



'Dizzily magical,
and still utterly believable'
LAINI TAYLOR

THE KINGDOM OF COPPER

S.A. CHAKRABORTY



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Book Two of the
Daevabad Trilogy


HARPER
Voyager

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Dedication

FOR SHAMIK

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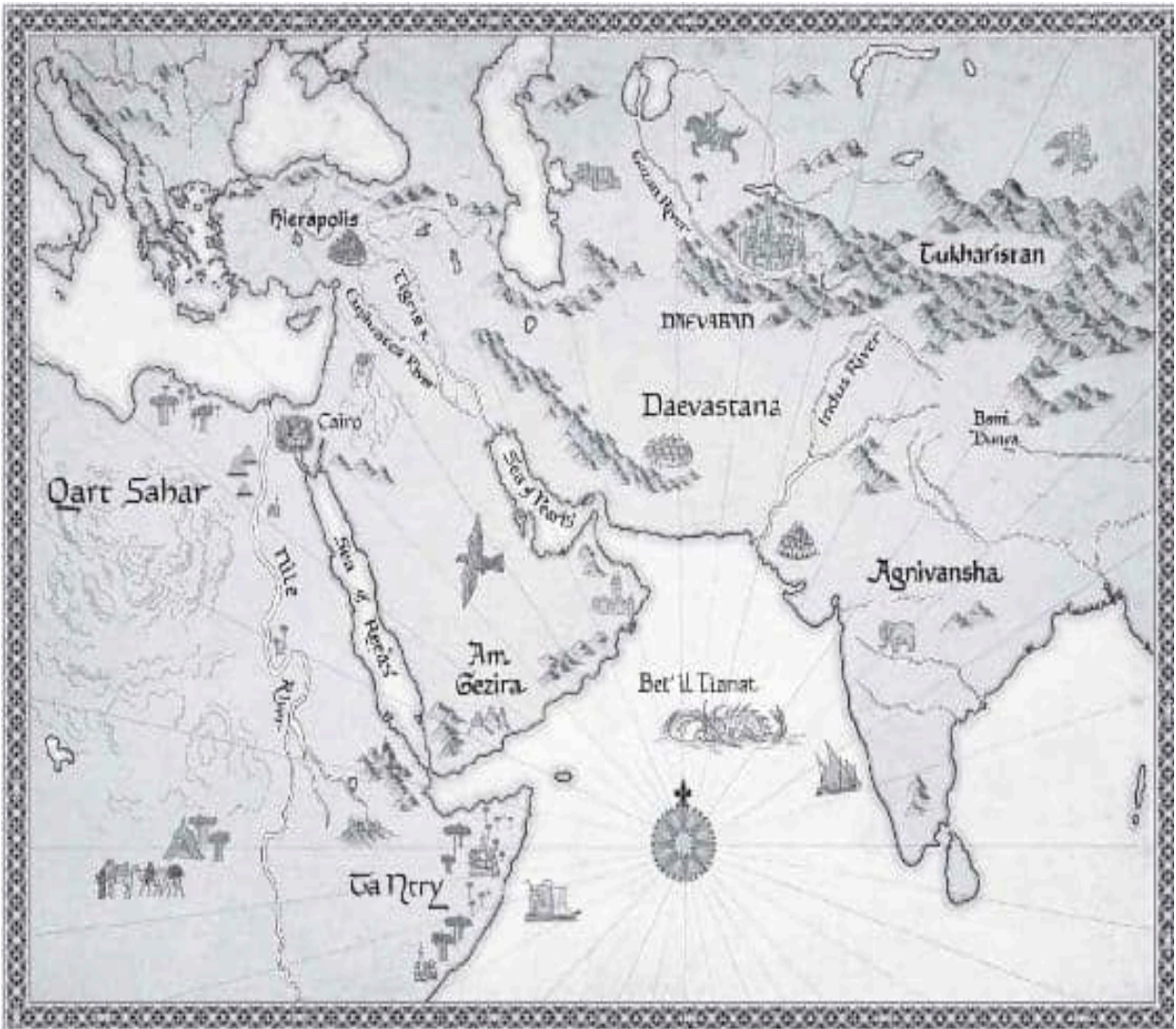
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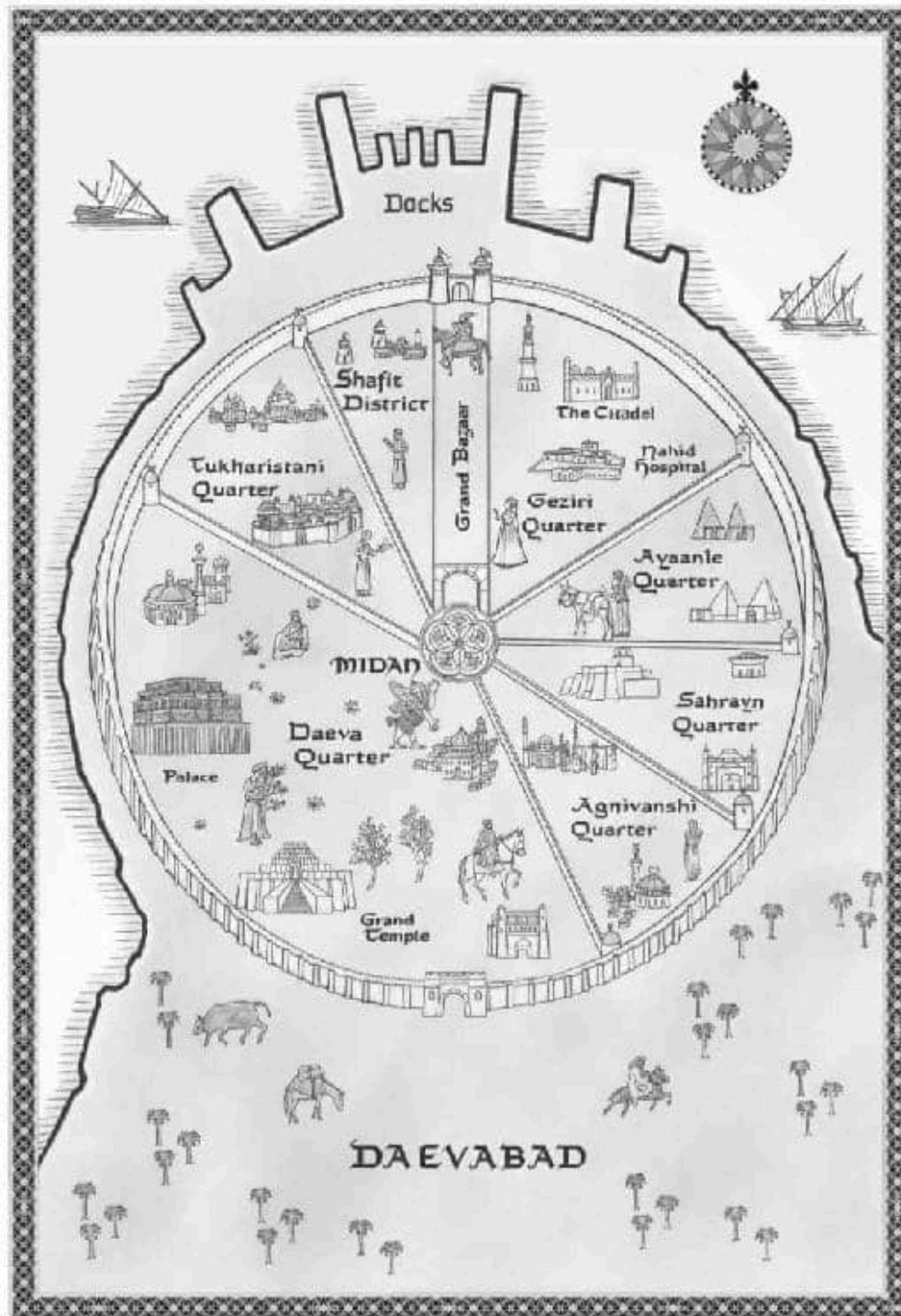
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PROLOGUE

ALI

Alizayd al Qahtani didn't make it a month with his caravan.

"Run, my prince, run!" the sole Ayaanle member of his traveling party cried as he staggered into Ali's tent one night when they were camped along a southern bend of the Euphrates. Before the man could say more, a blood-dark blade burst from his chest.

Ali flew to his feet. His weapons already at hand, he slashed the back of the tent open with a strike of his zulfihar and fled into the darkness.

They pursued him on horseback, but the Euphrates glistened close ahead, black as the star-drenched night reflected in the river's coursing surface. Praying his weapons were secure, Ali plunged into the water as the first arrows flew, one whistling past his ear.

The cold water was a shock, but Ali swam fast, the motion as instinctual as walking, faster than he ever had, with a grace that would have taken him aback had he not been preoccupied with saving his life. Arrows struck the water around him, following his path, and so he dived deep, the water growing murky. The Euphrates was wide, and it took him time to cross, to push through waterweeds and fight the fierce current trying to drag him downstream.

It was only when he was staggering up the opposite bank that the sick realization swept over him: he had not needed to emerge for air the entire time.

Ali gulped, shivering as a cold breeze stole through his wet dishdasha. Nausea rose in his chest, but there was little time to contemplate what had happened in the river—not when mounted archers were pacing on the other side. His tent was aflame, but the rest of the camp looked untouched and eerily still, as though a quiet command had been passed among the other travelers in his party to ignore the screams they might hear tonight.

Ali had been betrayed. And he was not waiting around to find out if either the assassins or his traitorous companions could cross the river. He

stumbled to his feet and ran for his life, racing headlong toward the opposite horizon.

Dawn had broken by the time his legs finally gave out. He collapsed, landing hard on the golden sand. The river was long gone. In every direction was desert, the sky a bright, hot bowl turned upside down.

Ali's gaze darted across the still landscape as he fought for breath, but he was alone. Relief and fear warred through him. He was *alone*—with a vast desert before him and enemies at his back, his only possessions his zulfiqar and khanjar. He had no food, no water, no shelter. He hadn't even had time to grab the turban and sandals that might have protected him from the heat.

He was doomed.

You were already doomed, you fool. Your father made that clear. Ali's exile from Daevabad was a death sentence, one obvious to anyone with knowledge of the politics of his tribe. Did he really think he could fight it? That his death would be easy? If his father had wanted to be merciful, he would have had his youngest son strangled in his sleep within the city's walls.

For the first time, a twinge of hate clawed up in Ali's heart. He didn't deserve this. He had tried to help his city and his family, and Ghassan wasn't even generous enough to give him a clean death.

Angry tears pricked his eyes. Ali wiped them away roughly, feeling disgusted. No, this wouldn't be how things ended for him, weeping tears of self-pity and cursing his family as he wasted away in some unknown patch of sand. He was Geziri. When the time came, Ali would die dry-eyed, with the declaration of faith on his lips and a blade in his hand.

He fixed his eyes southwest, in the direction of his homeland, the direction he'd prayed his entire life, and dug his hands in the golden sand. Ali went through the motions to cleanse himself for prayer, the motions he'd made multiple times a day since his mother had first shown him how.

When he finished, he raised his palms, closing his eyes and catching the sharp scent of the sand and salt clinging to his skin. *Guide me*, he begged. *Protect those I was forced to leave behind and when my time comes—his throat thickened—when my time comes, please have more mercy on me than my father did.*

Ali touched his fingers to his brow. And then he rose to his feet.

Having nothing but the sun to guide him through the unbroken expanse of sand, Ali followed its relentless path across the sky, ignoring and then growing accustomed to its merciless heat upon his shoulders. The hot sand

scorched his bare feet—and then it didn't. He was a djinn, and though he couldn't drift and dance as smoke among the dunes the way his ancestors had done before Suleiman's blessing, the desert would not kill him. He walked each day until exhaustion overtook him, only stopping to pray and sleep. He let his mind—his despair at how completely he'd ruined his life—drift away under the white, bright sun.

Hunger gnawed at him. Water was no problem—Ali had not thirsted since the marid took him. He tried hard not to think about the implication of that, to ignore the newly restless part of his mind that delighted in the dampness—he refused to call it sweat—beading on his skin and dripping down his limbs.

He could not say how long he'd been walking when the landscape finally changed, rocky cliffs emerging from the sandy dunes like massive, grasping fingers. Ali scoured the craggy bluffs for any sign of food. He'd heard rural Geziris were able to conjure entire feasts from human scraps, but Ali had never been taught such magic. He was a prince raised to be a Qaid, surrounded by servants his entire privileged life. He had no idea how to survive on his own.

Desperate and starving, he ate any bit of greenery he could find down to the roots. It was a mistake. The following morning, he awoke violently ill. Ash crumbled from his skin, and he vomited until all that came up was a fiery black substance that burned the ground.

Hoping to find a bit of shade in which to recover, Ali tried to climb down from the cliffs, but he was so dizzy that his vision blurred and the path danced before him. He lost his footing on the loose gravel almost immediately and slipped, tumbling down a sharp incline.

He landed hard in a stony crevasse, smashing his left shoulder into a protruding rock. There was a wet pop, and a searing heat burst down his arm.

Ali gasped. He tried to shift and then yelped, a sharp pain shooting through his shoulder. He sucked for air through his teeth, biting back a curse as the muscles in his arm spasmed.

Get up. You will die here if you do not get up. But Ali's weakened limbs refused to obey. Blood trickled from his nose, filling his mouth as he stared helplessly at the stark cliffs outlined against the bright sky. A glance at the crevasse revealed nothing but sand and stones. It was—rather fittingly—a dead place.

He choked back a sob. There were worse ways to die, he knew. He could have been caught and tortured by his family's enemies or hacked apart by

assassins eager to claim bloody “proof” of their victory. But God forgive him, Ali was not ready to die.

You are Geziri. A believer in the Most Merciful. Do not dishonor yourself now. Shaking, Ali squeezed his eyes against the pain, trying to find some peace in the holy passages he’d memorized so long ago. But it was difficult. The faces of those he’d left behind in Daevabad—the brother whose trust he’d finally lost, the friend whose love he’d killed, the father who’d sentenced him to death for a crime he hadn’t committed—kept breaking through the encroaching darkness, their voices taunting him as he slowly slipped away.

He woke to an impossibly foul substance being forced down his throat.

Ali’s eyes shot open and he gagged, his mouth full of something crunchy and metallic and *wrong*. His vision swam, slowly focusing on the silhouette of a broad-shouldered man squatting beside him. The man’s face came to him in patches: a nose that had been broken more than once, a matted black beard, hooded gray eyes.

Geziri eyes.

The man laid a heavy hand on Ali’s brow and spooned another thick helping of the disgusting gruel into his mouth. “Eat up, little prince.”

Ali choked. “W-what is that?” His voice was barely a whisper in his parched throat.

The other djinn beamed. “Oryx blood and ground locusts.”

Ali’s stomach immediately rebelled. He turned his head to throw up, but the man clamped his hand over Ali’s mouth and massaged his throat, forcing the revolting mixture back down.

“Aye, do not be doing that. What kind of man turns down food that his host has so thoughtfully prepared?”

“Daevabadis.” A second voice spoke up, and Ali glanced down at his feet, catching sight of a woman with thick black braids and a face that might have been carved from stone. “No manners.” She held up Ali’s zulfiqar and khanjar. “Lovely blades.”

The man held up a gnarled black root. “Did you eat something like this?” When Ali nodded, he snorted. “Fool. You’re lucky not to be a pile of ash right now.” He shoved another spoonful of the bloody gristle at Ali. “Eat. You’ll need your strength for the journey home.”

Ali pushed it weakly away, still dazed and now thoroughly confused. A breeze swept through the crevasse, drying the dampness that clung to his skin, and he shivered. “Home?” he repeated.

“Bir Nabat,” the man said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Home. It is but a week’s travel west.”

Ali tried to shake his head, but his neck and shoulders had gone stiff. "I can't," he rasped out. "I ... I'm going south." South was the only direction he could think to go; the Qahtani family originally hailed from the forbidding mountain chain along Am Gezira's humid southern coast, and it was the only place he could think to find allies.

"*South?*" The man laughed. "You are mostly dead and you think to cross Am Gezira?" He thrust another spoonful into Ali's mouth. "There are assassins looking for you in every shadow of this land. Word is the fire worshippers will make rich the man who kills Alizayd al Qahtani."

"Which is what *we* should be doing, Lubayd," the other raider cut in. She nodded rudely at the gruel. "Not wasting our provisions on a southern brat."

Ali swallowed back the vile concoction with difficulty, narrowing his eyes at her. "You'd kill a fellow Geziri for foreign coins?"

"I'd kill a Qahtani for free."

Ali started at the hostility in her voice. The man—Lubayd—sighed and shot her an annoyed look before turning back to Ali. "You'll forgive Aqisa here, prince, but it's not a good time to be visiting our land." He put down the clay cup. "We haven't seen a drop of rain in years. Our spring is drying up, we're running out of food, our babies and old folk are dying ... So we send messages to Daevabad pleading for help. And do you know what our king says, our fellow Geziri king?"

"*Nothing.*" Aqisa spat at the ground. "Your father doesn't even respond. So do not speak of tribal ties to me, al Qahtani."

Ali was too tired to be frightened by the hatred in her face. He eyed the zulfiqar in her hands again. He kept his blade sharp; at least this ordeal would finally end quickly should they choose to execute him with it.

He choked back another wave of bile, the oryx blood thick in his throat. "Well ...," he started weakly. "In that case I agree. You needn't waste that on me." He nodded at Lubayd's gruel.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Lubayd burst into laughter, the sound ringing out across the crevasse.

He was still laughing when he grabbed Ali's injured arm without warning and pulled it firmly straight.

Ali cried out, black spots blossoming across his vision. But as his shoulder slid back into place, the searing pain immediately lessened. His fingers tingled, sensation returning to his numb hand in excruciating waves.

Lubayd grinned. He removed his ghutra, the cloth headdress worn by northern Geziri djinn, and quickly fashioned it into a sling. Then he hauled

Ali to his feet by his good arm. “Keep your sense of humor, boy. You’re going to need it.”

A massive white oryx waited patiently at the mouth of the crevasse; a line of dried blood crossed one flank. Ignoring Ali’s protests, Lubayd shoved him up onto the animal’s back. Ali clutched its long horns, watching as Lubayd wrestled his zulfiqar away from Aqisa.

He dropped it in Ali’s lap. “Let that shoulder heal and perhaps you’ll swing this again.”

Ali gave the blade an incredulous look. “But I thought ...”

“We’d be killing you?” Lubayd shook his head. “No. Not yet, anyway. Not while you are doing *that*.” He motioned back to the crevasse.

Ali followed his gaze. His mouth fell open.

It wasn’t sweat that had soaked his robe. A miniature oasis had sprung up around him while he lay dying. A spring gurgled through the rocks where his head had been, trickling down a path shrouded with new moss. A second spring bubbled up through the sand, filling the depression his body had left. Bright green shoots covered a bloody patch of gravel, their unfurling leaves wet with dew.

Ali took a sharp breath, scenting the fresh moisture on the desert air. The potential.

“I have no idea how you did that, Alizayd al Qahtani,” Lubayd said. “But if you can draw water into a barren patch of sand in Am Gezira, well ...” He winked. “I’d say you’re worth far more than a few foreign coins.”

NAHRI

It was very quiet inside Emir Muntadhir al Qahtani’s apartment.

Banu Nahri e-Nahid paced the room, her bare toes sinking into the sumptuous carpet. Upon a mirrored table, a bottle of wine rested beside a jade cup carved in the shape of a shedu. The wine had been brought in by the calm-eyed servants who’d helped Nahri out of her heavy wedding clothes; perhaps they’d noticed the Banu Nahida’s trembling and thought it would help.

She stared at the bottle now. It looked delicate. It would be easy to break it, easier still to conceal a glass shard under the pillows of the large bed she was trying not to look at and end this evening in a far more permanent way.

And then you will die. Ghassan would put a thousand of her tribesmen to the sword, make Nahri watch each one, and then throw her to his karkadann.

She tore her gaze from the bottle. A breeze came from the open windows, and she shivered. She'd been dressed in a delicate blue silk shift and soft hooded robe, neither of which did much to ward off the chill. All that was left of the overly elaborate outfit in which she'd been wed was her marriage mask. Made of finely carved ebony and secured by copper clasps and chains, the mask was engraved with her and Muntadhir's names. It was to be burned upon consummation, the ash marking their bodies the next morning proof of the marriage's validity. It was—according to the excited Geziri noblewomen teasing her earlier at the wedding dinner—a beloved tradition of their tribe.

Nahri didn't share their excitement. She'd been sweating since she entered the room, and the mask kept sticking to her damp skin. She pulled it slightly loose, trying to let the breeze cool her flushed cheeks. She caught the reflection of her movement in the massive bronze-edged mirror across the room and averted her eyes. However fine the clothes and mask, they were Geziri, and Nahri had no desire to see herself in the garb of her enemy.

They're not your enemy, she reminded herself. "Enemy" was Dara's word, and she was not going to think about Dara. Not tonight. She couldn't. It would break her—and the last Banu Nahida of Daevabad was not going to break. She'd signed her wedding contract with a steady hand and toasted Ghassan without trembling, smiling warmly at the king who'd threatened her with the murder of Daeva children and forced her to disown her Afshin with the crudest of charges. If she could handle all of that, she could handle whatever happened in this room.

Nahri turned to cross the bedroom again. Muntadhir's vast apartment was located on one of the upper levels of the enormous ziggurat at the heart of Daevabad's palace complex. It was filled with art: paintings on silk screens, delicate tapestries, and finely wrought vases, all of which had been carefully displayed and all of which seemed to carry an aura of magic. She could easily envision Muntadhir in this wondrous room, lounging with a cup of expensive wine and some cosmopolitan courtesan, quoting poetry and bantering about the useless pleasures of life that Nahri had neither the time nor inclination to pursue. There was not a book in sight. Not in this room, nor in the rest of the apartment she'd been guided through.

She stopped to stare at the closest painting, a miniature of two dancers conjuring flamelike flowers that sparked and flashed like hearts of ruby as they twirled.

I have nothing in common with this man. Nahri couldn't imagine the splendor in which Muntadhir had been raised, couldn't imagine being surrounded by the accumulated knowledge of millennia and not bothering to learn how to read. The only thing she shared with her new husband was one awful night upon a burning ship.

The bedroom door opened.

Nahri instinctively stepped back from the painting, pulling her hood low. There was a soft crash from outside, followed by a curse, and then Muntadhir entered.

He wasn't alone; indeed, she suspected he might not have made it alone, for he was leaning heavily on a steward, and she could practically smell the wine on his breath from across the room. A pair of female servants followed, and Nahri swallowed as they helped him out of his robe, unwinding his turban with a number of what sounded like teasing jests in Geziriyya, before leading him to the bed.

He sat heavily on the edge, looking drunk and somewhat stunned to find himself there. Heaped with cloudlike linens, the bed was big enough to fit a family of ten—and given the rumors she'd heard whispered about her husband, she suspected he'd filled it on many an occasion. Frankincense smoldered in a corner burner beside a chalice of sweetened milk mixed with apple leaves—a traditional Daeva drink brewed for new brides hoping to conceive. That, at least, would *not* be happening—Nisreen had assured her. One did not assist Nahid healers for two centuries without learning a number of nearly foolproof methods to prevent pregnancy.

Even so, Nahri's heart beat faster as the servants left, closing the door softly behind them. Tension filled the air, thick and heavy and at awkward odds with the sounds of celebration in the garden below.

Muntadhir finally glanced up, meeting her eyes. Candlelight played on his face. He might not have had Dara's literally magical beauty, but he was a strikingly handsome man, a charismatic man, she'd heard, one who laughed easily and smiled often ... at least with people who weren't her. His thick black hair was cut short, his beard stylishly trimmed. He'd worn his royal regalia for the wedding, the gold-trimmed ebony robe and patterned blue, purple, and gold silk turban that were the hallmarks of the ruling al Qahtani family, but he was dressed now in a crisp white dishdasha edged with tiny pearls. The only thing detracting from his careful appearance was a thin scar dividing his left eyebrow—a remnant from Dara's scourge.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither one moving. She saw that beneath the edge of drunken exhaustion, he too looked nervous.

Finally he spoke. "You're not going to give me plague sores, are you?"

Nahri narrowed her eyes. "Excuse me?"

"Plague sores." Muntadhir swallowed, kneading the embroidered covering on the bed. "That's what your mother used to do to men who looked at her too long."

Nahri hated that the words stung. She wasn't a romantic—on the contrary, she prided herself on her pragmatism and her ability to set aside her emotions—that's what had led her to this room, after all. But it was still her *wedding night*, and she might have hoped for a word of kindness from her new husband; for a man eager to touch her, rather than one worried she would curse him with some sort of magical disease.

She let her robe drop to the floor without ceremony. "Let's get this over with." She approached the bed, fumbling with the delicate copper fixtures holding her marriage mask in place.

"Be careful!" Muntadhir's hand shot out, but he jerked it back when he brushed her fingers. "Forgive me," he said quickly. "It's just—the mask clips were my mother's."

Nahri's hands stilled. No one in the palace ever spoke of Muntadhir's mother, Ghassan's long-dead first wife. "They were?"

He nodded, taking the marriage mask from her hands and deftly unhooking the clips. In comparison to the opulent room and the glittering jewelry they were both wearing, the clips were rather plain, but Muntadhir held them as if he'd just been handed Suleiman's seal ring.

"They've been in her family for centuries," he explained, running his thumb over the fine filigree work. "She always made me promise to have my own wife and daughter wear them." His lips quirked into a sad smile. "She said they brought good fortune and the best of sons."

Nahri hesitated and then decided to press forward; long-lost mothers might be the only topic they had in common. "How old were you—"

"Young," Muntadhir cut in, his voice a little raw, as if the question caused him pain. "She'd been bitten by a *nasnas* out in Am Gezira when she was a child, and the poison stayed with her. She'd have the occasional reaction, but Manizheh could always treat it." His expression darkened. "Until one summer Manizheh decided dawdling in Zariaspa was more important than saving her queen."

Nahri tensed at the bitterness lingering in his words. So much for a connection between them. "I see," she said stiffly.

Muntadhir seemed to notice. A flush came to his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that to you."

“It’s fine,” Nahri replied, though in truth she was regretting this marriage more with each passing moment. “You’ve never hid how you feel about my family. What was it you called me to your father? The ‘*lying Nahid whore*’? The one who seduced your brother and ordered my Afshin to attack your men.”

Muntadhir’s gray eyes flashed with regret before he dropped his gaze. “That was a mistake,” he said, defending himself weakly. “My best friend and my little brother were at death’s door.” He rose to his feet, moving toward the wine. “I wasn’t thinking straight.”

Nahri dropped to sit on the bed, crossing her legs under the silk shift. It was a pretty thing, the fabric so thin it was nearly sheer, chased through with impossibly fine gold embroidery and adorned with delicate ivory beads. At another time—with another person—she might have delighted in the teasing way it brushed her bare skin.

She was decidedly not feeling that way now. She glared at Muntadhir, incredulous that he believed such an excuse sufficient justification for his actions.

He choked on his wine. “That’s not helping me forget about plague sores,” he said between coughs.

Nahri rolled her eyes. “For God’s sake, I’m not going to hurt you. I can’t. Your father would murder a hundred Daevas if I so much as put a scratch on you.” She rubbed her head and then held out a hand for the wine. Maybe a drink *would* make this more bearable. “Pass that over.”

He poured her a cup, and Nahri drank it down, her lips puckering at the sour taste. “That’s awful.”

Muntadhir looked wounded. “That’s an antique ice wine from Zariaspa. It’s priceless, one of the rarest vintages in the world.”

“It tastes like grape juice that’s been passed through a rotting fish.”

“A rotting fish ...,” he repeated faintly. He rubbed his forehead. “Well ... what do you like to drink then, if not wine?”

Nahri paused but then answered honestly, seeing little harm in it. “Karkade. It’s a tea made from hibiscus flowers.” The lump grew in her throat. “It reminds me of home.”

“Calicut?”

She frowned. “What?”

“Isn’t that where you’re from?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m from Cairo.”

“Oh.” He looked a bit nonplussed. “Are they close?”

Not at all. Nahri tried not to cringe. He was supposed to be her husband, and he didn't even know where she was from, the land whose essence still flowed in her blood and beat in her heart. Cairo, the city she missed so fiercely it took her breath away at times.

I don't want this. The realization, swift and urgent, swept through her. Nahri had learned the hard way not to trust a soul in Daevabad. How could she share a bed with this self-centered man who knew nothing of her?

Muntadhir was watching her. His gray eyes softened. "You look like you're about to be sick."

She did flinch now. Maybe he wasn't completely blind. "I'm fine," she lied.

"You don't look fine," he countered, reaching for her shoulder. "You're trembling." His fingers brushed her skin, and Nahri tensed, fighting the urge to jerk away.

Muntadhir dropped his hand as though he'd been burned. "Are *you* afraid of *me*?" he asked, sounding shocked.

"No." Nahri's cheeks burned with embarrassment, even as she bristled. "It's just ... I haven't done this before."

"What, slept with someone you hate?" His wry smile vanished when she bit her lip. "Oh. *Oh*," he added. "I had assumed that you and Darayavahoush —"

"No," Nahri said quickly. She couldn't hear that sentence completed. "Things weren't like that between us. And I don't want to talk about him. Not with you."

Muntadhir's mouth tightened. "Fine."

Silence grew between them again, punctuated by the shouts of laughter that drifted in from the open window.

"Glad to know everyone's so happy we're uniting our tribes," Nahri muttered darkly.

Muntadhir glanced at her. "Is that why you agreed to this?"

"I *agreed*"—her voice turned sarcastic on the word—"because I knew I would otherwise be forced to marry you. I figured I might as well go willingly and take your father for every coin of dowry I could. And maybe one day convince you to overthrow him." It probably wasn't the wisest response, but Nahri was finding it harder and harder to care what her new husband thought.

The color abruptly left Muntadhir's face. He swallowed and then tossed back the rest of his wine before turning to cross the room. He opened the door, speaking in Geziriyya to whoever was on the other side. Nahri inwardly