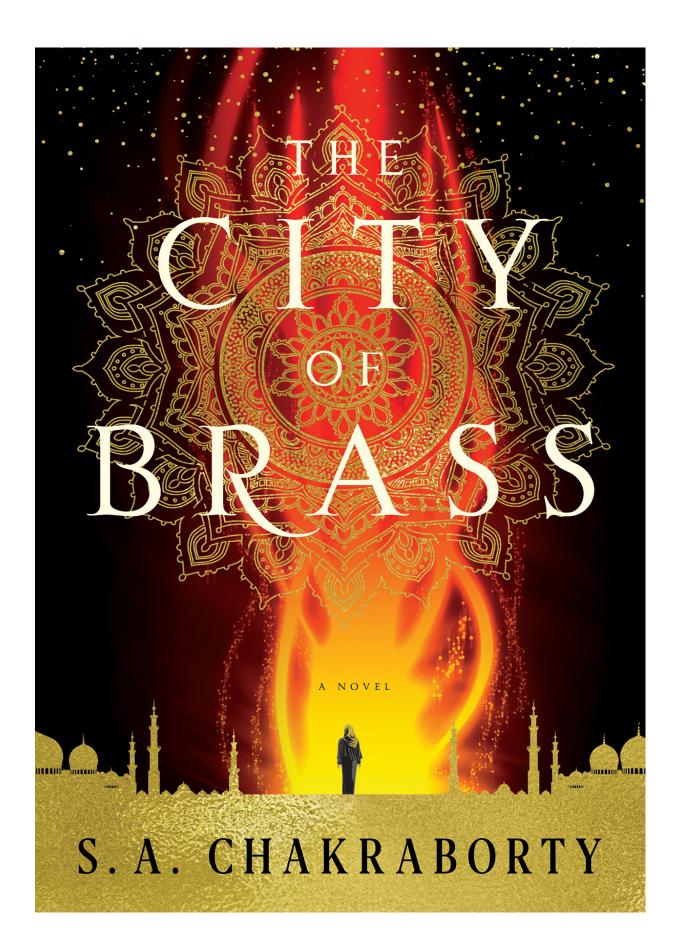
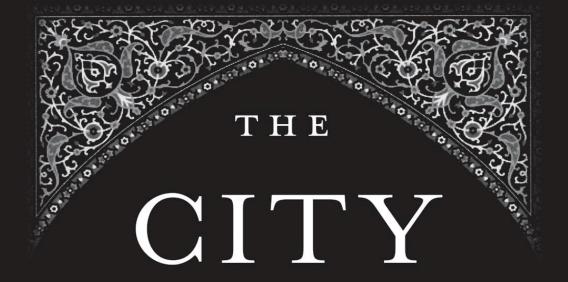


S.A. CHAKRABORTY





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# BRASS

S. A. CHAKRABORTY



## **Dedication**

For Alia, the light of my life

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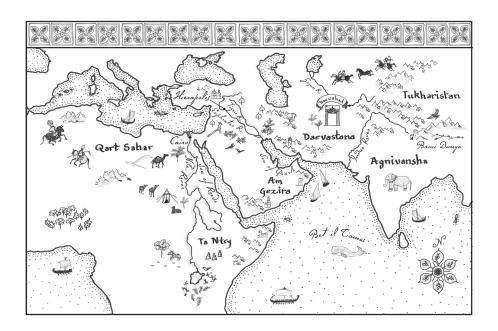
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### 1 **Nahri**

#### **H**e was an easy mark.

Nahri smiled behind her veil, watching the two men bicker as they approached her stall. The younger one glanced anxiously down the alley while the older man—her client—sweated in the cool dawn air. Save for the men, the alley was empty; fajr had already been called and anyone devout enough for public prayer—not that there were many in her neighborhood—was already ensconced in the small mosque at the end of the street.

She fought a yawn. Nahri was not one for dawn prayer, but her client had chosen the early hour and paid handsomely for discretion. She studied the men as they approached, noting their light features and the cut of their expensive coats. Turks, she suspected. The eldest might even be a basha, one of the few who hadn't fled Cairo when the Franks invaded. She crossed her arms over her black abaya, growing intrigued. She didn't have many Turkish clients; they were too snobbish. Indeed, when the Franks and Turks weren't fighting over Egypt, the only thing they seemed to agree on was that the Egyptians couldn't govern it themselves. God forbid. It's not as though the Egyptians were the inheritors of a great civilization whose mighty monuments still littered the land. Oh, no. They were peasants, superstitious fools who ate too many beans.

Well, this superstitious fool is about to swindle you for all you're worth, so insult away. Nahri smiled as the men approached.

She greeted them warmly and ushered them into her tiny stall, serving the elder a bitter tea made from crushed fenugreek seeds and coarsely chopped mint. He drank it quickly, but Nahri took her time reading the leaves, murmuring and singing in her native tongue, a language the men most

certainly wouldn't know, a language not even she had a name for. The longer she took, the more desperate he would be. The more gullible.

Her stall was hot, the air trapped by the dark scarves she hung on the walls to protect her clients' privacy and thick with the odors of burnt cedar, sweat, and the cheap yellow wax she passed off as frankincense. Her client nervously kneaded the hem of his coat, perspiration pouring down his ruddy face and dampening the embroidered collar.

The younger man scowled. "This is foolish, brother," he whispered in Turkish. "The doctor said there's nothing wrong with you."

Nahri hid a triumphant smile. So they were Turks. They wouldn't expect her to understand them—they probably assumed an Egyptian street healer barely spoke proper Arabic—but Nahri knew Turkish as well as she knew her native tongue. And Arabic and Hebrew, scholarly Persian, high-class Venetian, and coastal Swahili. In her twenty or so years of life, she had yet to come upon a language she didn't immediately understand.

But the Turks didn't need to know that, so she ignored them, pretending to study the dregs in the basha's cup. Finally she sighed, her veil fluttering against her lips in a way that drew the gazes of both men, and dropped the cup on the floor.

It broke as it was meant to, and the basha gasped. "By the Almighty! It's bad, isn't it?"

Nahri glanced up at the man, languidly blinking long-lashed black eyes. He'd gone pale, and she paused to listen for the pulse of his heart. It was fast and uneven due to fright, but she could sense it pumping healthy blood throughout his body. His breath was clean of sickness, and there was an unmistakable brightness in his dark eyes. Despite the graying hairs in his beard—ill hidden by henna—and the plumpness in his belly, he suffered from nothing other than an excess of wealth.

She'd be glad to help him with that.

"I am so sorry, sir." Nahri pushed back the small cloth sack, her quick fingers estimating the number of dirhams it held. "Please take back your money."

The basha's eyes popped. "What?" he cried. "Why?"

She dropped her gaze. "There are some things that are beyond me," she said quietly.

"Oh, God . . . do you hear her, Arslan?" The basha turned to his brother, tears in his eyes. "You said I was crazy!" he accused, choking back a sob. "And now I'm going to die!" He buried his head in his hands and wept; Nahri counted the gold rings on his fingers. "I was so looking forward to marrying . . ."

Arslan shot her an irritated look before turning back to the basha. "Pull yourself together, Cemal," he hissed in Turkish.

The basha wiped his eyes and looked up at her. "No, there must be something you can do. I've heard rumors— People say you made a crippled boy walk by just *looking* at him. Surely you can help me."

Nahri leaned back, hiding her pleasure. She had no idea what cripple he was referring to, but God be praised, it would certainly help her reputation.

She touched her heart. "Oh, sir, it grieves me so to deliver such news. And to think of your dear bride being deprived of such a prize . . ."

His shoulders shook as he sobbed. She waited for him to grow a bit more hysterical, taking the opportunity to appraise the thick gold bands circling his wrists and neck. A fine garnet, beautifully cut, was pinned to his turban.

Finally she spoke again. "There might be something, but . . . no." She shook her head. "It wouldn't work."

"What?" he cried, clutching the narrow table. "Please, I'll do anything!" "It will be very difficult."

Arslan sighed. "And expensive, I bet."

*Oh, now you speak Arabic?* Nahri gave him a sweet smile, knowing her veil was gauzy enough to reveal her features. "All of my prices are fair, I assure you."

"Be silent, brother," the basha snapped, glowering at the other man. He looked at Nahri, his face set. "Tell me."

"It's not a certainty," she warned.

"I must try."

"You are a brave man," she said, letting her voice tremble. "Indeed, I believe your affliction has come about from the evil eye. Someone is envious of you, sir. And who wouldn't be? A man of your wealth and beauty could attract only envy. Perhaps even someone close . . ." Her glance at Arslan was brief but enough to make his cheeks redden. "You must clear your home of any darkness the envy has brought in."

"How?" the basha asked, his voice hushed and eager.

"First, you must promise to follow my instructions exactly."

"Of course!"

She leaned forward, intent. "Obtain a mixture of one part ambergris to two parts cedar oil, a good amount. Get them from Yaqub, at the apothecary down the alley. He has the best stuff."

"Yaqub?"

"Aywa. Ask for some powdered lime rind and walnut oil as well."

Arslan watched his brother with open disbelief, but hope brightened in the basha's eyes. "And then?"

"This is where it might get difficult, but, sir . . ." Nahri touched his hand, and he shuddered. "You must follow my instructions exactly."

"Yes. By the Most Merciful, I swear."

"Your house needs to be cleansed, and that can only be done if it is abandoned. Your entire family must leave, animals, servants, all. There must not be a living soul in the house for seven days."

"Seven days!" he cried, then lowered his voice at the disapproval in her eyes. "Where are we to go?"

"The oasis at Faiyum." Arslan laughed, but Nahri continued. "Go to the second smallest spring at sunset with your youngest son," she said, her voice severe. "Gather some water in a basket made of local reeds, say the throne verse over it three times, and then use it for your ablutions. Mark your doors with the ambergris and oil before you leave and by the time you return, the envy will be gone."

"Faiyum?" Arslan interrupted. "My God, girl, even you must know there's a war on. Do you imagine Napoleon eager to let any of us leave Cairo for some useless desert trek?"

"Be *quiet*!" The basha banged on the table before turning back to Nahri. "But such a thing will be difficult."

Nahri spread her hands. "God provides."

"Yes, of course. So it is to be Faiyum," he decided, looking determined. "And then my heart will be cured?"

She paused; it was the heart he was worried about? "God willing, sir. Have your new wife put the powdered lime and oil into your evening tea for the next month." It wouldn't do anything for his nonexistent heart problem, but perhaps his bride would better enjoy his breath. Nahri let go of his hand.

The basha blinked as if released from a spell. "Oh, thank you, dear one, thank you." He pushed back the small sack of coins and then slipped a heavy gold ring from his pinkie and handed that over as well. "God bless you."

"May your marriage be fruitful."

He rose heavily to his feet. "I must ask, child, where are your people from? You've a Cairene accent, but there's something about your eyes . . ." He trailed off.

Nahri pressed her lips together; she hated when people asked after her heritage. Though she wasn't what many would call beautiful—years of living on the streets had left her much thinner and far dirtier than men typically preferred—her bright eyes and sharp face usually spurred a second glance. And it was that second glance, the one that revealed a line of midnight hair and uncommonly black eyes—unnaturally black eyes, she'd heard it said—that provoked questions.

"I'm as Egyptian as the Nile," she assured him.

"Of course." He touched his brow. "In peace." He ducked under the doorway to leave.

Arslan stayed behind; Nahri could feel his eyes on her as she gathered her payment. "You do realize you just committed a crime, yes?" he asked, his voice sharp.

"I'm sorry?"

He stepped closer. "A crime, you fool. Witchcraft is a crime under Ottoman law."

Nahri couldn't help herself; Arslan was only the latest in a long line of puffed-up Turkish officials she'd had to deal with growing up in Cairo under Ottoman rule. "Well, then I suppose I'm lucky the Franks are in charge now."

It was a mistake. His face instantly reddened. He raised his hand, and Nahri flinched, her fingers reflexively tightening over the basha's ring. One sharp edge cut into her palm.

But he didn't hit her. Instead, he spat at her feet. "By God as my witness, you thieving witch . . . when we clear the French out of Egypt, filth like you will be the next to go." He shot her another hate-filled glare and then left.

She took a shaky breath as she watched the arguing brothers disappear into the early morning gloom toward Yaqub's apothecary. But it wasn't the threat that unsettled her: It was the rattle she'd heard when he shouted, the smell of iron-rich blood in the air. A diseased lung, consumption, maybe even a cancerous mass. There was no outward sign of it yet, but soon.

Arslan had been right to suspect her: there was nothing wrong with his brother. But he wouldn't live to see his people reconquer her country.

She unclenched her fist. The gash in her palm was already healing, a line of new brown skin knitting together beneath the blood. She stared at it for a long moment and then sighed before ducking back inside her stall.

She pulled off her knotted headdress and crumpled it into a ball. *You fool. You know better than to lose your temper with men like that.* Nahri didn't need any more enemies, especially not ones now likely to post guards around the basha's house while he was in Faiyum. What he'd paid today was a pittance compared to what she could steal from his empty villa. She wouldn't have stolen much—she'd been doing her tricks long enough to avoid the temptations of excess. But some jewelry that could have been blamed on a forgetful wife, a quick-fingered servant? Baubles that would have meant nothing to the basha and a month's rent to Nahri? Those she would take.

Muttering another curse, she rolled back her sleeping mat and dislodged a few bricks from the floor. She dropped the basha's coins and ring in the shallow hole, frowning at her meager savings.

It's not enough. It's never going to be enough. She replaced the bricks, calculating how much she still needed to pay for this month's rent and

bribes, the inflated costs of her increasingly unsavory profession. The number always grew, pushing away her dreams of Istanbul and tutors, of a respectable trade and actual healing instead of this "magical" nonsense.

But there was nothing to be done about it now, and Nahri wasn't about to take time from earning money to bemoan her fate. She stood, winding a rumpled headscarf around her messy curls and gathering up the amulets she'd made for the Barzani women and the poultice for the butcher. She'd need to come back later to prepare for the zar, but for now, she had someone far more important to see.

Yaqub's apothecary was located at the end of the alley, crammed between a moldering fruit stand and a bread bakery. No one knew what had led the elderly Jewish pharmacist to open an apothecary in such a grim slum. Most of the people living in her alley were desperate: prostitutes, addicts, and garbage-pickers. Yaqub had moved in quietly several years ago, settling his family into the upper floors of the cleanest building. The neighbors wagged their tongues, spreading rumors of gambling debts and drunkenness, or darker charges that his son had killed a Muslim, that Yaqub himself took blood and humors from the alley's half-dead addicts. Nahri thought it all nonsense, but she didn't dare ask. She didn't question his background, and he didn't ask why a former pickpocket could diagnose illnesses better than the sultan's personal physician. Their strange partnership rested on avoiding those two subjects.

She entered the apothecary, quickly sidestepping the battered bell meant to announce customers. Crowded with supplies and impossibly chaotic, Yaqub's shop was her favorite place in the world. Mismatched wooden shelves crammed with dusty glass vials, tiny reed baskets, and crumbling ceramic jars covered the walls. Lengths of dried herbs, animal parts, and objects she couldn't identify hung from the ceiling while clay amphorae competed for the small amount of floor space. Yaqub knew his inventory like the lines of his palms, and listening to his stories of ancient Magi or the hot spice lands of the Hind transported her to worlds she could hardly imagine.

The pharmacist was bent over his workbench, mixing something that gave off a sharp, unpleasant scent. She smiled at the sight of the old man with his even older instruments. His mortar alone looked like something from the reign of Salah ad-Din. "Sabah el-hayr," she greeted him.

Yaqub made a startled noise and glanced up, knocking his forehead into a hanging garlic braid. Swatting it away, he grumbled, "Sabah el-noor. Can't you make some noise when you enter? Scared me half to death."

Nahri grinned. "I like to surprise you."

He snorted. "Sneak up on me, you mean. You get more like the devil each day."

"That's a very unkind thing to say to someone who brought you a small fortune this morning." She pushed up on her hands to perch on his workbench.

"Fortune? Is that what you call two bickering Ottoman officials banging down my door at dawn? My wife nearly had a heart attack."

"So buy her some jewelry with the money."

Yaqub shook his head. "And ambergris! You're lucky I even had some in stock! What, could you not convince him to paint his door in molten gold?"

She shrugged, picking up one of the jars near his elbow and taking a delicate sniff. "They looked like they could afford it."

"The younger one had quite an earful to say about you."

"You can't please everyone." She picked up another jar, watching as he added some candlenut kernels to his mortar.

He put the pestle down with a sigh, holding his hand out for the jar, which she reluctantly handed back. "What are you making?"

"This?" He returned to grinding the kernels. "A poultice for the cobbler's wife. She's been dizzy."

Nahri watched another moment. "That won't help."

"Oh, really? Tell me again, Doctor, who did you train under?"

Nahri smiled; Yaqub hated when she did this. She turned back to the shelves, hunting for the familiar pot. The shop was a mess, a chaos of unlabeled jars and supplies that seemed to get up and move on their own. "She's pregnant," she called over her shoulder. She picked up a vial of peppermint oil, swatting away a spider that crawled over the top.

"Pregnant? Her husband said nothing."

Nahri pushed the vial in his direction and added a gnarled root of ginger. "It's early. They probably don't know yet."

He gave her a sharp look. "And you do?"

"By the Compassionate, don't you? She vomits loudly enough to wake Shaitan, may he be cursed. She and her husband have six children. You think they'd know the signs by now." She smiled, trying to reassure him. "Make her a tea from these."

"I haven't heard her."

"Ya, grandfather, you don't hear me come in either. Maybe the fault lies with your ears."

Yaqub pushed away the mortar with a disgruntled noise and turned to the back corner where he kept his earnings. "I wish you'd stop playing Musa bin Maimon and find yourself a husband. You're not too old, you know." He pulled out his trunk; the hinges groaned as he opened the battered top.

Nahri laughed. "If you could find someone willing to marry the likes of me, you'd put every matchmaker in Cairo out of business." She pawed through the random assortment of books, receipts, and vials on the table, searching for the small enamel case where Yaqub kept sesame candies for his grandchildren, finally finding it beneath a dusty ledger. "Besides," she continued, plucking out two of the candies, "I like our partnership."

He handed her a small sack. Nahri could tell from its weight that it was more than her usual cut. She started to protest, but he cut her off. "Stay away from men like that, Nahri. It's dangerous."

"Why? The Franks are in charge now." She chewed her candy, suddenly curious. "Is it true Frankish women go about naked in the street?"

The pharmacist shook his head, used to her impropriety. "French, child, not Frankish. And God prevent you from hearing such wickedness."

"Abu Talha says their leader has the feet of a goat."

"Abu Talha should stick to mending shoes . . . But don't change the subject," he said, exasperated. "I'm trying to warn you."

"Warn me? Why? I've never even talked to a Frank." That wasn't for lack of effort. She'd tried selling amulets to the few French soldiers she'd encountered, and they'd backed away like she was some sort of snake, making condescending remarks about her clothing in their strange language.

He locked eyes with her. "You're young," he said quietly. "You have no experience with what happens to people like us during a war. People who are different. You should keep your head down. Or better yet, leave. What happened to your grand plans of Istanbul?"

After counting her savings this morning, the mere mention of the city soured her. "I thought you said I was being foolish," she reminded him. "That no physician would take on a female apprentice."

"You could be a midwife," he offered. "You've delivered babies before. You could go east, away from this war. Beirut, perhaps."

"You sound eager to be rid of me."

He touched her hand, his brown eyes filled with concern. "I'm eager to see you *safe*. You've no family, no husband to stand up for you, to protect you, to \_\_"

She bristled. "I can take care of myself."

"—to *advise* you against doing dangerous things," he finished, giving her a look. "Things like leading zars."

Ah. Nahri winced. "I hoped you wouldn't hear about those."

"Then you're a fool," he said bluntly. "You shouldn't be getting caught up in that southern magic." He gestured behind her. "Get me a tin."

She fetched one from the shelf, tossing it to him with a bit more force than was necessary. "There's no 'magic' to it at all," she dismissed. "It's harmless."

"Harmless!" Yaqub scoffed as he shoveled tea into the tin. "I've heard rumors about those zars . . . blood sacrifices, trying to exorcise djinn . . . "

"It's not really meant to *exorcise* them," Nahri corrected lightly. "More like an effort to make peace."

He stared at her in utter exasperation. "You shouldn't be trying to do anything with djinn!" He shook his head, closing the tin and rubbing warm wax over the seams. "You're playing with things you don't understand, Nahri. They're not your traditions. You're going to get your soul snapped up by a demon if you're not more careful."

Nahri was oddly touched by his concern—to think that just a few years ago he'd dismissed her as a black-hearted fraudster. "Grandfather," she started, trying to sound more respectful. "You needn't worry. There's no magic, I swear." Seeing the doubt on his face, she decided to be more frank. "It's nonsense, all of it. There's no magic, no djinn, no spirits waiting to eat us up. I've been doing my tricks long enough to learn none of it's real."

He paused. "The things I've seen you do—"

"Maybe I'm just a better trickster than the rest," she cut in, hoping to assuage the fear she saw in his face. She didn't need to scare off her only friend simply because she had a few strange skills.

He shook his head. "There are still djinn. And demons. Even scholars say so."

"Well, the scholars are wrong. No spirit has come after me yet."

"That's very arrogant, Nahri. Blasphemous, even," he added, looking taken aback. "Only a fool would speak in such a way."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "They don't exist."

He sighed. "No one can say I didn't try." He pushed the tin over. "Give that to the cobbler on your way out, will you?"

Nahri pushed off the table. "Are you doing inventory tomorrow?" Arrogant she might be, but she rarely passed on an opportunity to learn more about the apothecary. Yaqub's knowledge had greatly advanced her own instincts for healing.

"Yes, but come early. We have a lot to get through."

She nodded. "God willing."

"Now go buy some kebab," he said, nodding at the purse. "You're all bones. The djinn will want more to eat should they come for you."

**B**y the time Nahri reached the neighborhood where the zar was taking place, the sun had blinked behind the crowded landscape of stone minarets and mud-brick flats. It vanished into the distant desert, and a low-voiced muezzin began the call to maghrib prayer. She paused, briefly disoriented by

the loss of light. The neighborhood was in southern Cairo, squeezed between the remains of ancient Fustat and the Mokattam hills, and it wasn't an area she knew well.

The chicken she was carrying took advantage of Nahri's distraction to kick her in the ribs, and Nahri swore, tucking it tighter under her arm as she pushed past a thin man balancing a board of bread on his head and narrowly avoided a collision with a gaggle of giggling children. She picked her way through a growing pile of shoes outside an already packed mosque. The neighborhood was crowded; the French invasion had done little to stop the waves of people coming to Cairo from the countryside. The new migrants arrived with little more than the clothing on their backs and the traditions of their ancestors, traditions often denounced as perversions by some of the city's more irritated imams.

The zars were certainly denounced as such. Like belief in magic, belief in possession was widespread in Cairo, blamed for everything from a young bride's miscarriage to an old woman's lifelong dementia. Zar ceremonies were held to placate the spirit and heal the afflicted woman. And while Nahri didn't believe in possession, the basketful of coins and the free meal earned by the kodia, the woman who led the ceremony, were too tempting to pass up. And so, after spying on a number of them, she started hosting her own—albeit extremely abbreviated—version.

Tonight would be the third one she held. She'd met with an aunt from the afflicted girl's family last week and arranged to hold the ceremony in an abandoned courtyard near their home. By the time she arrived, her musicians, Shams and Rana, were already waiting.

Nahri greeted them warmly. The courtyard had been swept clean, and a narrow table, covered with a white cloth, set in the center. Two copper platters sat at either end of the table, laden with almonds, oranges, and dates. A fair-size group had gathered, the female members of the afflicted girl's family as well as about a dozen curious neighbors. Though all looked poor, no one would dare come to a zar empty-handed. It would be a good take.

Nahri beckoned to a pair of small girls. Still young enough to find the whole thing terribly exciting, they raced over, their little faces eager. Nahri knelt and folded the chicken she'd been carrying into the arms of the elder.

"Hold him tight for me, okay?" Nahri asked. The girl nodded, looking selfimportant.

She handed her basket to the younger girl. She was precious, with big dark eyes and curly hair pulled into messy braids. No one would be able to resist her. Nahri winked. "You make sure everyone puts something in the basket."