



THE NEW YORK TIMES-BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *WE HUNT THE FLAME*

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We Free  
the  
Stars



HAFSAH FAIZAL

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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*To Azraa—  
Sometimes friend,  
Sometimes foe,  
Sometimes ferocious,*

*Forever my sister.*

*Honor before heart, said the girl.  
Delicacy fosters death, said the lion.  
Destruction follows darkness, said the boy.  
Power begets pain, said the king.  
And they were all horribly right.*



# **ACT I**

**DARK AS A HOLLOW GRAVE**





## CHAPTER 1

Darkness surged in his veins. It exhaled wisps from his fingers and feathered his every glance. And when he thought too hard too fast, it bled up his arms in streams of black.

*Fear becomes you.*

The high sun drew Nasir Ghameq's shadow across the planks of Jinan's ship as he slid, for what felt to be the thousandth time since they'd left Sharr, the crate's lid back in place. A steady pulse thrummed against his fingers, emanating from the four hearts resting inside. Hearts that once belonged to Arawiya's founding Sisters of Old, sourcing the kingdom's magic from the five caliphates' royal minarets, amplifiers that rationed morsels of magic to the masses. And until the organs were restored, magic was as good as gone—as it had been for the past ninety years.

Yet magic continued to exist in him, a fact he couldn't keep to himself because of the shadows ghosting his presence.

"The fifth heart isn't going to materialize the harder you look. Neither is he, for that matter," Kifah said, lithely climbing down the crow's nest. The cuff on her upper arm glinted, the engraved crossed spears a reminder of who she once was: one of the Nine Elite who guarded Pelusia's calipha. With a pang, Nasir realized he was waiting for a certain golden-haired general's response to her lightning-quick words. Something silly, or clever, followed by an endearing *One of Nine*.

The silence that echoed was as loud and unsettling as the Baransea's crashing waves.

Nasir made his way to Jinan. The gash across his leg, courtesy of an ifrit on the island of Sharr, forced him to limp about the ship.

"We've been at sea for two days. What's taking so long?"

The Zaramese girl squinted at him from the helm. Unruly dark curls slipped from the folds of her checkered turban, the cloth casting her brown eyes in a reddish glow. "*Anqa* is the fastest ship there is, your highness."

"Not that there *are* any other ships, kid," Kifah pointed out.

Nasir tucked the crate with the hearts safely into a nook near her as Jinan frowned. "I'm not a kid. *Anqa* means 'phoenix.' You know, like the immortal bird made of fire? Named after my favorite star. My father—"

"No one cares," Nasir said, gripping the rough wood as the ship rocked.

Jinan gave an exaggerated sigh.

"How much longer?"

"Five days," she pronounced, but her pride deflated at Nasir's withering stare. "What, his highness's ship took six days, at most? Forgive me for not having the sultan's might at my back."

"My ship," he said slowly, "took less than two days to reach Sharr, even with the dandan we defeated along the way."

Jinan whistled. "I'm going to need to take a look at those ship plans when we get to the fancy palace, then. What's the rush?"

Irritation flared beneath his skin, and a streak of black unfurled from his fingertips. Jinan stared. Kifah pretended not to notice, which only irritated him further.

"Did you go to school?"

Jinan's eyes narrowed. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Then you would know how dire it is when I say the Lion of the Night is alive," said Nasir, and the assassin in him reveled in the fear widening her eyes. He didn't tell her of the heart the Lion had stolen. He didn't care about that, or even magic—not as much as he cared about Altair, but the girl wouldn't understand. Nasir himself didn't understand the strange compulsion in his blood, this concern for another human that he thought had faded with his mother's supposed death. "Did you think Benyamin tripped on a rock and died?"

Jinan turned away with another frown and Kifah leaned against the mast, crossing her arms as she studied him. "We'll get him back."

It wasn't Benyamin she spoke of.

"I wasn't worried." He didn't look at her.

"No, of course not," Kifah drawled. "I'm just reminding myself aloud that he's Altair and he can handle himself. He could talk so much the Lion would

beg us to take him back. I wouldn't be surprised if he left the bumbling fool somewhere with a sign saying 'He's all yours.'"

It was a lie, and they both knew it. Uncertainty rang painfully clear in her normally grounding voice.

Nasir looked to the sea beyond, toward the island of Sharr. Part of him expected to see another ship in pursuit, dark and fearsome as the Lion himself. A fortnight ago, Nasir had been ready to kill Altair—he was ready to kill *anyone* in his path, but when he closed his eyes now, he saw the blinding beams of light extending from Altair's open palms. He saw the sharp facets of the Lion's black stave protruding from Benjamin's heart.

*Sacrifice*, Benjamin had murmured. Sacrifice was nothing but death in a romantic farce. Nasir knew—he'd been born for death and darkness, and it was hard to have a heart when one had stopped that of so many others. It was hard to do good when it would be shadowed forever by his wrongs.

Somewhere on Sharr his heart had found a beat, and he intended to keep it going. He intended to make himself worthy of it, even if it meant restoring the very magic that had destroyed his family.

And he would start by rescuing Altair and vanquishing the Lion.

He looked at Jinan. "Five days is too long. Make it three."

Jinan sputtered. "That's impos—"

He was already turning for the steps leading belowdecks. "Make it three and I'll double Benjamin's silver."

The young captain's shouts were instant. Chaos erupted as her ragtag crew leaped to attention, the rough inflection of Zaramese at home with the crashing sea. He didn't know what the girl would do with so much coin, but he didn't exactly care. The throne had enough to spare.

Nasir limped down the steps. Three days was still three days too long. Now that the Lion was no longer shackled to the island, he had no reason to remain there, particularly when the Jawarat—the key to what he wanted most—was getting farther and farther away from him. The zumra needed to reach shore before the Lion did, or their troubles would be infinitely worse,

and if there was anyone who could quicken their journey, it was no mortal girl from Zaram.

The must of burning oil clung to the salty air within the ship. Lanterns flickered as Nasir made his way past cabins cramped one against the other like a mouthful of teeth, bolted beds and other sparse furnishings dark in the dim, reminiscent of the palace.

His exhale broke and suddenly he was standing in front of Ghameq, telling him of the mission. How he'd failed to kill the sultan's general. Failed to kill the Hunter. Failed to bring back the Jawarat.

Failed, failed, failed.

He shook his thoughts free. It was different now, he reminded himself. The leash between him and his father had gnarled, tangled in the lives of many more. Zafira, Altair, Kifah, his mother, and most important, the Lion of the Night, who had sunk his claws into Ghameq, controlling his every move.

His gaze flicked to the farthest end, where Zafira's cabin stood like a ledge just out of reach.

During her rare emergencies on deck, the Jawarat was always clasped to her chest, her gaze distant and detached. It worried him, seeing the ice in her eyes fading as something else took its place, but coward that he was, he couldn't approach her, and as the insanity of their final moments on Sharr continued to recede, Nasir didn't know how to halt the rapidly swelling distance between them.

He paused to rest his leg, leaning against a splintering beam. The Silver Witch—*his mother, rimaal*—had chosen a cabin just as far as Zafira's, and when he finally reached her door, a dark gleam on the floorboard made him pause.

*Blood?*

He tugged his glove free and touched two fingers to the splotch, bringing them to his nose. Sharp and metallic—most certainly blood. He wiped his fingers on his robes and lifted his gaze, following the haphazard trail.

To where it disappeared behind the door to the last cabin: Zafira's.



## CHAPTER 2

Power bled from her bones. It leached from her soul, dregs draining into some unseen abyss. Emptying her. Zafira Iskandar had ventured into the cursed forest known as the Arz for as long as she could remember, magic gradually sinking beneath her skin, always there, within reach.

And now it was gone.

Stuffed into a crate, shoved beneath a rotting nook beside a too-sure Zaramese. The Jawarat echoed her angry thoughts.

“I planned to destroy that book after magic was retrieved.” Anadil, the Silver Witch, Sultana of Arawiya, and Sister of Old pursed her lips at the green tome in Zafira’s lap. The lantern cast the angles of her face in shadow, white hair shimmering gold. Zafira’s cabin paled in her splendor.

*She does not like us*, the Jawarat reminded.

Zafira no longer flinched at its voice. It was nothing like that soothing whisper that once caressed her from the shadows near the Arz. The one she had thought belonged to a friend, before she learned it belonged to the Lion of the Night.

No, this voice was assertive and demanding, yet it was filling the void that magic had left behind, and she couldn’t complain.

*No, she does not.*

Instead, she had begun speaking back to it.

After all the trouble Zafira had gone through to retrieve the forsaken thing, she wasn’t going to let a scornful witch destroy it. Skies, was this why the woman had come to her cabin? “You’re afraid of it.”

“The Jawarat is my Sisters’ memories incarnate,” the Silver Witch said with a withering stare from the cot. Now that Zafira knew the woman was Nasir’s mother, she could see the resemblance in that look. “What have I to fear?”

*She does not know. She is oblivious to what we gleaned upon Sharr.*

The reverberation in her lungs was an order of silence as much as a reminder: *Zafira* didn’t even know the extent of what she had gleaned on

Sharr, in accidentally slitting her palm and binding herself to this book. For the Jawarat was more than the Sisters' memories.

It had steeped on Sharr for ninety years with the Lion of the Night. It held some of his memories, too, and the Silver Witch hadn't the faintest clue. *No one* did.

*Tell them.* Her conscience was barely a whisper beneath the Jawarat's weighted presence, but that was not the reason why she didn't heed it. She simply *couldn't*. She could not tell them of the Jawarat any more than she could tell them of the darkness that once spoke to her. Fear mangled whatever words she summoned. She was afraid of them. Afraid of how the others would see her.

She had been judged long enough simply for being born a woman.

"But we need it," Zafira said at last, smoothing her features. The trunk beneath her had been bolted to the ship, but her stomach lurched with the waves. "To *restore* magic."

"I'm a Sister of Old, girl. I know how magic must be restored. It is the book I know little about, for it was created in their final moments, in their last attempt to triumph over the Lion."

And they had. They hadn't been strong enough to destroy him, but they had trapped him upon Sharr and created the Jawarat. The way Zafira saw it, the book had been created for a single reason: to house their memories so that one day their story would be known. To say why magic had been severed from Arawiya that fateful day, why they had died, and most important, where the hearts were located.

"The removal of the hearts from the minarets left Arawiya without magic, but the spell entrapping the Lion drew upon so much that it cursed the kingdom, leaching energy from every caliphate and causing havoc. Snow in Demenhur. Darkness in Sarasin. Sharr became frozen in time," the Silver Witch said, catching Zafira's surprise. "Indeed, life spans stretched beyond reason. Death became an impossible wish. By freeing the Jawarat and the hearts, you freed Arawiya, including those trapped upon the island. They were at last given the peace they sought."



“Then the kaftar...” Zafira trailed off, tugging at the fringe of the scarf around her neck. She hadn’t been fond of the way the men who could shift into hyenas had leered at her, but they’d come to the zumra’s aid. They had helped fight off the Lion’s horde of ifrit.

“Dead.”

Zafira released a breath. How long did one have to live before death became a wish?

Jinan’s shouts echoed in the silence, the crashing waves muffling the rushing of feet on deck. Her contract with Benyamin would only take them to Sultan’s Keep, but they were heading for the mainland, close enough to Demenhur to rile a restlessness in Zafira’s blood.

“If you know how to restore magic, then you won’t need me,” she said. *Or the book.* “I can return home.”

She had left everything she’d ever known for magic. Journeyed across the Baransea. Trekked through the villainous island of Sharr. But that was before time and distance had created an insatiable yearning that came laced with fear.

Because she would need to face Yasmine.

“To what?” the Silver Witch asked without a drop of sympathy. “The Arz is gone. Your people have no need for a hunter.”

Her words were pragmatic, rational. *Cruel.* They stripped Zafira bare, reducing her to an insignificant grain in the vastness of the desert. Bereft, she reached for the ring at her chest—

And dropped her hand back to the Jawarat, running her fingers down the ridges of its spine. Almost instantly, she was filled with a sense of peace. Something that lulled the disquiet.

“When I bathe, will the pages melt?” Tendrils of sorrow lingered at the edges of her mind, too distant to grasp. She couldn’t remember being sad now. Nor even the reason for it. The Jawarat purred.

The Silver Witch paused. “I sometimes forget you’re only a child.”

“The world thieves childhoods,” Zafira said, thinking of Baba’s bow in her still-soft hands. Of Lana, brushing a warm cloth across Umm’s forehead. Of

Deen, a ghost after his parents became bodies in a shroud.

“That it does. The Jawarat is a magical creation, immune to the elements, or it would have crumbled to dust within its first decade upon Sharr. Its life force, however, is now tied to yours because you so foolishly bound yourself to it. Tear out a few pages, and you may well lose a limb.”

Zafira hadn't asked to be tied to the book. The Silver Witch was the one who had asked a *child* to go on this journey. It was her fault that Zafira was now bound to this ancient tome, and she hadn't even *needed* Zafira for this quest. Only someone strong enough to resist the Lion's hold. Unlike the Silver Witch herself, who had fallen deeper than any of them even realized.

Zafira had been certain Sharr had given them enough revelations to last a lifetime, but that was before Kifah's pointed question. Before they'd learned Altair was the Lion's son as much as he was the Silver Witch's. Strangely enough, learning his lineage had only made her *more* partial to the general.

She bit her tongue. “And there's no way to undo the bond?”

“Death,” the Silver Witch said, as if Zafira should have known. “Drive a dagger through the tome's center, and you'll be free of it.”

“How kind,” Zafira ground out. “I'll be ‘free’ of everything else, too.”

She brushed her fingers across the green leather, thumb dipping into the fiery mane of the lion embossed in its center. The Silver Witch only hummed, studying the girl who knew the Lion almost as well as she did.

*She envies us.*

Zafira began to agree, before she clenched her jaw against the Jawarat's whispers. They could be far-fetched, she realized. Why ever would a Sister of Old envy a mortal girl?

*We will align with time.*

Whatever that meant.

She jumped when the two lanterns struck with a sudden clang. Her quiver tipped, arrows spilling and dust swirling like the sands of Sharr. The Silver Witch didn't flinch, though Zafira noted the tight bind of her shoulders, so unlike the languid immortal, before the door swung open, revealing a silhouette in the passageway.

Zafira recognized the mussed hair, the absolute stillness she had only ever seen in deer before she loosed a fatal arrow.

A cloak of darkness followed Arawiya's crown prince inside. He was effortless, as always. Almost careless, if one wasn't paying close enough attention to his deliberate movements. His gray gaze swept the small space and she couldn't stop the flutter in her chest when it locked on hers.

And strayed to her mouth for the barest of moments.

"Are you hurt?" Nasir asked, in that voice that looped with the shadows, soft and demanding. But there was a strain to it, a discomfiture that made her all too aware of the Silver Witch watching every heartbeat of this exchange.

Zafira had known the context behind that question, once. When she was an asset that needed protecting. A compass guiding his destructive path. What was the reason for his concern now that they had retrieved what they once sought, rendering her purpose—on Sharr, in Demenhur, skies, in this *world*—obsolete?

Before she could find her voice, he was looking at the Silver Witch and gesturing to a dark trail on the floorboards that hadn't been there before. Red stained his fingers.

"So this is why the ship isn't going any faster."

Waves crashed in the silence.

"I can perform the mundane tasks any miragi can," his mother said finally, "but time is an illusion that requires concentration and strength, neither of which I currently have."

"And why is that?" His tone was impatient, his words terse.

The Silver Witch stood, and despite Nasir's height, everything shrank before her. She parted her cloak to reveal the crimson gown beneath, torn and stiff with blood.

Zafira shot to her feet. "The Lion's black dagger. Back on Sharr."

Beneath the witch's right shoulder gaped a wound, one she had endured to protect Nasir. It was a festering whorl of black, almost like a jagged hole.

“The very same,” the Silver Witch said as another drop of blood welled from her drenched dress. “There is no known cure to a wound inflicted by cursed ore. The old healers lived secluded on the Hessa Isles, and if any of them still remain, my only hope is there.”

“What of Bait ul-Ahlaam?” Nasir demanded.

Zafira translated the old Safaitic. *The House of Dreams*. She’d never heard of it before.

“You can easily cross the strait from Sultan’s Keep and find what you need there.”

“At what cost? I will not set foot within those walls,” she replied, but Zafira heard the unspoken words: *Not again*. She had been there before, and it was clear the cost had little to do with dinars.

The Silver Witch was not easily fazed, so the flare of anger in her gaze and the frown tugging the corners of her mouth was strange. Notably so.

“Then you’ll leave us,” Nasir said, and Zafira flinched at his harsh indifference.

“I will be a walking vessel of magic. Of no use to you, but of every use to the Lion when he inevitably gets his hands on me,” the Silver Witch replied. “With my blood and his knowledge of dum sihr, no place in Arawiya will be safe. There is only so much he can do with my half-si’lah sons.”

Nasir looked down at his hands, where wisps of black swirled in and out of his skin. Almost as if they were breathing. His shadows hadn’t retreated like Zafira’s sense of direction had. He didn’t need the magic of the hearts when he could supply his own. He didn’t have to suffer the emptiness she did.

Something ugly reared in her, choking her lungs, and Zafira nearly dropped the Jawarat in her panic. Just as suddenly, the rage cleared and her heartbeat settled.

*What*— Her breath shook.

“This mess began because of you.” Nasir’s words were too cold, and she had to remind herself that he was speaking to his mother, not her. “We left Altair in the Lion’s hands because of you.”