreachable.

A shield strike knocked Alisher from his feet.

"What has gotten into you?" Asard demanded angrily, deliberately speaking the Sultanate's tongue. "You think too much. You know: time for talking, time for thinking, time for fighting. Do not mix. You die."

The lookout's cry interrupted the training. The Norsemen took their positions. Sail handlers seized the sheets. Rowers placed their oars into the locks and waited.

Yorik remained silent as he confidently guided the longship into the mouth of the Daryo.

"Brother, the islands lie that way." Asard extended one hand to port. "We must change tack and heave to."

"No. We are going to Ostos."

"But—"

"We are going to Ostos," the chieftain commanded in a voice that allowed no objection.

"A raid?" his younger brother asked.

Yorik shook his head.

Asard glanced toward Thrasing and received a confirming nod.

"What if there is an ambush?"

"An ambush waited between the Bowl and the Sickle—more than seven heavy galleys. Had we changed tack, they would have closed around us."

"But..."

"The old hag's spirit visited my dreams near dawn. If she spoke true, we should see their banners... now."

Yorik had barely finished when the sultan's standards appeared to port, stirring upon tall masts beyond the hills of a small pine-covered island.

“Mother of all—at this wind, our usual tack would have carried us straight into their jaws,” Asard exclaimed.

Yorik nodded again.

“We have come to seek a bride—the daughter of Ostos’s ruler. Rumors of Yusuf Bey’s daughter’s great beauty have reached the northern lands. Everything else can wait.

“And stop waving your arms, Asard. The woods to starboard are crawling with archers. I have no desire to test the accuracy of Asarian bows upon my own hide.”

As if to confirm his words, military tents and campfires stood in a clearing beside a small inlet.

“We are putting our necks into a noose, brother,” Asard whispered.

“We cannot die before our hour. And the pass to Valhalla is not a territory but a sword in the hand of a warrior fallen in battle.”

Another galley lay at anchor outside Ostos’s harbor, blocking the channel.

Yorik raised one hand above his head and dropped it sharply.

The drummer struck stretched bull hide with sticks more like wooden maces than drumsticks. The rowers pulled backward once, then again and again.

A wooden wheel groaned. Forged chain rang. The anchor struck the river with a great splash, and lowered sails snapped.

A moment later, the longship lay motionless several hundred paces from the galley.

A boat left the harbor and headed toward the longship’s port side. Nukers of the Sultanate formed ranks upon the galley’s deck, their armor glittering. A deep voice shouted orders as the crew prepared to board the northern vessel.

The northerners exchanged only occasional uneasy glances, remaining in their places as befitted the disciplined war band of Windale’s jarl.

No one moved when the men in the arriving boat called for a rope ladder.

Thrasing’s hand settled upon his sword hilt, but Asard shook his head and became still again, like a statue carved from stone.

The visitors climbed aboard.

An elderly man in a large turban, with a pointed beard beginning to gray, was far too richly dressed to be an ordinary harbor official. Four well-armed mamluks in forged armor and bearing iron shields accompanied him.

An awkward silence followed. Yorik said nothing and looked down upon the guests.

The youth’s heart tightened and seemed to refuse to beat. Air became impossible to find. Anxiety turned his legs to cloth. The tension hung in the air like a nearly visible fog.

The visitor hesitated. Then, observing the ritual, he bowed to the ship’s master. Whatever else might be true, aboard the longship he was the guest. Etiquette required him to offer the first greeting as a sign of respect.

“I am Abu Bikar ibn Sahib, vizier to the great Sultan Artashat.” The man straightened.

“I am Yorik Storm Wind, ruler of Windale.” The chieftain answered with only a slight nod. “These are my brothers: Asard the Crusher and Thrasing the Unbowed.”

Alisher did not spend long deciding how to greet the great vizier. If he was Thrasing, prostration was out of the question. Following Asard’s example, he merely inclined his head.

“What purpose brings you to Ostos, worthy ruler of Windale?”

“Rumors of the beauty of Ostos’s ruler’s daughter have reached the northern lands. My sworn brother Thrasing has come to ask for the hand of Yusuf Bey’s beautiful daughter, Zamira.”

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