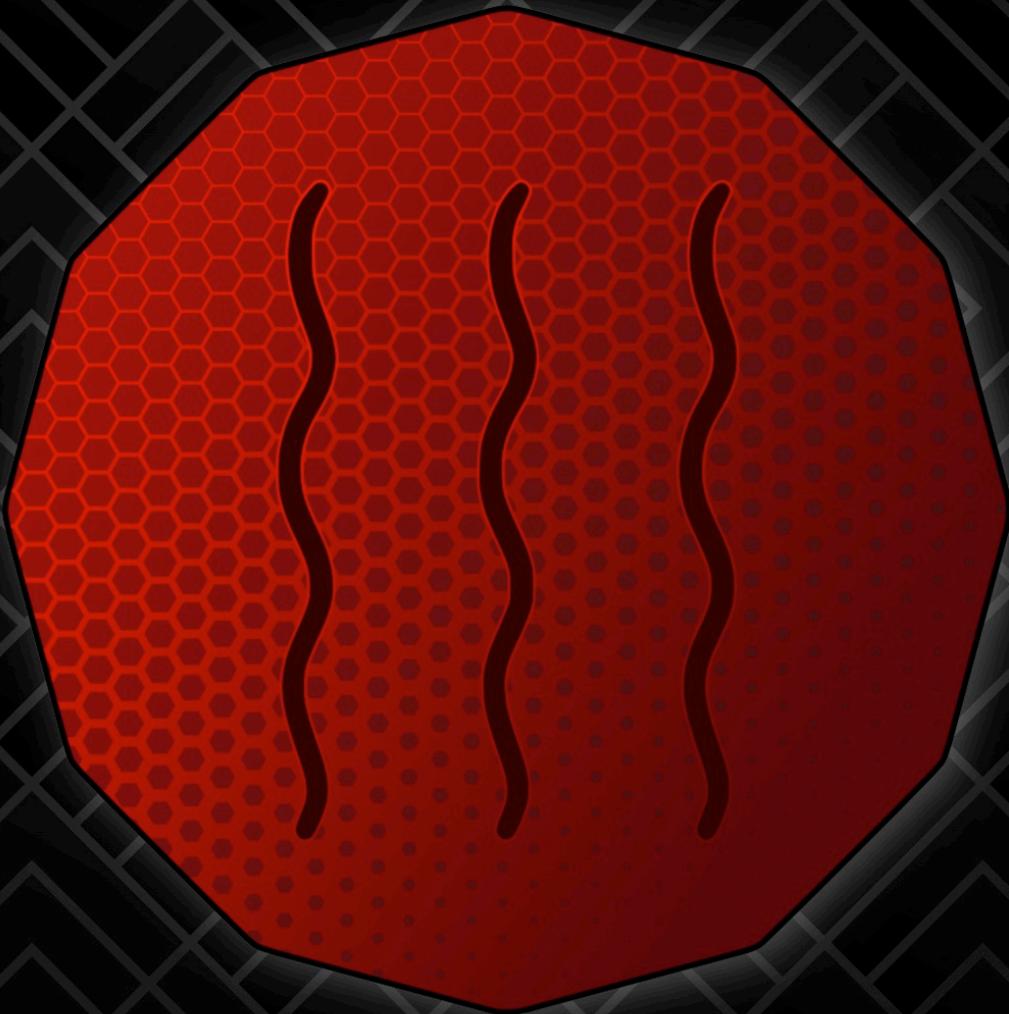


THE UNLINKED PRINCE



O.A. BHATTI

Thank you for taking an interest in The Unlinked Prince! This is an excerpt containing the first seven chapters. Check out the link at the end if you'd like to [read more!](#)

THE UNLINKED PRINCE

The Stellar River Chronicles: Book One

O. A. BHATTI

To my family, thank you for giving me the spark I sorely needed. And to the Grinning Maw, thank you for always being there, just behind my eyes.

This work contains sensitive and mature subject matters including religious abuse, domestic abuse, enslavement, torture, violence (some graphic), references to violence towards children (not explicitly depicted), depictions of war zones (including bombings, bombardment, and a death march). It should be noted that most of these depictions come from Chapter 13, which contains the Nightmare. This is not a horror novel, but does contain horror. Reader discretion is advised.

This is a work of fiction. Character names and descriptions are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Chapter One

Again with the thicket of fleshy red arms and appendages with razor-toothed jaws. They grabbed and snapped at Kabir as he struggled to escape. He pushed a few aside, but one of the jawed flesh-tendrils sank its teeth into his bicep. He screamed and ripped the tendril out of the ground. The thicket dragged him back, threatening to pull Kabir off his feet. All the while, his mother's voice echoed through his skull.

"Once, there was only Ul Maw. From Esgul, It spewed out the world. Then It populated the new world with people and beasts. When we became plentiful enough, Ul Maw hunted us all."

The sky was blood-red. At its center, the gargantuan eye that was the moon gazed down at the thrashing field. Suddenly, its pupil morphed and contorted, settling into a circular mass of teeth and fangs, with a black hole in the center. Kabir reached for his sword.

"Ul Maw stalked us in the hills and in the trees. It hunted us when we hid underground. It scuttled us as we fled to the oceans. When we raised villages, Ul Maw leveled them. When we raised arms in our defense, Ul Maw devoured us."

He drew the blade and severed one arm, then another. Blood sprayed from the reaching masses of flesh as he hacked again and again.

"Until one day, after eons of hunting, Ul Maw slept. And we were finally free."

Kabir staggered out of the thicket, bracing his hands against his knees to recover. When he looked up, the cloaked figure was there. It turned towards him, and he readied for a fight.

"As we evolved from prey to hunters, Qualaalnoor emerged from the Stellar River to guide our people to a new tomorrow. And thus, the Stellar River Empire was born."

He slashed out before the figure could grab him. The black cloak fell away empty. But Kabir's triumph was short-lived. When he looked up, the Toothy Moon hovered above him. The jaws yawned open, a vortex of flesh and teeth, revealing not the inky

blackness of Esgul, but a pulsing red light?

Kabir snapped back as his communicator glowed red and trilled at him. He grabbed the glowing sphere of putty off the coffee table and chucked it across the room. It splat against the wall and stayed there, an amorphous splotch of black against the cream-white. For the moment, he was safe. Kabir put away his journal and folder of sketches. Nothing to report, just the same old Toothy Moon. Then the communicator trilled again. This time, it named the caller.

"Call from 'Wake the fuck up, brother! This is important!',“ the damnable device projected.

Still groggy from the trance, Kabir staggered over to the splotch on the wall. The sindform putty trilled and glowed as he shaped it into a rectangle. He answered the call with a thought, prompting his older brother's face to appear on the putty's surface. Before him, on a table, sat a healthy helping of eggs and toast. Kabir's young nephew was there next too, but simply waved before scampering away. Morning already.

"Maw's teeth, Kabir, you look like shit!" Abdul bellowed. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Yeah. What's so important?"

"Got a complaint from the Fabric district."

Kabir yawned. "Since when does the Head Office assign complaints?"

"Well, apparently someone's going around saying he's lost his home. The Empress has asked that we keep a close eye on such matters. Before they get out of hand."

"Another one? That's the third case this month."

"Yes, it's the strangest phenomenon, this un-housing business. We're calling the victims the 'home-less.' Because they supposedly lack homes, you see. Hopefully it doesn't catch on. At any rate, given the importance to Mum, I thought I'd get my little brother on the case!"

"Just add it to the pile," Kabir mumbled.

"Sorry, didn't catch that, brother. You really should upgrade to a new communicator. They have holograms now, you know!"

"I said I'll get started right away, Abdul."

"Excellent! And give Mum a call when you can. She's been asking after you."

"I'll try, but you know how busy she is."

"Mm, quite. Anyhoo, I'll send you the details. Let me know how everything goes. Toodles!"

Kabir attempted to clean up before heading out, splashing his face and running water through his black hair. The dark circles under his eyes were especially dark today and stuck out against the light brown of the rest of his face. At least he was already wearing work clothes, a white linen button-up tucked into khaki slacks. He put on his long, khaki sherwani-style coat and matching trilby hat, then absently ran his hand over the bronze Imperial Seal on his right ring finger. The seal featured three vertical, undulating lines carved into a twelve-sided dodecagon. The symbol gave him momentary vertigo, and Kabir half-wondered if he were still in the throes of a trance. His multi-tool wasn't in its usual place on the bedside table. Instead, he found it on the counter next to the fridge.

Kabir stretched the lump of copper-colored putty out, then shaped it into a long strip. The material read his intention and did the rest, minutely morphing into a lustrous black belt. He fed it through the loops of his slacks. Before leaving, he stretched out the communicator and attached it to the skin behind his left ear. Stretched-out, the black putty reached from his ear to the middle of his neck. Kabir pressed it with two fingers.

"Activate Link Interface with ocular recording." A soft vibration buzzed against his skull, and the "Link Interface Online" message popped up in the corner of his vision, accompanied by the red dot. From here-on, everything he looked at would be recorded as video until he deactivated the feature, standard procedure for Security Officers of any rank or duty. The optical updates also sparked a blinding headache. "Turn off optical notifications," he commanded, swaying from the strain.

The communicator's robotic voice chirped its confirmation in a frequency only Kabir could hear. He put on his shoulder-bag and reached for his transport-module, a small black briefcase next to the door. But then he stopped himself. His apartment wasn't far from the Fabric District, and he could use the walk.

As Kabir stepped out of the apartment, he caught sight of his neighbor Darrien locking his front door down the hall. He tried to duck back in, but was far too late. Darrien saw him and waved, and a shit-eating grin crossed his dark brown face.

"Prince Kabir! You wouldn't be trying to shirk your duties now, would you?" Darrien shouted in that boisterous tone of his. "A citizen requires assistance!"

Kabir sighed as he approached. "What seems to be the problem, citizen?"

Darrien laughed and clapped his hands. "I'll never get used to that! An actual Prince, right down the hall. And asking what he can do for me, no less! You'd never see anything like this back home. You Stellar River people are—"

"Sorry, I am on duty, Darrien. Was there something you needed?" Kabir asked in his most even tone.

"Psh, straight to business, as usual. Our toilet is giving us trouble. We need someone to come and fix it. Unless... can you fix a toilet, Prince?" Darrien's grin remained, but there was a hint of genuine curiosity in his expression. Immigrants to the Empire often wondered how far civil servants, particularly Royals, would go to serve the populous.

"Unfortunately, I'm not qualified, Darrien. Why don't you file the request yourself?"

"Don't have one of those fancy terminals. I was going to talk to the building manager, but then I saw you and, well..." His inquisitive grin morphed into something like satisfaction.

"Alright," Kabir peeled off his communicator, shaped it, and willed the screen to life. "I can file a request on your behalf. When would be a good time for management to take care of it?"

"When, today? Pshaw! I know how this goes. You file a request, and I'm left waiting

weeks in an apartment that smells like shit!"

"Not in Lion City." Kabir navigated to the building's maintenance request form and held out the communicator.

Darrien gave him a look of surprise, then took it. "After work would be good." He tapped out the time on the screen and handed the communicator back.

"I'm also filing a request for you to receive a terminal so you can access the service network yourself."

His face fell. "And... how much will that cost? We can't really afford to buy luxury items, Prince Kabir."

Darrien's sudden shift into formality unnerved Kabir, and he found himself trying to reassure the man. "No cost, Darrien. Well, no direct cost to you. It's a utility, don't worry about it. Do you need anything else?"

Darrien's usual grin returned. "No, I'm good. I'll leave you a note when they don't show up. Hah!"

Darrien saluted, and they walked to the elevator. Once inside, Kabir fixed his gaze forward and ignored Darrien's furtive glances. After a silence that Darrien no doubt considered awkward, he finally spoke again.

"My wife took the Link." Darrien declared this more somberly than Kabir would have expected.

"That's interesting. You haven't?"

"No. And she won't tell me what it's like. She says she can't. You used to be Linked too, right?"

"I was. Not now, though."

"Then you tell me what it is. Tell me why I shouldn't be having a fit right now."

"I can't, sorry."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't. I know it might not make sense. But I just can't."

A flash of frustrated anger crossed Darrien's face, then quickly subsided. He averted his gaze. "Of course, Prince Kabir."

When the elevator reached the ground floor, Darrien crossed the lobby in a huff. Kabir shook his head and spoke before he could stop himself.

"Darrien."

"Yes, Prince?"

"You needn't fear the Link. If you want to know what it does, watch your wife. I can't tell you what effect the Link is having on her, but she will show it in her actions. Right now, you worry she's changed into a different person. Watch her, and you'll find she hasn't."

He didn't turn around. "Thank you, my Prince. I'll leave you a note. Hah!"

It was hotter than expected outside, so Kabir swiped down on the side of his jacket. The lattice loosened the molecules of the fabric considerably, allowing his skin to breathe. In an instant, he was no longer boiling in his clothes. The wide bazaar between his building and the next was already bustling with activity. Kabir's city basked in the sun, the light kissing the tops of buildings and stalls, where sellers set up shop for the morning. And high above, commuters walked along the web of sky bridges connecting the buildings to one another. Kabir weaved through to his favorite breakfast place, Aisha's Diner, as Aisha herself placed chairs in front of her stall.

"Ready for customers yet, auntie?"

The older woman's tan face lit up with a smile. "Good morning, Kabir. If you help set up, I'll make you breakfast."

"Deal."

Kabir finished preparing the chairs and tables, then rolled out the shade sticking from the top of Aisha's stall.

"The umbrellas too, Kabir!" Aisha shouted from behind the grill.

"You got umbrellas?" He spotted fabric-wrapped metal tubes leaning against the wall beside her stall. Kabir slotted each one into the center of each table. "Are they latticed?" he shouted.

"Yes! Swipe up!"

He swiped up on the fabric of the first. After a brief delay, it unfurled like a flower coming in bloom, into a wide, inviting red shade against the sun. Kabir nodded, impressed, and moved onto the rest. Aisha came out with a foil-wrapped paratha and a paper cup filled with coffee.

"Your usual. Come for dinner tonight, Kabir. You're always coming and going, but you've never had one of my late specials."

"I'd love to, auntie. I've just been busy."

Her dark brown eyes shimmered red for a split second. "Are you doing alright, behta?"

Kabir held back a sigh out of respect. No point lying outright.

"I'm tired, auntie. I've been working a lot of cases and haven't been getting enough sleep."

"Get someone else to take some. You work too much."

"I'm a Prince. I have to."

The red light flashed brighter in her eyes this time, and she furrowed her brow. "You're full of shit, behta. What are you really doing?"

He rolled his eyes and tapped his communicator against the payment terminal on the wall. "Stop using your Link tricks on me, you old camel."

Aisha scoffed. "Don't need tricks for you, whelp!"

Kabir peeled away the foil from the folded paratha. The meat and onion-filled greasy flatbread beckoned him, and he came in for a massive bite. "Maybe I'll take a

vacation," he said, his voice muffled by chewing. "I've been thinking of going on a hunt."

"A hunt is not a vacation, Kabir, take a real vacation!" She shouted. He waved back to her and made his way down the street.

It wasn't long before Kabir regretted the decision to travel by foot. A young woman flagged him down a block away from the building.

"Prince Kabir, wonderful day, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Do you need something, citizen?"

At the prompt, the woman immediately swamped him with renovation requests for the street.

"Oh, how lovely would it look with a boulevard of greenery running down the center?" she asked during her cheerful prattle. "It'd be great for the children and would create a natural feel for the neighborhood," she added towards the end.

Immediately after he processed her request, a group of adolescents approached asking whether the park to be converted into a trampoline park because it would be ever so fun. But could he not tell their parents they asked because their parents told them not to bother him? Then a cyclist flagged him down, requesting the creation of separate bike lanes in front of some random building to keep cyclists clear of pedestrian traffic. As Kabir processed this request, the cyclist's eyes shimmered red and a look of mild embarrassment crossed his face.

"So sorry, Prince Kabir, I'm holding you from your duties. Thank you for your time! May It never awaken." He beamed a smile before riding away.

Kabir sighed. While he tried not to look annoyed when taking requests, something in his body language must have signaled that he was not in the mood. A minute twitch or a subsonic sigh. Who knew? Now every Linked person he came across would give him a wide berth and tactfully ignore him. They wouldn't make him feel like shit about it, but that'd make him feel more like shit. The Linked were so Maw-damned considerate.

Sure enough, no one else bothered Kabir for the rest of his walk. When he arrived at the arched entrance to the Fabric District, his twin sister, Zainab, stood there waiting. She wore a yellow floral kameez that reached down to her knees, with matching light trousers and a sky blue scarf draped over her shoulder. Her long black hair fell down her back. She'd added purple highlights since last he saw her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Abdul called, said we had a joint case going. Took you long enough to get here." Zainab didn't look at him, and instead scanned the shop windows, presumably planning some shopping trip.

"I was processing citizen requests."

She scoffed. "Requests! People are too nice to you. They know you're a workaholic, so they enable your addiction."

"I'm not a workaholic."

"You are. They could have submitted the forms themselves. It only takes a couple of minutes. Those people just wanted to talk to their Prince. The Nightmare's coming up and they know you're Unlinked. They probably wanted to see if they could help somehow. You can just say you're busy, Kabir. You don't need to take on extra duties. Maybe that's why Abdul sent me. To lighten the load."

"Why don't you go get a new outfit? If I need someone to look at spreadsheets, I'll let you know."

Zainab shot him a lazy smile. "Actually, Abdul's probably worried you'll miss something. You are the dumb one."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Kabir narrowed his eyes, and Zainab matched the gesture with mock seriousness.

"What does this case have to do with the Office of Finance and Commerce? In the last

two cases like this, the victims had gambling debts and gave up their homes to pay them. I just needed to get the deeds back from the person who'd taken them."

Zainab furrowed her brow. "I didn't know there were other cases like this. We've had an uptick of business owners reaching out for loans to cover strange debts, but no homelessness. Hopefully this doesn't catch on. At any rate, Abdul thinks this case is related to what we're seeing. And from what you've said, it sounds like it may be. So, you're stuck with me."

"Hm. Fine, let's go. Let me talk to him first."

"Very well. After you." Zainab stepped aside and gestured dramatically for him to go ahead.

The shop Abdul told them about differed from others they passed. While most displayed mannequins adorned in flashy suits and shalwar-kameez, the mannequins here wore black leather coats and hats. The entryway was also distinct from the others made of glass, just a black door with a small covered window.

"'Hunter's Apparel.' Seems niche," Zainab remarked.

A small bell rang as Kabir opened the door.

"Be just a moment!" A gruff voice shouted from out of sight.

The interior was small, but well-cared for, with dark hardwood floors and clothing racks full of merchandise. The clothes on the racks weren't anything to write home about visually. Jackets, thick flannels, dark vests and even some simple suits. But the name of the shop suggested there was more to them than they appeared. It was as Kabir was inspecting the clothes that he heard the clacking sound. He moved to take cover, but Zainab beat him to it, dragging her brother down behind the counter.

"Who's there? You're not getting my shop, sneak-thief! You already got your money, damn you!"

Kabir tried to stand, but Zainab pulled him down and shook her head. She shook her head more furiously when he contradicted her with a nod. He pulled away, but she

yanked him by the sleeve. Kabir rolled his eyes and pulled his earlobe down, a hunter's signal that said, "Listen."

Zainab narrowed her eyes, and they shimmered with red light as she read the shopkeeper's intent. Then she sighed, gave him a conciliatory head tilt, and let go.

"I'm standing up. Don't do anything reckless," Kabir declared.

He rose to his feet to see a stout man with graying hair holding something he didn't immediately recognize. Kabir had never seen one in person before, so it took him a moment to register what the object was. "Is that a firearm? From Ermenden? Where the gul did you get that?"

The man blanched at the sight of the prince. He placed the firearm on the ground and stood at attention. The weapon was about the length of a long sword, with a metal tube protruding from a mechanism that reminded Kabir of a crossbow or ballista. There was a trigger, and a small wooden handle that extended into a triangular shoulder-stock. "Apologies, Prince Kabir! I didn't know it was you."

"You're forgiven. I'm here as a detective of the Security Service. You're the owner, correct?"

The man nodded. "Yes, detective. Fawad Sidiqqi. This is my shop. You've caught me at a bad time, I'm afraid. Did you need something?"

"I understand you've been telling people you've lost your home. Princess Zainab and I have been dispatched to investigate."

Mr. Siddiqui's eyebrows went up in surprise. "I—I didn't think it was something that... Can you help?"

Zainab spoke up. "We can assist you, Mr. Siddiqui, we just need to—" Her eyes flashed red and she tensed. The entrance bell rang again. This time, three men armed with cricket bats stepped into the shop. Siddiqui jolted into action and took up his firearm while the men charged.

Kabir shoved Zainab out of the way. She hit the counter with a yelp. He turned his

attention to the attackers, ducking under the swing of a bat. Kabir grabbed hold of the assailant's arm mid-swing, pushing it into its owner's body, and grasped the back of his neck. Within the same movement, he stepped forward, placed his lead leg behind his opponent's, and threw the man to the ground. Then he disengaged and caught the second attacker by surprise, side-tackling him into a rack of clothes. As they struggled, a deafening bang rang out, and the third, a mountain of a man, tossed his splintered bat and scampered behind the counter for cover.

Siddiqui pursued the man with his firearm, but Kabir intercepted and yanked the weapon from his hands. He shot the shopkeeper a look of warning before bringing the firearm up to deflect an oncoming bat. The man Kabir had thrown swung again. The prince smacked the bat aside, then thrust the hardwood stock of the firearm into the man's face. While he was stunned, Kabir thrust again, this time at his solar plexus, knocking the wind out of him. Suddenly, Kabir was tackled to the ground. He prepared for a barrage of blows, but his attacker just gawked at him in surprise before running out of the shop. As he scrambled to his feet, Kabir heard that telltale clacking sound again. He turned to see the man he'd hit brandishing the dropped firearm. Blood trickled from his nose, but the man grinned furiously from ear-to-ear.

"Night night, Prince."

"Oh, for fuck's—" The curse had barely left his lips before Kabir felt fire-hot pellets drilling into his chest.

Chapter Two

The blast threw Kabir out the window, dropping him in a tangle of black leather and broken glass. The shooter hopped out and bolted down the street. Metal pellets fell into Kabir's lap as he sat up, groaning. The latticework woven into the threads of his shirt did its job, compressing the fibers, then dispersing the force of the blast. But it still hurt like getting pummeled by a Massive-class beast. On a hunch, Kabir swiped up and down on the singed fabric. Nothing happened. He added lattice repair to his to-do list.

"Maw's teeth! Are you okay?" Zainab rushed out the broken window and knelt beside her brother. Kabir grunted an affirmation and put his arm around her shoulder as she helped him to his feet. Then he limp-walked after the fleeing man.

"Seriously?! You're not going anywhere until we've had a medic look at you," she shouted.

"Stop fussing, I've had worse."

"Kabir!"

He sighed and turned. "I'm not waiting for a medic. If you're so concerned, you check."

Zainab's expression went hard. Though her eyes flashed red, she didn't need the Link to know he was serious.

"Fine! Get in the shop!"

He complied and found a very concerned Fawad Siddiqui staring at him with wet eyes as he re-entered.

"I'm so sorry, Prince Kabir. I didn't mean—"

"Move!" Zainab barked.

Kabir knew what Zainab would demand next before she said it and laid down on the hardwood floor.

"Shirt."

He unbuttoned his shirt. Zainab turned her scrutinizing gaze to his torso for a field-medic check, first scanning for injuries, then poking and prodding with her fingers. While Kabir's chest was sore, nothing was so bad as to make him yelp. As she prodded, Zainab looked him dead in the eye, making sure he didn't conceal any pain. Kabir grinned.

"What? Don't trust me?"

"Absolutely fucking not, brother." She sighed. "No contusions, no broken ribs or other bones. You'll probably bruise, but that's it. But before you go gallivanting off, you may want to interview your other suspect."

Kabir stood up and buttoned his shirt. "Other suspect?"

Zainab smirked and pointed to the counter. Sure enough, the large man whose bat had exploded into smithereens lay bound and gagged on the floor behind the counter. He wriggled against his bonds, and Kabir saw Zainab had tied him up using her scarf. Though he'd seen Zainab fight many times, Kabir still marveled at how she'd taken down someone so massive without him noticing. Not that he'd ever admit he was impressed.

"I'm going to need that duputta back when you're done," Zainab remarked.

Minutes later, a khaki-uniformed Security Service officer arrived driving a detention transport. The vehicle was a small silver quad-bike with a cage-pod on the back. Kabir helped the officer strap the offender to the chair inside the cage. The security officer gawked at the man afterward. Though likely a former hunter, the officer had clearly never arrested a violent offender in Lion City before.

"Things don't get too wild in the Fabric District, eh?" Kabir asked.

"No, pretty quiet around here. Should I take him right to the station?"

"I'm going to question him first. I'll submit my report after you leave. The trial should happen later today."

"Right. Shouldn't you hand this off? You just got hit by an explosive weapon."

"I'll be fine."

The officer shook his head in disbelief, but Kabir ignored him. He approached the cage-pod and inspected the detainee. The big man eyed him with naked fear.

"I didn't know he was going to shoot you! How are you up and walking around? You blessed or something?"

Kabir raised an eyebrow. "Not from around here, are you?"

The man looked down. "I'm not saying anything."

"Sir, you committed aggravated assault in broad daylight. Against three citizens, two of which are public servants. That type of thing doesn't happen often in Lion City. Your sentence will be steep. But you can alleviate that somewhat if you cooperate with us."

"Alleviate? What's that mean?"

"You can make your sentence less severe if you help us understand what happened. What is happening."

The man seemed to consider it. Kabir decided to show him what lay in store if he didn't take the offer.

"Officer..."

"Esposito."

"Esposito, you're Linked, correct? Could you please Interface and access the sentencing trends and guidelines for aggravated assault?"

Officer Esposito's eyes glowed with red light, prompting a look of genuine shock from the detainee. Clearly not from around here.

"By itself, aggravated assault typically carries a maximum sentence of four months of service in the Hunter Corps, or six months of imprisonment. This sentence can be increased if there is evidence of intent to inflict grievous bodily harm, if grievous bodily

harm is actually inflicted in the attack, or if there's evidence of intent to commit murder. And as with all crimes major and minor, all sentences could be commuted if the offender were to accept the Link, though mandatory supervision or placement in other communities may be necessary in cases involving violence or severe harm of other kinds."

"Thank you, officer. Since it appears there's no evidence of intent to commit grievous bodily harm or murder, I can easily shave that down to one month on the Hunt, or a month and a half of imprisonment."

The man eyed Kabir suspiciously. "What about that Link thing?"

Kabir's face went blank. Like others who had been Linked, he was physically incapable of conveying too much information on the subject to those who had never been Linked. "You may take the Link, if you so choose. And it need not be permanent if you choose to be rid of it after your sentence is commuted."

The man shook his head. "I'll take the Hunt. Those hunters have it pretty good, from what I hear," he remarked with a small grin.

"Good. Now, what's your name?"

"Kamran Safi, sir. My brother, Rashid, he's the one who... shot you. Always the wild one. A man came to our village. Strange one, really pale with yellow hair. Said he could take a bunch of us to Lion City if we work for one of his friends."

"You're from the wilds. Up north?"

"Yeah. Anyway, he took us to this place just inside your Wall. The owner, Yahya, had me working security for a few months. Then today, he sent me with Rashid to get the keys to that shop. We didn't know you were here. My brother called you Prince. Are you a Prince?"

"Yahya. Is that Yahya Bin Nassir, owner of the Jewels?"

"Yeah, that's the guy. Kind of annoying, but the restaurant has good food!"

"Thank you, Kamran. You've been very helpful."

"You're going to tell that to the other one?" Kamran pointed to Officer Esposito.

Kabir placed two fingers on his communicator in its place behind his ear. "Submit incident footage and subsequent interview into detainee file 'Kamran Safi,'" He commanded. Only he heard the sub-dermal confirmation "beep."

"Just told everyone. The Magistrate will take your cooperation into consideration at your sentencing later today. You can take him, officer."

"One more thing, Prince. The Dreaming is coming up soon, yes?"

"The Nightmare?"

Kamran nodded quickly.

"Yeah, in a few days."

"Can I stay in Lion City until it's over? Back home we go into hiding, to keep beasties from getting us while we dream. But we don't have a great wall like you. If it's okay, I'd rather stay here."

"Noted. You can stay. You'll be well cared for afterward."

Kamran smiled in what seemed to be genuine relief. Kabir nodded to Officer Esposito, who took his seat on the quad-bike and drove off with Kamran in tow. Zainab came out of Hunter's Apparel carrying a paper shopping bag.

"We're supposed to be conducting an investigation," Kabir chastised.

"We are! This is part of it. The victim in the case is a skilled tailor, leatherworker, and latticer." She pulled a hat out of the bag, put it on, and posed with one arm crooked on her hip. The hat was a tricorn, with proportions favoring the sharply downswept beak at the front. "And he has a good sense of style, despite his catalogue's focus on utility over traditional beauty. Do I look like Grandfather in this hat?"

Kabir grunted. She actually did, to an unnerving degree. "Don't let mum see you with

that."

"Oh, it'll work with a different outfit."

"That's not what I mean."

"I know." She grinned mischievously, then tilted her head towards the street. "Off to your little manhunt, then?"

"In a minute. Now that I know where to look, I may as well conduct a full interview with the victim."

"You're welcome, by the way."

Kabir ignored her and entered the shop, where he found Fawad repositioning a fallen rack.

"Seems your case has gotten more interesting, Mr. Siddiqui."

The man stopped cleaning and adopted a subdued stance. "Yes. Sorry about the trouble."

"Let's start again. What's this about you having lost your home?"

"Well, it's a bit embarrassing. I signed some papers to put my home down as collateral for a debt. When I couldn't pay, they took the deed and the keys, and that was that."

"Do you live with anyone?"

He nodded. "My wife and son. They've had to move into a housing unit across the city. It's very nice, but not, you know, home. She... isn't speaking with me at the moment. My mistake has cost us much."

"Gambling right? Have you been spending time at Yahya Bin Nassir's establishment?"

He looked up in surprise. "Y-yes! How did you know?"

"And you put the shop up as well?"

Fawad shook his head angrily. "Not willingly! Those brutes said the piece of paper I signed gave them the right to take my shop! I don't know where the gul they got that idea! It wasn't part of the agreement!"

"Sounds like Yahya's up to his usual tricks. One more question. Where did you find that firearm? I don't know of any shop in Lion City that sells that kind of weapon."

"Oh! I won it at the Jewels in a special raffle. It's an import from Ermenden! I'd used explosives back when I was on the Hunt, so it was easy enough to figure out." A sheepish smile crossed Fawad's face. "Now that I've fired it, though, I think it might be too dangerous to use in an urban setting."

"Quite. Just a forewarning, I'm submitting a request to introduce legislation to regulate those. I'll be in touch when I get the deed and keys back from Yahya. In the meantime, you, your family, and your property are under the protection of the Crown." Kabir made for the door.

"Sorry, detective. Yahya doesn't have it."

Kabir turned around. "What? Who does then?"

"I'm not sure... They said my property was now owned by something called the Harrier Group."

"Harrier Group? Are you sure?" Zainab interjected.

Siddiqui nodded.

"What's that?" Kabir asked.

Zainab gave him a severe look and started ushering him out. "Thank you for speaking with us, Mr. Siddiqui. We'll be in touch soon. May it never awaken."

"Thank you. Sorry again for all the trouble. May it never awaken."

Zainab all but pushed Kabir out the door. The block had gotten busier since they'd first arrived, and the street now bustled with shoppers and curious bystanders. Zainab stormed ahead, forcing Kabir to pick up the pace to keep up.

"I still have questions for him, you know," Kabir complained.

"Time for that later. Let's take my transport. We're going to visit this Bin Nassir character and find out what in Esgul he has to do with the Harrier Group."

"What's the Harrier Group?"

"A multinational corporation from the Confederated Union of Ermenden."

"Okay. What's a corporation?"

"Something like a company. They're all over Ermenden. Massive groups of people who engage in business as a collective. They're organized in hierarchical systems similar to those of certain governments. Much grander in scope and influence than individual companies you'd find in the Empire."

"Okay. Why's this Harrier Group corporation got you so worried?"

"I'm not worried! I just... it'll take too long to explain! Just come on!"

Zainab hurried through the pedestrian-only street, with Kabir following her lead without another word. He rarely saw his sister take anything this seriously outside of a hunt.

As they walked, Kabir messaged the station to send someone to check out the Siddiqui home and take any interlopers in for questioning. They made it to the roadway as the morning traffic whizzed by. They approached the transport storage unit, a massive box-shaped metal structure beside the sidewalk, with slots for inserting and retrieving transport-modules. Zainab tapped a command onto the touch-screen, and a moment later her rectangular briefcase-shaped module ejected from a slot. She grasped the handle and pulled it out, then placed it in the middle of an empty roadway entry-spot demarcated by yellow lines. Zainab pressed a button on top of the module and stepped back. After a delay, the rectangular box began its transformation. Metallic plates emerged, expanded, and rearranged themselves until they formed a black motorbike with red accents. Zainab detached a helmet affixed to the side of the bike and handed it to Kabir.

"Oh no, I'm sitting in the sidecar," he said.

"What? Why?"

"Because you drive like a maniac, and I don't want to go flying off when you take a turn."

Zainab rolled her eyes at him and pressed another button, then stepped aside as a sidecar formed. Sure enough, the second Kabir got himself situated, Zainab peeled off and sped down the roadway. Traffic was light, but this didn't stop his sister from weaving between the other vehicles as she drove at ridiculous speed. As she drove, Zainab's voice sounded through the speakers in his helmet.

"So how are things going, anyhow? Still working too much?"

"I have a good work-ethic, yes."

"Tsk. Unhealthy. Please tell me you're at least seeing someone."

"Nope. Been busy with cases."

"Kabir, there's barely any crime in Lion City. To be that busy, you've got to be taking work away from other people!"

"Our job is to serve the people. To make their lives easier."

"Yes! But you don't need to kill yourself in the process."

"What I don't need is advice."

Zainab took one hand off the handle of her motorbike to smack the side of his helmet.

"You're lucky you're driving!" he shouted.

She responded with an angry grunt.

After a drive that should have been longer than it was, they approached the neighborhood containing the casino owned by Yahya Bin Nassir, "The Lion's Jewels," or "The Jewels" for short. Kabir hated the name. But though he'd cited Bin Nassir many times for various infractions, the name of the establishment, while suggestive and annoying, wasn't harmful, so he'd never pursued action to have it changed. They

disembarked, and Zainab made her transport module compact again to store it.

"This Yahya fellow. He was involved in the other home-less-ness cases?"

Kabir nodded. "Similar stories too. Though there wasn't anything about this Harrier Group. My guess is he's trying to be clever by distancing himself using complicated paperwork. I threatened to shut him down if this happened again. He may think that if some group has seized the property, he can hide behind them and keep his own hands clean."

"So in the other cases, he took the property himself?"

"In the first one, he did. And I reminded him that gambling establishments are prohibited from taking or accepting any sort of collateral. They cannot 'loan out' money to patrons so they can keep playing. He claimed ignorance and gained clemency. In the second case, however, he technically didn't know that the victim had sold her property to keep gambling. I reminded him that gambling establishments are required to cut off patrons before they spend too much. They're supposed to confirm stable finances, but he claimed she just slipped through the cracks, and the Chief told me to leave it at a warning. Those two cases were subtle, though, just shy of legal. I don't know why he was so brazen with Siddiqui, but this is the last time he pulls something like this."

"Not Linked then, is he?"

"Hah! Absolutely not. That man hasn't a kind bone in his body." Kabir grinned a sardonic smile. "Not yet, anyway. Maybe he'll take the Link to avoid punishment. That'd be a fortunate turn of events."

Zainab shot him a disapproving look. "The Link is not a punishment, Kabir."

"I didn't say it was. It's just that the world would be a much better place if he were Linked."

Zainab grabbed his arm in a vice-grip and glared at him. "Don't talk like that, Kabir. It's forbidden."

Kabir tried, unsuccessfully, to shake her off. "I know. I didn't mean to imply I was going to do anything outrageous, it was just a feeling. Alright?"

Her eyes shimmered red. Then she let go with a small, apologetic smile. "Sorry."

Kabir rubbed his arm and grinned. "That's two I owe you, sister. I'll offer him the same options everyone else gets."

The neighborhood they'd entered was colloquially called "The Wall," because of its proximity to the actual Wall, and because of its proximity to the city's main gate. It largely operated as an entertainment sector. Upon entering Lion City through the main gate, one would find restaurants, dance halls, bars, music venues, theaters, even game and hobby shops. There were a few casinos, but the Empire made a point of heavily regulating them to protect people from being taken advantage of. As the twins walked through the streets, a thought itched at Kabir's mind.

"Is Fawad Siddiqui Linked?"

A look of curiosity crossed Zainab's face. "I thought so. But that doesn't match up with the excessive gambling. Maybe—oh shit! Look!"

They ducked behind a corner as the casino came into view. The building had four floors and few windows. Above the entrance, an ornate light-up sign depicted a maned lion lazing on the tops of two cut diamonds, with 'The Lion's Jewels' written in violet, flowy script through the middle. Zainab pointed out the distant figure of Rashid Safi walking in the front door.

"Okay. Change of plans," Kabir replied. "You might end up being more useful than I thought."

Zainab punched her brother in the arm.

"That's three I owe you now, sister."

Chapter Three

The security guard fell into a predictable pattern as Kabir approached the door to the Jewels. The large woman touched the communication device behind her ear, whispered, and held a hand out for Kabir to wait. After a few moments, the guard stepped aside and gestured at the door.

"Welcome to the Lion's Jewels, Prince Kabir," she said.

Kabir thanked the guard and walked into the establishment. It was still morning, and there weren't any patrons on the bar and restaurant level just yet. Gambling machines or games weren't allowed on this floor or near any entrance, and with little natural light, the room was dark as night. Kabir supposed this was a tactic to interfere with the patrons' sense of time and made a mental note to request legislation to change that predatory tactic. If he submitted the request after the interview, Yahya would likely have to install some fucking windows. Courtesy of the Empire, of course.

Kabir walked up the flight of stairs and passed the Casino level, where several patrons sat transfixed by the slot machines. Though he only counted six people, that was too many to be playing away their life's savings right after breakfast. Kabir realized with a start that all the patrons were veteran hunters, recognizable not through their clothing, but through their scars. It was unnerving to see them glued to the machines, mindlessly inserting coins and pulling levers for a fleeting thrill. The flashing lights reflected off their blank features as they renewed the cycle again and again.

Another guard awaited Kabir in front of Yahya Bin Nassir's office. As with the other guard, this one held out his hand to block him.

"I'm afraid Mr. Bin Nassir is finishing a meeting, Detective. If you don't mind waiting in the restaurant below, a server will bring you whatever you like. On the house, of course," he said.

"I do mind, actually. Don't care if Yahya's in a meeting. He'll see me now."

The man touched the communicator behind his ear and turned slightly. Kabir took

advantage of the distraction, swiftly stepping around the guard to open the door before the man could stop him. The office was spacious, with a wide desk opposite two large leather chairs, and a wide bay window as the backdrop.

Yahya Bin Nassir was a voluminous man with a taste for the ostentatious. He sat at the desk wearing his typically loud finery: a gold kaftan with blue accents, jeweled rings for each of his fingers, and a large gold necklace with a massive ruby pendant. The Bahgni man seated across from him wore a more sober Ermenish-style suit, complete with black slacks and a suit-coat over a white button-up shirt and a red tie. This man had high cheekbones and a strong jawline. His clothes, along with his fair skin with a pinkish hue, hinted at Ermenish origin.

He broke off his conversation with Yahya to favor Kabir with a toothy smile that appeared amiable, but put Kabir in the mind of a predator stalking prey. A neatly dressed Barwazi woman with shoulder-length dark brown hair sat in the other chair. Her sizable, leathery wings hugged her frame like a robe as she sat. She had a similar complexion to the man, but the fur that covered her body and framed the pale skin of her face was a vivid red.

"Prince Kabir! You should have called. I'd have prepared you a table!" Yahya exclaimed with too much enthusiasm. He shooed the guard, who exited the room and closed the door.

"You've been naughty, Yahya. Another one of your patrons has come up home-less. They claim you coerced them into giving up property."

"Oh, you wound me, my Prince! I would never force anybody to do any such thing! Any exchange of currency, goods, or property is done entirely of my clients' free will. I can't control if a patron incurs debt and forfeits collateral to pay it off!"

"That is why the law requires you to refuse service if they spend too much."

"What, I'm supposed to turn away customers?! I'm trying to run a business!"

"That's exactly what the law requires. And since you didn't do that. Since you put Fawad Siddiqui's family out of house and home, then sent goons to take his shop by

force, I get to arrest you."

Yahya blanched at this and took a step back. As Kabir moved towards him, the man in the suit stood up, barring his path.

"Sorry to interrupt, Prince Kabir. I'm Caleb Reynolds and this is my associate, Janine Woodard." The man spoke perfect Stellari, which meant Kabir didn't have to break out his stilted Ermenish. "We're representatives of the Harrier Group," the man continued. "I understand these charges are very serious, but you see, my company actually bought the debt from the Lion's Jewels. This was before the debtee forfeited any collateral. So, for all intents and purposes, the Harrier Group actually took the property, and for that, I apologize. This type of transaction is very common where we come from, and we didn't know it was illegal here in Lion City. If it'll help Mr. Bin Nassir's case, we will happily return the rights to the properties at our own expense."

Reynolds held out a hand, upon which he wore a gold ring with a lustrous yellow stone in the center. When Kabir didn't shake it, he put his hand down, but the toothy smile didn't waver. The woman favored Kabir with a smile that was significantly more reserved.

Kabir looked the man in the eye. "First off, you lose nothing by not taking someone's property, as you spent nothing in the first place."

"We spent money, my Prince. To buy the debt, you see."

Kabir raised an eyebrow. "Money's not real. It's a placeholder to facilitate civil exchange. People, their belongings, and their goods are real. And you can't 'buy debt.' That's absurd. Besides, the unlawful seizure of Fawad Siddiqui's property has already been reversed. So any piece of paper or anbaric document you have that says otherwise is already null and void."

"Hmm, on whose authority?"

"On the authority of the Lion City Security Service, and that of the Crown."

"Interesting. You know, there are some in my country who'd call that government overreach."

"And here we say a person having their home and business taken from them by predatory business practices is wrong."

Reynolds put on a speculative look. "Wrong... that's very interesting, Prince Kabir. Does your government take action based on moral platitudes?"

"Our morals aren't platitudes. Now I'll be arresting Mr. Bin Nassir. Someone will be in touch with your office soon to educate you all on the laws of the land."

His grin returned. "Oh, I look forward to it! I love learning about other cultures."

Something in Reynolds' tone made Kabir want to punch him. Either he thought Kabir didn't recognize the condescension in his voice, or was looking to see how the detective would react. Kabir gestured for Yahya to come out from behind the desk. Hesitantly, Yahya complied and Kabir walked him out of the office. He removed the communicator from behind his ear and shaped it into its more interactive rectangular form. Kabir didn't need to do this, but the movement allowed him to locate and save the images of Reynolds and his partner from within the video footage in secret. As they walked out, Kabir contacted the local station to assist in detention transport. But before escorting his detainee down the stairs, he stopped Yahya in front of the gambling section.

"Why are all of those people still here?" Kabir asked.

Yahya looked at Kabir with confusion. "Probably because they feel lucky. Why else would they be in a casino?"

Kabir scanned his face. Yahya seemed to not see anything awry in these Linked people being addicted to his machines. But of course, Yahya wasn't Linked himself, so why would he? Kabir shook himself out of his thoughts and gestured for Yahya to keep walking. The detention transport was already in front of the casino when they exited, and Kabir directed Yahya into the cage-pod. The sindform-alloy bars retracted into themselves to let him in, then closed when he was secure. Though Yahya said nothing, he glared daggers at the detective. Kabir needed to question him, but he got the sense that those Harrier characters were listening in somehow.

"Take him to Central Station. I'll conduct the interview there," he told the officer manning the transport. Kabir then brought up his personal heads-up display. There, with a few thoughts and hand gestures, he submitted the report of the arrest, attached the footage he'd taken, and called Zainab.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Out in New Sheipon. He ducked out the back of the Jewels when you went in, like you said he would. I tailed him to a warehouse, and he hasn't come out."

"Great, I'm on my way. You took your transport, right?"

"Yeah. Hey, grab us a cold drink on the way. I'm sweating my tits off here!"

Kabir made his way to the roadway and hailed a ride using his communicator. A rickshaw driver pulled up, and he hopped in the back. New Sheipon was a neighborhood known for its imports and Sheiponic atmosphere. Much of Lion City's architecture featured multi-colored stone buildings and arch-lines, apart from the occasional skyscraper. But many buildings in New Sheipon were wooden, with ridged, shingled roofs, upturned eaves, and grand pillars.

Kabir made a mental note to do some grocery shopping before leaving. You could find food and sweets in this neighborhood that couldn't be found anywhere else in Lion City. He bought two ice-cold boba tea slushies from one of the street shops, then texted his sister to find where she was hiding.

Zainab stood leaning against a wall on the unshaded roof of a department store. She fanned herself with her new hat as Kabir approached, her gaze fixed on the building across the street through a small pair of binoculars. Kabir handed her the drink.

"Mango?" she asked.

"You know it."

The twins tapped their paper cups in a toast, then Zainab began drinking voraciously.

"Careful, you're going to—"

Too late. Zainab grabbed her forehead and cringed at her brain freeze. Kabir shrugged and sensibly sipped his own slushie.

"Rashid's still in there?"

"Fuck! Yeah, he is. Saw a few more go in, too. How'd you know he'd have people with him?"

"Kamran said he and his brother were among a group of northerners who recently arrived. Anything notable about them?"

"Not really. They were Unlinked and dressed rather simply."

"Right. And they didn't see you?"

She narrowed her eyes. "I am a Hunter, Kabir."

"Stalking people isn't the same as stalking beasts."

"Psh. A hunt's a hunt. So what's the plan, detective?"

"I'll call some friends from the station—"

"You don't have friends."

"I'll call some colleagues from the station," he corrected. "We'll get close and poke around, see what we see. Then we'll arrest Rashid Safi for aggravated assault, property damage, attempted burglary, and attempted murder."

Zainab put on her mismatched hat and struck a pose. "Awwww yeah."

Kabir sighed. "You know, we do need to look into the financials for the Lion's Jewels—"

"Later! I'm invested now. Let's go!"

Zainab rushed through the door to the stairwell. Kabir was half surprised she didn't just jump off the roof to be dramatic. He called for backup and followed her down. After a few minutes, Kabir's fellow detectives, Zichang and Faruk, arrived just outside the warehouse. Zichang was a tall and slim Barwazi, with wiry muscles clearly defined under

his tight shirt and tie, and leathery wings retracted close to his back. He shot a quick grin at Kabir, his long ears twitching. Faruk was Bahgni, like Kabir and Zainab, but was comparatively short and burly. He dressed similarly to Kabir, minus the hat, and sported a big, bushy beard and long hair wrapped into a bun.

"You've had a busy day, Kabir. Two arrests in one morning. One of them a violent one at that," Faruk said coolly. "Almost makes you glad for the backup, eh? Good morning, Princess."

Zichang wore a flirty smile as he studied Zainab. "Hello, Princess. I don't believe we've met."

Annoyingly, Zainab flirted right back. "I think I'd remember meeting you. Kabir never introduces me to his colleagues."

Zichang's smile grew, and he winked at Kabir. "Oh, I like to think that we're friends. Though, you know..."

He shrugged, and the three of them shared a knowing look. Though they were all Linked, not a single flash of red shone in their eyes. Kabir clenched his jaw. "That's enough of that. We've a job to do."

"Right," Faruk said. "How many offenders?"

"Just the one for now, though we know there's more people in the warehouse. Looks to be a storage place for imports. Zainab and I will snoop around. We'll let you know if we need backup."

"No need for that. Zainab will let us know via the Link," Zichang interjected. "May I call you Zainab, Princess?"

Zainab replied with an overblown head tilt and a turn of her leg. "Oh, I insist, Zichang."

Kabir decided then that he'd rather be chewed to pieces by UI Maw than experience the nightmare of a relationship between his sister and Zichang. He scaled the fence surrounding the warehouse, and Zainab tied her duputta around her waist before following. The two snuck around the building to a window. Inside, a group of people

sat playing cards at a makeshift table made of shipping pallets. Stacks of boxes surrounded them, as though they'd been moved aside to make space in the center. Rashid Safi sat among them, working on something Kabir couldn't make out. They moved further down to get a better look. On the pallet was a black duffel bag, and Rashid was tinkering with something on the inside. Just then, a door to the twins' right opened, and a man stepped out holding an identical duffel bag. He froze when he spotted the twins.

"Hi! Is that new shipment of milk tea in?" Zainab asked nonchalantly.

The man considered her for a moment, then darted back into the warehouse, shouting. Kabir cursed, and Zainab led the way as they followed the man at a run. Inside, Rashid and others gathered matching duffel bags and rushed out the back. The shouting man swung a punch at Zainab. Zainab weaved around the punch, then took the man down to one knee with a jab to the face and a kick to the inside of his thigh. She followed this attack with a knee to the face that sent him sprawling to the floor, clutching his nose. As Zainab fended off another assailant, a man came at Kabir with a spinning kick. He side-stepped and grabbed him into a chokehold, but the man pushed back on a stack of crates, causing Kabir to lose his grip.

The man wound up and kicked Kabir in the chest, knocking him against a wall. When he came in for a punch, Kabir dodged at an angle and closed in with an elbow to his face. He staggered back into Zainab, who wrapped her arm around the man's neck in a tight hold. Ahead of them, Zichang dropped from the ceiling window, his wings retracting as he tackled a man from above. Kabir darted a glance at Zainab, and predictably, the whites of her eyes now bore the dull, lusterless red of Battle-Link. The choking man in her grip was turning red too, so Zainab let go, dropping the now still man into a gasping heap.

Faruk wasn't in the warehouse, but Kabir sensed he was engaged with the fleeing people out back and could use an assist. He passed Zichang, who was in the process of subduing the man he'd landed on, and dashed out the back exit. Kabir made it in time to see people piling into a utility van as Faruk pulled the driver out. Faruk pinned the man to the ground, but then the drivers-side door slammed shut and the van started anyway. Kabir sprinted to close the distance. As he did, he pulled the multitool from his

belt-loops and ripped it in two, reverting it to copper putty, one glob for each hand. Within an instant, he'd willed the globs to morph into a pair of gauntlets that enclosed his hands, each fingertip stretching out into a curved spike.

Before the van could pick up speed, Kabir jumped, pushing off the bumper and sinking his gauntleted fingers into the metal roof. The van accelerated, ramming the chain-link gate open and spilling into the alleyway. As it sped down the alley, Kabir climbed up, using his claws to punch new handholds, then hung on for dear life, belly-down against the roof. His hat flew off his head, prompting him to bark a curse. The van zoomed past a stop sign marking the crossing with the pedestrian-only street, and a woman darted out of the way just in time to avoid getting hit. Kabir had to stop this van.

As they crossed into another alleyway, Kabir crawled towards the front of the van. He braced his core, then pulled his left claw out of the roof. This almost sent him flying back, and he tightened his grip to steady himself. Kabir then morphed the free claw into a long, straight blade that jutted from his hand. When it was the right length, he moved to stab it into the engine. But before he could, the new driver, Rashid Safi it turned out, pointed a handheld firearm in his direction.

Kabir ducked as a projectile whizzed past. The protective lattice lining his shirt was already damaged. He didn't think he could take another hit. Kabir fought against the momentary impulse to retain his grip. He wanted to press the attack, damn the consequences. But even without his hunter's instincts shouting in his head, he knew he had to let go. Kabir willed the fingers of his right claw to morph into rear-facing blades and made the left gauntlet match. Then he slid backwards, letting the inertia of the speeding van move him out of the path of Rashid's firearm. His sliding retreat cut gashes into the metal. Then, when he was at the edge of the van's roof, Kabir let go.

His feet hit the pavement first, and he rolled, landing on his back after a few tumbles. Kabir lay there a moment. To catch his breath, he told himself. It hit him then that he'd never seen so much action this side of the Wall. Something big was happening, Kabir could feel it in his bones. Hopefully none of those were broken. Tight pain shot down his right side as he sat up. His ears were ringing, but his senses returned just in time to hear Zainab screaming his name. He shot up a hand like he was on roll call. Forget broken bones. Hopefully he didn't have a concussion. He almost covered his ears in

response to the blaring siren of an ambulance. Of course she called a fucking ambulance.

The medics looked Kabir over: no concussion, one cracked rib. They used a field-kit to repair the fracture, injecting beast-medicine directly into the rib itself to accelerate his body's healing process. The needle, combined with the sensation of re-stitching bone hurt like being stabbed, but after a moment, the pain subsided and Kabir felt his muscles loosen. Though the medics gave him a clean bill of health, they still recommended taking it easy for the next couple of days. Unfortunately, they said this in front of Zainab, and in that instant, Kabir saw the gears turn in her brain. At least she found his hat.

The medics drove them through the alleyways towards the storage unit where Zainab had stashed her transport. All the while, Zainab chatted away on her communicator, giving her report to Abdul, and telling him about Kabir's injuries. She refrained from telling their older brother that Kabir fucked up, to spare his feelings, he thought.

Zainab took the communicator from her ear and handed it to Kabir. "He wants to talk to you."

"Fang in the eye, Kabir, it sounds like you got right walloped!" Abdul shouted through the device. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. Sorry I let them get away, Abdul."

"Nonsense! We'll get them, whoever they are. Don't you worry about that! You're onto something much bigger than I thought, little brother. Now, I heard Zainab's side of things. Tell me yours."

Kabir gave his report. He started with the attack at Hunter's Apparel, then told of how that led them to the Lion's Jewels, and then down here after Rashid Safi. Kabir went into detail about the encounter with the Harrier Group representatives. Zainab listened closely during this part of the story. Kabir made a mental note to ask her about them later.

"Right. Good show, Kabir. First order of business is to interview Yahya Bin Nassir, get

whatever information he has on Rashid Safi and these Harrier people."

"You wouldn't be trying to get me out of the field, would you, brother?"

"That's absolutely what I'm doing! You're off fieldwork until further notice! Bestial medicine or no, you need some fucking rest! That's an order!"

Kabir sighed. "Can I at least gather a bit of evidence? No chance of further violent encounters. I promise."

"Hmmm. Very well. But you're taking it easy, at least through tomorrow!"

"Alright, Abdul. I'll take another go at Kamran Safi as well, see what he knows about what his brother's up to."

"First class! Zainab will continue to act as your partner in this case. The Shair Twins on the Hunt again, hah! Talk soon."

With that, Abdul hung up. Kabir handed the communicator back to Zainab.

"Right, we're off to the station to interview the detainees, then?"

There was no point in arguing. "Yeah. You'll have to wait outside the room, though. You're not authorized to do detainee interviews."

Zainab's eyes shimmered red for a moment. Then she put on her hat and a wide grin.

"Just got the authorization... partner."

Chapter Four

Instead of driving like a maniac as she normally did, Zainab now safely steered her motorbike at a steady pace, all the way to the station. This infuriated Kabir, who'd already had to shove her off when she tried helping him into the sidecar, and had shut her down every single time she asked about his head.

Central Station was in the Garden District, just a few blocks from Kabir's apartment. Like most buildings in the district, it hosted a full garden atop its five-story roof. The air around the neighborhood was especially fresh and smelled of greenery and lush vegetation. The desk-officer flagged Kabir as they stepped through the automatic sliding doors. Chief Mirza wanted to see Kabir upstairs.

The twins rode the elevator to the fifth floor. Chief Mirza was an old hunter, and like many old hunters, Kabir knew him to be gruff and reserved, both qualities he respected. Every adult citizen of the Stellar River Empire was required to serve for a year in the Hunter Corp in some capacity. Jobs in the Corp ranged from the mundane, like administrative positions, to the most dire, like that of the Beast Hunter. The compulsory service requirement went double or triple for government employees, but it was rare to find someone in the Security Service who hadn't served at least ten years. It was a source of persistent guilt for Kabir that he'd only served five years before leaving the Corps. One source of guilt, anyway.

For his part, Chief Mirza had been an active hunter in the Corp most of his life. His tenure as head of the Lion City Security Service was effectively his retirement, a peaceful respite after centuries devoted to rigorous service.

There was nothing peaceful about today's case, though. Though Abdul had undoubtedly already briefed him, the Chief would want to hear Kabir's full report on the chaos. His office was empty, so Kabir led the way to the roof. There, they found Chief Mirza picking peppers off a vine. He was a lanky man, with fair skin and short grey hair. His blue uniform was slightly too large on him, giving him the look of a gangly stick-figure in clothes. This could have led one to underestimate his physical prowess, think him a frail old man. But Kabir had seen him in the training room. Anyone who

underestimated the Chief did so at their own peril.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Chief Mirza looked up, his expression impassive. "I spoke to Prince Abdul. Seems the case of the missing home is closed. Quite the eventful day you've had, Kabir. How are you feeling?"

"Alright, sir. Should be back to fieldwork in no time."

He regarded the young man with a shrewd look. "Don't need to hurry, boy. There's time yet for you to throw yourself back into the fray. I called you here to share some information about your attacker, Rashid Safi. It may be pertinent to your new investigation into this Harrier Group. I did a cursory interview with your new friend Kamran. Nice enough sort, despite the aggravated assault and attempted burglary. Turns out he's one of my countrymen. Comes from a village near where I grew up."

"Oh?" Kabir raised an eyebrow. "Quite the coincidence, sir."

"Indeed. A fortuitous one, at that, as I can be the first to tell you to be on your guard. That brother of his and that gang of miscreants are more dangerous than you think."

"I've already had run-ins with them, sir. I know the risks."

"Yes, but you don't know what motivates them." Chief Mirza picked up a woven basket filled with multicolored peppers. "Come down to my office." He eyed Zainab. "You too, if you would, Princess."

They accompanied the Chief back to his office, where he brought out a large leather-bound atlas. He opened the volume on his desk and flipped to a map depicting Kalan-Mak, a land far north of Lion City.

"This is where I'm from, Pettil," he said, pointing to a dot on the map. "Once a small village, now a bustling city. The Empire came just before I was born, when your grandmother was Empress. When the emissaries made their offer of community and technology, not to mention the services of their imposing Hunter Corps, our people jumped at the chance to join. However, other villages did not."

"And were they offered the chance?" Kabir asked.

"Yes. That was centuries ago, mind you. Since then, Pettil has become a bountiful city and most of the other villages, if they're still around, have joined up as well. But one still holds out."

"Nothing wrong with that. The Empire's not out to take in anyone who doesn't want it."

"That may be, but there's a reason they don't. This village is the base of a peculiar religious group. One that worships Ul Maw."

An expression of shock crossed Zainab's face. "I'm sorry, what?"

Kabir shrugged. "Maw, worship's not completely unheard of."

"Yeah, in Ermenden, sure, but so close to the Empire?"

"There's a small masjid of the Maw here in the city."

"What?! Is it like that Ermenish one? The one that worships that man? Egger, Eejay, Eggsy—"

"Eejmakh. And no, the masjid in town isn't Devran."

"This group is different, detective," Mirza continued. "Hardliners. The leaders think any other way of life is a threat to theirs. They're known in the area as marauders, owing to their proclivity for knocking over imperial shipments. The Empire, however, is more than happy to just let supplies go now and then to show them we're peaceful."

Zainab snorted. "Why would we do that?"

Chief Mirza grinned, taking Kabir by surprise. He'd never seen the man smile. "Because you Stellari are a bunch of bleeding hearts! These outliers are scarcely seen. Even when they steal from the Empire, they do so in secret, without engaging the hunters escorting the shipments. For the most part, anyway."

The Chief's look of mirth disappeared, and he looked away. "These people see the Stellar River Empire as a threat that challenges their sense of morals, their way of life,

their very existence. Kamran Safi might tell you more, but if they're in the city, we need to find them."

"And how does Kamran fit into all this?" Kabir asked.

"The boy seems to know very little. To be honest, when I found out where he's from, I expected him to be a mouth-frothing zealot. But he's been so enamored with this city that he's been very forthcoming. His brother, on the other hand, seems to be deeply involved with the leadership of his village. We need to find him."

"Of course, sir. What's the name of the village?"

He sighed. "Ilavsal."

The name sparked something in Kabir's mind. Some memory he couldn't touch. He looked at Zainab, hoping she recognized the name. She looked at him, confused, and shrugged.

"I have to say, princess. With that hat, you strike a figure similar to Abdul Al-Hazred Raatki."

"You know Grandfather?" Zainab asked, a smile lighting her face.

Kabir whipped back to face the Chief. He'd never mentioned that. The unfamiliar smile returned to the old man's face.

"Oh yes. I hunted with him back in the day. A right mad bastard, that one. Sometimes he scared us more than the beasts!"

Zainab laughed. "That's him alright. You must have stories!"

Chief Mirza chuckled. "Oh, that I do. I remember this one time, years ago, before he became the late empress' consort. We were preparing to hunt a massive shairian that had been spotted near a village out in the Wilds. Very serious business. The rest of our team suited up in the usual way, checking the gear, gathering provisions, sharpening blades. But I found your grandfather hiding in some corner of the base with a chemistry set. The whole time we'd been preparing, he'd been experimenting with beast fats."

"He does love his experiments," Zainab interjected.

"That he does. So I asked him what he was doing. He just grinned and said it was a surprise. I decided to leave him to it. The last time he'd experimented with beast-materials, we got an improvement to our standard-issue medicine, one still used to this day to repair tissue damage. We only found out what he was actually doing the next day when we engaged the creature. While the rest of us stayed in formation and approached cautiously, Abdul rushed ahead brandishing a shortsword coated in his new mixture."

"Oh, I know where this is going."

"I'm sure you do. His sword cut a gash into the shairian's tail. But I'm sure I don't need to tell you how thick a shairian's tail is. The cut was more of a sliver when you consider the creature's size. Before we could bark at him for his stupidity, an explosion blew the tail clean off!"

"That was how he tested his first timed-release gel?" Kabir asked.

"Oh, yes. We'd seen nothing like it up till then. Anyway, that was all well and good, but the creature wasn't dead! It turned on him and swallowed him whole, but left his gel-coated sword behind. Me and the team sprang into action, heroically fighting the beast with spear, sword, and bow to save our friend, only for the shairian to start wobbling and fall over. Not from anything we did, turns out. Your grandfather had pierced the beast's heart with his dagger, then cut his way out its back. Struck a pose whilst on top of the dead creature. Wish I had a picture. It'd be quite the memento. The whole affair was absolutely ridiculous and unnecessary, but the man knows how to have fun with his work!"

"Do all of his inventions have such reckless origins?" Kabir asked.

"Well, how else are you supposed to test this stuff if not on a hunt, party pooper?" Zainab chastised.

Chief Mirza laughed. "That was what he'd always say. He's still on the Hunt, then?"

The smile disappeared from Zainab's face, and she shot Kabir a panicked glance.

"Yes. Hard to peel him away," Kabir said, smiling unconvincingly.

The Chief's eyes shimmered red for a moment, a clear indication that he saw through the deception. But he tactfully changed the subject. "You two had better get downstairs. Let Prince Abdul know what you find out. He'll filter the information down to me."

"Yes, sir." Kabir saluted, placing a fist over his heart, then a finger just under his eye. The Chief matched the salute.

"And come by anytime, Princess. I'm full of old stories," Chief Mirza said. "It was lovely to meet you. May It never awaken."

"May It never awaken," the twins recited in unison. They got into the elevator and Kabir pushed the button for the detention floor. When the door closed, Zainab dropped the small amount of composure she'd mustered.

"Shit! He totally saw through that. I shouldn't have asked him to talk about Grandfather. Sorry."

"Don't be. I've never heard him talk that much. I always thought he was a stern codger."

"That's because you never want to talk to anyone unless you're interrogating them. What do we do? What if he tries to get in contact with Grandfather?"

"Shh!" The elevator came to a stop, and Kabir stepped out to make sure they were alone. After confirming they were, he turned to his sister.

"Mum has never brought formal charges against him, so there's no legal issue there," he whispered. "Grandfather knows how to cover his tracks, so if he doesn't want to be found, he won't be. And most importantly, we don't even know why she's mad at him, so it's not our problem. Besides, maybe he deserves her anger."

"She said she was going to kill him!" Zainab whisper-yelled. "She's had Abdul looking for him for years!"

Kabir rolled his eyes. "Team player he might be, but there's no way Abdul is actually looking for him. Don't worry about it. We've got work to do."

Zainab punched her brother in the arm. He grinned and shook his head. "That's four, now. Let's go."

The detention-floor was full of empty cells, one after another. There were few detainees, Kamran Safi, Yahya Bin Nassir, some of the people who'd attacked them at the warehouse, and an old woman who appeared to be sleeping off a hangover. Kamran sat at a table in his cell, scarfing down a plate of biryani with his hands, his cutlery left untouched.

"This is the best rice I've ever tasted!" he exclaimed as the pair approached. "The food in this city is fantastic!"

"Glad you like it," Kabir said. "I have a few follow-up questions, Kamran."

"Oh, sure!" He wiped his hand on a cloth napkin. "What do you need, Prince?"

"Your brother just tried to kill me again. It's starting to feel personal."

Kamran grimaced. "Sorry."

"You can make it up to me by telling us what he and his friends are up to."

"Up to? What do you mean?"

"They seem to be working towards something. Something they want to keep secret. But you've said you don't know anything about it. Why is that?"

Kamran shrugged. "Rashid's the smart one. Whenever there's something important to do, he's usually in charge. Actually... getting those keys was my last chance. I messed up real bad back home, and the Clerics were about to kick me out of the village. Rashid convinced them to let me stay, and when that man came, they told Rashid to take me too."

Kabir peeled off his communicator and brought up the picture of Caleb Reynolds. "This man?"

"Yeah, he's the one who came to our village. No idea how he even found us. I didn't talk to him or anything, but he met with the Clerics and then they told us to go to Lion City. Rashid never told me why, just said it's my last chance to do something right. I guess I really messed up again." An expression of shame crossed Kamran's face.

"Have you seen that man from the picture anywhere else?"

"Yeah, he's been coming to the Lion's Jewels to meet with Yahya. Always smiling. It's creepy."

"Do you know what he and Yahya talk about?"

At the mention of his name, Yahya yelled from his cell down the hall. "The business dealings of Lion's Jewels Incorporated are private!"

"No. Sorry Prince. I'm not that helpful, am I?" Kamran remarked.

"Don't count yourself out just yet, Kamran. I would like to know more about your people. You worship the Maw, correct?"

"Of course! Ul Maw is our Creator, the most High, the Devourer! Your people don't?"

"Not typically. It's not forbidden or anything. I think the Nightmares just scare us off."

Kamran stared at the twins with astonishment. "I've never met people who don't worship Ul Maw. I guess this is what the Clerics are always talking about."

"What do they say about us in your village?"

"Well, I shouldn't..."

Kabir gave an encouraging smile. "You can say. I promise I won't be offended."

"The Clerics say your empress promotes idol worship. That false maws of many kinds are worshipped throughout your empire. And that... you worship a false maw yourselves."

"Well, there are a lot of faiths that exist within the Empire, but there's no official religion."

"What about the red one?"

"Qualaalnoor."

"Yeah, that. Isn't that the maw you worship?"

"Well, Qualaalnoor isn't worshiped so much as—"

"Trusted," Zainab interjected. Her face beamed with a warm smile.

"Yes, trusted. It also forms the basis for our information networks."

"But what about your Link thing? I know that's got something to do with it. That's not worship?"

"Not quite," Zainab said. "We Linked allow the Light to enter our being, but we don't bow in supplication to Qualaalnoor."

Even being Unlinked, Kabir knew Zainab wanted to finish by saying something to the effect of "that would defeat the point." But the Link physically prevented her from elaborating. Though he no longer harbored the Light, Kabir couldn't elaborate either. Kamran didn't seem to notice they were holding anything back, and simply shrugged.

"I don't really get it, but it's interesting. Is this Link why you're all so nice?"

Kabir's mind screamed at Kamran's moment of unknowing insight, while his face remained blank. A charge filled the air, and Zainab's eyes gleamed red. Was Kamran Safi about to take the Link?

Kamran gazed into Zainab's eyes, entranced by the warm glow. A moment later, the spell broke.

"Why are your eyes red?" He asked, obviously.

Kabir stifled a chuckle, prompting Zainab to glare daggers at him as her red light receded.

"Anyway," Kabir said, clearing his throat. "Back to your brother. If Rashid was given an assignment by your clerics, would Yahya know about it?"

"You keep your mouth shut, ingrate! Your bosses will hear about your lack of company loyalty!" Yahya shouted.

Kamran ignored him. "If not him, then that man from your communicator."

"Right. Well, thank you again, Kamran. You may want to save room for dinner. The cafeteria here is top-notch."

The detainee smiled ear to ear. "If it's not too late, can I change my sentence? I think I'd like to stick around Lion City, if that's okay."

Kabir scoffed. "You'd take imprisonment over the Hunt?"

Kamran shrugged. "I've been out in the Wilds my whole life. Best way to get away from the Clerics, you know. And there are such wonders in this city!"

Kabir considered him for a moment. "The magistrate will be along once the case is closed and you're no longer needed. At that time, you will be provided options for sentencing."

Kamran nodded in understanding, and the twins took their leave of him. Kabir took his time moving through the room towards Yahya. Instead, he and Zainab walked from cell to cell, attempting to interview the others from Ilavsal. While most regarded him with a cool silence, a couple repeated what he'd learned from Chief Mirza and Kamran. None knew the true purpose of their mission, and none had answers to Kabir's open questions, such as what Rashid had been tinkering with in that warehouse or what was in those duffel bags. Kabir checked with Zainab to see if they were just playing dumb, but there was no deception. Whatever these people were doing here, Rashid was clearly keeping them in the dark.

Eventually, the pair approached Yahya's cell. He sat facing away from them with his arms crossed. "Royalty or no, I will not speak to you!"

"The charges you're facing are very serious, Yahya. I'd like to give you the opportunity to explain yourself."

"Pshaw! What charges? You pulled me out of my place of business without cause!"

"We both know the charges were already explained to you, but I'll repeat them. Engaging in abusive and addictive business practices, coercion, unlawfully detaining property, solicitation to commit crimes of violence, solicitation to commit a crime of burglary. Need I continue?"

"You made those up! I didn't coerce anyone to do anything!"

"That may be the attitude you wish to project, but the evidence paints a different picture. Now, I'd be willing to offer leniency if you provide verifiable information that could shed your crimes in a different light. Perhaps if you yourself were coerced into taking specific actions..."

Yahya turned to face them, a shrewd smile painted on his face. "You must think I'm stupid!"

Kabir grinned right back. "Nah. Just thought I'd offer you a chance to help yourself a bit. Take care, Yahya. May it never awaken."

Kabir turned and walked away, beckoning Zainab to follow. Yahya scoffed.

"That's it?! You're leaving?!"

Kabir waved back without turning around.

"Don't you have questions?" Zainab whispered. "Ahh, you're letting him sweat."

"Yup, and gathering evidence. Come on, we're going back to the Jewels."

"If I'm going to be playing detective, can we stop at mine for an outfit change?"

"You're the one driving. Also, no."

Zainab huffed comically. "That's one I owe you, brother."

After an infuriatingly slow drive back to the Jewels, they grabbed lunch to-go: a sextet of samosas, three filled with peas and potatoes, and three packed with spiced ground meat and onions. Kabir bit into his crispy triangular pastries and watched with quiet satisfaction as uniformed Security Service officers led the staff and patrons of the Lion's

Jewels out of the casino. Zainab sensed this and chastised him for enjoying this too much. She pointed out that the staff members weren't sure they'd have a job tomorrow. Kabir insisted they'd be fine. Better to let the workers take government assistance and have this poison pit shut down, however temporarily. She replied that just because they'd be fine financially didn't mean they were fine emotionally. They might have liked their jobs. Kabir responded by saying that, in that case, he was glad they felt like shit. She responded by punching him in the arm.

"That's four I owe you now, sis. Also, ow."

Kabir didn't know exactly what he was hoping to find in Yahya's office. Link evidence discerned by the magistrate would confirm that Yahya facilitated the theft of Fawad Siddiqui's property, and that he sent the goon squad to seize the shop as well. Kabir just couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this Harrier Group connection, something he wasn't seeing. He had Zainab look through the papers in and on top of Yahya's desk. She immediately uncovered two separate ledgers, which meant they could now add tax evasion to Yahya's list of charges. But Kabir wanted more.

He turned his search to a shelf against the wall, upon which sat stacks of ornate wooden boxes with hinged lids. He opened one to find it was divided into small square compartments. Each compartment contained a silver ring inset with a shiny yellow stone. The rings were reminiscent of the one Caleb Reynolds wore. The inside of the lid bore a plaque that read: "A gift for a valued member of the Lion's Jewel's Elite! Thank you for being a loyal customer!"

"Ooh, pretty," Zainab remarked. She handed Kabir a piece of paper, a certificate of ownership for the Lion's Jewels.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?" he asked.

"Look at who's listed as the owner."

Instead of a person, the document listed "Lion's Jewels Limited Liability Company" as the owner of the Lion's Jewels.

"Why isn't Yahya listed as the owner? And what's a Limited Liability Company?"

Zainab shook her head. "It'd take a while to explain. As for why he's not listed as the owner, well... This whole thing has gotten messy. Illegal asset seizure, aggravated assault, secretive dealings. I don't know how all the people in this case are connected, but I have a hunch about the strangeness of this paperwork. I'd need to go through the records back at my office to confirm it, though."

"Okay, let's go."

"Ohh no. We're done for the day. It's been a long day, it's almost dark, and we're getting dinner."

"We can't just quit while we're ahead. Also, since when are we getting dinner?"

She smirked. "Since we spent a whole day together for the first time in years. We're not quitting, we're just clocking out for the night. It's been too long, Kabir. I want to have dinner with my brother." At Kabir's hesitation, Zainab punched his arm again. "Yes, that's five I owe you, and yes, we're going!"

Kabir rubbed his arm. "Actually, it's five I owe YOU. Okay!" He raised his hands up in surrender as she raised her fist again. "I've been meaning to try the dinner menu at this place near my apartment."

Zainab smiled ear to ear. "Good."

Aisha was ecstatic to see Kabir come home at what she deemed a reasonable time. She was even more excited that he was actually in time for dinner, and that he was with another person, even if it was just his sister. Kabir ordered a biryani, with warm, spicy multicolored rice and moist cuts of tender chicken. Zainab ordered some seekh kabobs with naan and raita, at Kabir's recommendation.

Zainab talked all throughout dinner, telling Kabir about work, her social life, and her love life. She'd just split with a girl she'd been seeing for a few months. The split had been amicable, but the bitch (her word, not Kabir's) was holding onto a pair of good shoes Zainab left at her house. Kabir shared as much as he could. His life hadn't been quite as active as hers, socially speaking, and he'd rather not bore her by recounting his work. And he couldn't tell her how he'd been spending most of his time. The one

activity he could tell her about was the drawing classes he'd been taking over the past year.

"You've been doing art?! With people?!"

"Well," Kabir rubbed the back of his head. "I go in person sometimes. I have to watch the recordings most days. Weird hours at work, you know."

This admission about the drawing classes brought up loads of questions. Did he have any friends? Had he met anyone romantically? Had he hooked up with anyone casually?

Though Kabir thought his answers (which amounted to a "no" for each of the questions) would disappoint her, Zainab seemed satisfied. When they finished dinner, Zainab accompanied Kabir into his building and walked him to his door.

"You going to tuck me in too?" Kabir asked.

Zainab refused to indulge his insolence. "I'm coming to pick you up tomorrow. I've already enlisted Zichang and Faruk to take the legwork for the case. You and I are going to focus on the paperwork."

"Oh, come on!"

"Abdul ordered you off field work. So don't try to slip the leash or you'll be disobeying orders AND stepping on your colleagues' toes. What's that?" She pointed to the note taped to Kabir's door.

He peeled it off. The note read "Toilet's taken care of. Many thanks, my prince!"

"It's from my neighbor. His toilet was backing up. I processed the request to fix it."

Zainab smiled softly. "Get some rest, Kabir. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Fine, see you."

She gave him a peck on the cheek before he could slip away, then made for the elevator. Kabir entered his apartment with a sigh. Things were just getting interesting

and now he was stuck looking at fucking spreadsheets. This case had turned into a right Maw-damned cockup. He didn't bother undressing, and headed straight to the bedroom to plop face-first into bed.

Kabir was almost asleep when he remembered his nightly ritual. He got up and went to the bathroom. Hidden in the cabinet under the sink was the black velvet pouch. Kabir retrieved it and brought it out to the living room. He sat on the couch, picked up his notepad and pencil from the coffee table, then opened the pouch. Inside was a palm-sized stone tablet wrapped in red velvet. Kabir took a deep breath and unveiled the tablet. In an instant, the visions came.

He was back among the thicket of thrashing limbs and teeth. This time, the ground itself opened into mouths with fangs, and one caught his leg like a beast-trap. Kabir wedged his sword against one jaw and levered it open to escape. He limped through the thicket and cut his way out yet again. There it stood, that cloaked figure under the toothy moon. It turned towards him and grinned.

Kabir woke up on his sofa. He covered the tablet and put it back in the pouch. Then he began to draw. Kabir sketched furiously, trying to capture the cloaked figure's face before the memory left him. For a moment, he thought he had enough time, but as usual, the image faded from his mind. All he had left was a variation of the only image of the face he'd ever been able to capture, that of a disembodied pair of lips set in a toothy grin. Tonight, the teeth were jagged and pointed. Kabir ripped the drawing from the pad and placed it with the others in the thick binder on the coffee table. In the one he drew last night, the teeth were fairly normal, generic like those of any person with a healthy mouth. Was tonight's vision progress, or a step back? Kabir staggered back to bed and plopped down. It would be the Nightmare in a few days. Hopefully, the dreams wouldn't come tonight.

Chapter Five

In the morning, Zainab arrived at Kabir's apartment to take him to the Office of Finance and Commerce. After a light breakfast, Zainab drove them on her motorbike with the same annoyingly sober caution as the day before. The Office of Finance and Commerce shared a building with several other municipal agencies, including an offshoot of the Office of Imperial Security. The structure was topped by a massive, white windowed dome that rested on a cylindrical edifice and towered over the surrounding buildings, with communal balconies overlooking the city. The entrance was an enormous ornate archway with a bay of revolving doors. Once inside, they walked through the marble-floored lobby to a stairwell which led to Zainab's office on the seventh floor. Where officers in the Security Service were typically more reserved in how they dressed, Zainab's outfit of powder blue dress and yellow flats fit right in among her colorfully relaxed colleagues. If anything, Kabir stuck out like a sore thumb.

Zainab had distinguished herself in her post as a forensic accountant, but like Kabir, occupied a non-management position. Kabir wondered if he and his sister had a shared allergy to the responsibilities of leadership. They passed through a hallway lined with personal offices before arriving at Zainab's. Kabir took an extra chair while Zainab swiveled around in hers to boot up the terminal at her desk. The three screens connected to the terminal lit up blue as they awoke.

"Right. Action plan for the Harrier Group. First order of business is fact-finding. I can see why Abdul wanted me on this. A lot of weird financial stuff going on behind the scenes."

"Is that the technical term for it?"

"Shh. We need to look at the financial records for the Jewels. See how the Harrier Group fits in. What did those representatives say back at the Jewels?"

"The man, Caleb Reynolds, tried to feed me some shit about how they didn't know the asset seizure they'd committed was illegal. The woman didn't talk at all."

"Was there anything else? Anything notable?"

Kabir took a moment to think. "He talked down to me. Made a show of being superior to me somehow, while seeming to think I didn't notice. He acted like our conversation was a game or competition."

"And you thought this was notable?"

"The way he talked... It felt like deceiving people was a habit of his. I don't know, maybe it wasn't special at all."

Zainab raised an eyebrow. "How did you know where Faruk was when we were at the warehouse?"

"What? I, uh, saw Zichang, and he was alone, so I figured Faruk went ahead to where the rest of the suspects had fled and needed help. Why?"

"Are you sure you aren't Linked, Kabir? Because that sounds like something you'd say if you were still Linked."

Kabir rolled his eyes. "Fucking drop it. You sound like mum."

Zainab's eyes sparkled red, and she held back whatever she was going to say next. "Okay. Back to the case. I'm going to pull records for the Lion's Jewels and Harrier Group. The latter won't be as complete because they're for a foreign company, but they should at least give us some picture of their activities inside the Empire. Can you contact the Intelligence Office at Imperial Security? I want to see if there's a way to get access to the Ermenish equivalent of the inter-Link."

"They have a Link?"

"No, but they have their own anbaric information network. Apparently it's very open source."

"The inter-Link is open-source."

"Yes. But it seems the Ermenish version is less regulated. And not at all connected to Qualaalnoor, of course. They've been inviting the Empire to join their Net, as they call it, since its creation, but it does nothing our inter-Link can't already do."

"Okay, I'll make the call. But first, why's this Harrier Group got you so spooked? You never said."

Zainab rubbed her temples. "It's hard to explain... Okay. So the first Ermenish business on record in Lion City was a restaurant called Fauntleroy's."

Kabir grinned. "I love Fauntleroy's. They have great burgers."

"Right. They've been around for decades, and there are now five locations across the city. The people that jointly owned Fauntleroy's when it first came here operated under the group name Quality Food Company. It was a fairly generic name for a company, and the civil servant that originally granted the license made note of this. He also found it unusual for the name of the company to be distinct from the actual business and business owners. Come to find out this Quality Food Company owned several restaurant chains in Ermenden. This included Dunny's Chicken Joint, of which we have two locations, and Burger Palace, of which we have one. They even tried to start a business called Paratha Hut to compete with locally owned restaurants. That license was handily denied. On paper, these all seemed to be different businesses, and the prices were constantly changing to compete with one another. But they all operated under the same umbrella, and ultimately, the bulk of the money each chain earned got funneled to the Quality Food Company."

"Hm. Did the people in this Quality Food Company create recipes? Or is it one big farm? Why did they get most of the money?"

"That's the thing, Kabir. People who worked directly for this company just did administrative work. And the people in charge of the company did almost no work at all on the actual business of running the restaurants. But those were the people who collected the largest paychecks. Other Ermenish companies are the same. A company that owns hardware stores whose owners have never worked in a hardware store. A natural gas company owned by people who've never mined natural gas."

"Natural gas?"

"Like vapordrive, but less clean. But something strange has happened in recent years. Many companies, including the Quality Food Company, are no longer independent

entities. They weren't dissolved or put out of business, but absorbed."

Kabir put his hand to his temple. "Maybe I have a concussion after all. What do you mean, absorbed?"

"I mean, the owners of these organizations either agreed to merge their companies into, or were forcibly bought out, by a single bigger company. This new player was the Harrier Group."

"What about the workers? They didn't push against this? I'd imagine combining organizations like this would be a logistical nightmare."

"The workers had no say, and didn't factor at all into these transactions. This is what's so hard to explain. The Harrier Group is a corporation, a company solely designed to generate wealth for a select few. One source of their income comes from owning other companies that provide goods and/or services. Another source of income, which is even harder to understand, comes from trading fractions of ownership of other companies."

"Wait, so the Harrier Group owns Fauntleroy's?" Kabir's traitorous stomach rumbled at the mention of the burger restaurant chain.

"Yes. And the Harrier Group is not the only corporation operating within and outside of Ermenden. As per our anti-collusion laws, other corporations aren't allowed to operate within the Empire. But the Harrier Group gets around this by making businesses they own, like the restaurants, appear as though they operate independently. Most people don't even know about these connections. The Fauntleroy's locations sell food, make money, and send the bulk of their earnings back to Ermenden, to their parent company, who then funnels the money up the chain of ownership."

"If this Harrier Group does all that in Ermenden, why maintain a presence here in the Empire? In our capital city, no less?"

"Well, this branch of the Harrier Group has only recently moved in. I'm not exactly sure what their game is, but we've been watching them. Apparently, they've been purchasing what they call 'real estate.'"

Kabir sighed. "And what, pray tell, is 'real estate'?"

"It's their fancy word for land-based property. Houses, buildings, plots, stuff like that."

"What are they using these houses, buildings, and plots for?"

"To my knowledge, they're leaving many of these properties empty for now. The Ermenish have been pushing for us to adopt their economic system of speculative markets, which they insist is the best way for economies to grow."

"Grow?"

"Light save us, Kabir. Let's not get even more sidetracked. It seems the Harrier Group wants to turn a profit on these pieces of property if they dramatically raise in value. Which they won't. Because we don't engage in that kind of wasteful nonsense here. This is why I didn't want to waste time explaining yesterday. It's very messy, the ways they do things. It's as though they care more about paperwork than people. In fact, in Ermenden, these corporations, just names on documents, are actually treated as people in the legal sense. Even people in favorable leadership positions are disposable if they step out of line. But they rarely do."

Kabir rubbed his temples. "Why have we allowed this corporation to operate like this in Lion City?"

Zainab shrugged. "The Empire doesn't discriminate just because people have different ways than ours. And up till recently, they haven't actively harmed anyone. But we have been watching them. Nullifying their power within the Empire would be easily done by imperial decree. And I get the sense that Abdul and Mum have been lying in wait, just to see what they're capable of. If this case of ours is any indication, it seems they're capable of thievery and violence."

Kabir sighed. "Quite. I'll make the call."

He contacted the Intelligence Office, and a few minutes later, an officer brought a specialized laptop to access the Ermenish Net. The officer took a moment before leaving to show Kabir how to navigate the foreign network. It turned out to be easy. In fact, after using it for a minute, Kabir got the sense that it was derivative of the Empire's

own inter-Link.

"Why did they make their own inter-Link again?"

Zainab responded without looking up. "Net. And no idea. Bring it here. I'm going to cross-reference some things."

He gave her the terminal, and she placed it next to hers. For the next couple of hours, Zainab moved between the terminals, typing and clicking away. Periodically, she remembered to share a snippet of information, but it all went over Kabir's head. He was still trying to wrap his mind around what a corporation was. As he watched Zainab cycle through spreadsheets, databases, random infosites, and then back to spreadsheets again, Kabir felt himself start to nod off. But just as he was about to, Zainab gave a triumphant shout.

"Look at this!" she exclaimed

Kabir stood to look at her screens. One displayed a map of Lion City, with one area circled.

"The suburbs? What's so special there?"

Zainab swiveled her chair to face him. Her face bore an expression of excitement he'd seen on many a hunt. She'd found a trail.

"The Harrier Group owns many properties within the city under their own name. But we know they don't always operate under their own name. So I did some cross-referencing to see if there were any subsidiaries of theirs in Lion City we didn't already know about. One I'm not surprised to find is the Lion's Jewels—"

"Wait, the Lion's Jewels—"

"Is registered as a Limited Liability Company in the Confederated Union of Ermenden, yes. Not only that, the casino has always been under the Harrier Group umbrella. Since even before the Harrier Group opened an office here in Lion City."

"All this fucking time..."

"Wild, I know. But there's more. After a LOT more digging, and some, let's say, backdoor methods, I was able to find a subsidiary of the Lion's Jewels. Some company called New Horizon. They only operate in Ermenden, but they operate another subsidiary called Greenfield, which only has one location in Lion City."

"This is really confusing, Zainab."

"Oh, I'm sure that's intentional, brother. They've also bought property in the Groves."

"Close to where Bushra lives?"

"Closer to Downtown, actually. Right up against the Southeast end of the Wall. I looked at our records, and apparently they've built houses there that are still unoccupied."

"Should I check them out?"

Zainab shot him a stern glare. "No, you're off field duty, remember? Send Zichang and Faruk."

Kabir groaned. "Do I have to? I'm so fucking bored just sitting here."

"Why don't you get us lunch? We're going to be here for longer yet."

He pondered this for a moment. "Fine. I'll send Zichang and Faruk, then get lunch."

Zainab smiled and turned back to her work. Kabir didn't see any Link-eyes. His deception may have worked. He left her office and called Faruk. Kabir gave him the details and asked him to check out the Greenfield plots later, perhaps in the evening or whenever Faruk and Zichang had time. No hurry. Then he bought himself a shawarma wrap for lunch. Kabir didn't say he was getting lunch for Zainab. He felt a bit guilty as he chowed down his food and hailed a rickshaw, but it had to be done. He was losing his mind in there.

A rickshaw woman drove Kabir out of Downtown and towards the south suburbs, nicknamed "the Groves." Acquiring property out in the sparsely populated Groves was easy to do, but most people preferred the city proper. The move was more popular with veteran hunters who'd had to retire, possibly because the unrestrained greenery

reminded them of life outside the Wall, albeit significantly more peaceful.

As they drove down the freeway, the densely packed buildings gave way to flat farmland, then hills and thickets of trees. Kabir had the rickshaw drop him off a little way from the plots. His immediate surroundings were largely undeveloped, just a single road with trees lining it on either side.

Kabir walked until he saw a driveway branching off to the left. Acting on instinct, he made for the trees rather than walking the road itself. The branching driveway led to a group of houses arranged in two rows on either side of an empty street. The display was bizarre. There were about ten houses, all only a few feet away from one another. Each house looked the same, with only slight variations between them. They were all two stories high, with triangular roofs and lightly colored siding. Each house also seemed to have the same layout, at least from the outside. The small neighborhood was mostly bereft of wild plants, but there were tiny gardens of flowers in front of each house. In keeping with the arcane uniformity, each of these gardens looked the same.

Kabir was about to step out of the woods to investigate further, but he spotted movement in a window. He ducked behind a tree and watched as Caleb Reynolds came out of the house carrying a transport module. Janine Woodard followed him out. Kabir hadn't gotten a good look at her before. She was close to Reynolds' height, with broad shoulders and sharp facial features. She stretched her red, leathery wings before quickly folding them again when Reynolds glanced back at her.

Kabir could see they were both fit and physically capable. They looked and moved almost like hunters, and spoke in hushed, clipped tones. Reynolds placed the briefcase-shaped module on the road and activated it. The device grew and morphed into a sleek, full-sized black sedan, and he got in the driver's seat, while Janine took the passenger's. Kabir crouched and peeked through the tall grass as they drove past. He noted that despite Janine's almost neutral expression, she seemed troubled.

"What are they doing here?"

Kabir started and almost jumped out of his concealed position. Faruk was behind him, eyeing the car suspiciously.

"You scared the shit out of me. I almost gave us away!" Kabir whispered.

Zichang slunk to his left and grinned. "You're plenty disciplined, Kabir. You wouldn't give up your position that easily."

After a couple of minutes, when they were comfortably alone, the trio stepped out of the woods.

"So Zainab did use her Link tricks to suss me out."

"No," Faruk said evenly. "But she told us she didn't need the Link to see when you're full of shit."

"Apparently I'm just that transparent."

"Yeah, well. Since you're here, you might as well tag along for our investigation."

"Your investigation?"

"Yup. Our investigation."

Kabir glared at Faruk, but the other detective just regarded him with his trademark indifference. Kabir sighed.

"Fine. Where should we go first?"

Each of the uninhabited houses turned out to be unlocked, so they went through them one-by-one. Kabir's suspicion about them having the same layout was proven correct. It was eerie how identical the houses were. This strangeness was exacerbated by the fact that each house was completely empty. The only distinction came when they entered the house Reynolds and Woodard had exited. Apparently, the Harrier Group, or Greenfield, or whomever used the house as a storage place for stacks and stacks of paint cans. It was within that house that they also found brochures for what the Greenfield company was calling a "housing development." The brochures were advertisements for prospective buyers looking to "get away from it all" and who wanted "pristine homes, friendly neighbors, and scenic views." One picture in the brochure stuck out to Kabir.

"Is that the Wall?" He pointed out the snapshot to Zichang.

Zichang nodded. "Yeah, looks like."

The picture showed a section of wall far behind the row of houses that had been painted green. They stepped out of the house to check. Sure enough, far in the distance, they saw the Wall was indeed green. For safety reasons, it was illegal to build anything too close to the Wall, and a fence with steel bars blocked access to the public. Even still, only a section of the Wall was green, while the rest was the same concrete-grey as in the rest of Lion City. It was as though that section was painted just for the sake of the photo.

"It's not usually green, is it?" Faruk remarked.

"No, it isn't. Pretty sure that's illegal." Kabir responded.

"We going to start arresting people, then?" Faruk asked.

"Nah, at most it's a fineable offense. Weird, though. The picture would have looked good with a gray backdrop anyhow."

"This whole thing is weird," Zichang remarked.

"Yeah. Well, it looks like that's all there is to see. You guys can probably head out."

"You know, this lone wolf act is wearing thin. I think you've got a bit of a problem, bhai," Faruk said.

Kabir pressed his lips into a thin line. "Oh yeah?" he challenged in his most neutral tone.

"I mean, you're clearly trying to ditch us to go look into something. You know how little there is to actually investigate in Lion City? The rest of us need something to do too."

Kabir held Faruk's inscrutable gaze on for as long as he could, then sighed in resignation. "Okay, where to next?"

Faruk eyed him for a moment too long, then grinned and shook his head. Kabir didn't

think he'd ever seen a smile cross his lips.

"Quit trying to get rid of us. You'll hurt our feelings."

Kabir smirked back. "Fine."

"Now that we've got that settled. Where were you planning to ditch us to investigate?"

"Actually, I was just going to go back to Zainab's office, apologize for ditching her. And plan next steps."

"You need an assist? She might respond better if you're accompanied by someone with a friendly face," Zichang said, posing with what Kabir was sure was his friendliest face.

Kabir sighed. "Sure."

Faruk drove them back to the Office of Finance and Commerce in his transport, a big four-door pickup truck. When they entered Zainab's small office, she was exactly where Kabir had left her. He felt a twinge of shame when he noticed the half-eaten shawarma on the table next to her.

Kabir greeted her sheepishly. "Hey. Sorry about giving you the slip."

His sister turned and flashed a placid, perfectly friendly smile. "Don't worry about it."

But in that small expression, Kabir saw sadness, and worse, resigned disappointment. "I'm used to it" is something she didn't have to say out loud.

"We should probably tell Zainab what we saw, eh?" Zichang cheerfully interjected.

Zainab steepled her fingers in thought as they recounted the trip to the Groves. Kabir saw the gears in her mind move as they described the bizarre neighborhood and what they found there. When they'd finished, she inspected the brochure cover to cover.

"One thing is clear. The Harrier Group is working to increase their influence here in Lion City. The property buys, this 'housing development,' their flagrant boundary-pushing regarding our laws governing business practices. And let's not forget their employment

of violence to achieve their ends. I've been looking at the news on the Ermenish Net. Did you know they have an entire genre of business-focused news? It's maddening. Anyway, this type of thing happens all the time over there. Companies act unilaterally in pursuit of more and more profit. Their goal is indefinite growth, by legal means or otherwise. It's endless. We've got to put a stop to this before it gets out of hand."

"How do we do that?" Faruk asked.

"Easy. Our government has more power than these Harriers think. I'll start the paperwork tonight. Tomorrow, we'll march into their office and deliver an Imperial Decree of Cessation."

"They won't know what hit them," Zichang declared.

"Awwww yeah," Zainab replied. She put on her tricorn hat and struck a pose with one hand on it, and the other on her hip.

Kabir was too lost in thought to be annoyed at the gesture. A chill went down his spine as he pictured Zainab handing the decree to the shark-faced Caleb Reynolds. He wasn't sure why, he'd only met the man once. But there were so many unknowns, so many questions, that when considered together painted a foreboding picture. Something told him this wouldn't be as simple as Zainab thought.

Chapter Six

Emerald Tower was the largest building in Lion City, bar none. The height of the green marbled edifice dwarfed that of the Imperial Palace itself. If one stood on the top floor, they'd see the entire city and the wilds beyond. Zainab and Kabir stood outside the building, accompanied by a large team of Security Service officers and personnel from the Office of Finance and Commerce. Kabir stared at the relief above the entrance, which featured images of three great beasts native to the Stellar River Valley: a cheethour, a siran, and the unofficial symbol of Lion City, a shairian. Kabir was certain the feline eyes of the shairian were following him as he entered the lobby. When the team approached the elevator bay, Zainab nudged Kabir in the side.

"You look like shit," Zainab whispered. "Did you go out again after I left?"

"No," Kabir grunted, stepping into the elevator that had just arrived.

Zainab tried again as they ascended. "Are you sleeping okay?"

"For fuck's sake, let it go. We've work to do."

Though she continued to eye him, Zainab dropped it.

While foreign businesses could freely house their offices anywhere in the city, they often grouped together, regardless of national origin. Besides the Harrier Group, the building was home to import services and businesses from Sheipon, Kalan-Mak, Blackeagle, Dvant, and others. Most of these countries, excluding Blackeagle and Ermenden, were protectorates of the Stellar River Empire.

They came out of the elevator and crossed into the Harrier Group suite. It had an open floor-plan and walled cubicles arranged throughout. As the gathered team walked towards the back, bewildered workers poked their heads out to gawk. Kabir noted with interest that many of these workers wore rings similar to those he'd found at the Jewels. Ahead stood a set of wooden doors leading to the Regional Vice President's office. They burst open, and a large man with grey hair and red cheeks dressed in a suit and tie stormed out. Caleb Reynolds and Janine Woodard tracked behind him at a

much more relaxed pace.

The man bellowed something in Ermenish, a curse, Kabir suspected, before slipping into broken Stellari. "What's going on here?! Who are you people?! You can't storm into a place of business!"

Zainab pulled the Decree out from her leather folio. The crisp document bore a wax imprint of the Imperial Seal at the bottom. "Regional Vice President Shockley, I presume. We're from the Imperial Office of Finance and Commerce and the Lion City Security Service. This is an Imperial Decree of Cessation. All Harrier Group business and that of any organization operating under that umbrella within Lion City is to cease immediately pending an in-depth review of your finances and practices." She pulled two more documents from the folio. "This is an itemized list of property that will be searched, as well as a preliminary order to cease specific operations permanently. These include corporate property and land-buys without functional purpose, and most forms of asset seizure from clients under protection of the Empire. More orders will surely come following our investigation."

Shockley snatched the papers from her hand and scanned them. "What in the void do you mean 'functional purpose?!' We invest in real estate! You're saying can't buy real estate?!"

"If by real estate you mean land and property, then functional purposes include housing, storage, or business use."

"The land and property are for business use!"

Zainab's voice went hard. "Buying land and property only to leave them vacant while you speculate and gamble on appreciation of value is not use. You use this office as a hub for your business. These empty fields and buildings simply take opportunities for ownership away from others."

"This is outrageous! Do you know how much we stand to lose because of this interference?"

"The Empire will compensate you and the other employees for lost wages in

accordance with what you currently earn. Now, I need you or one of your assistants to walk me through the day-to-day here."

"Unbelievable. I need to call the home office. Janine, you talk to Miss... what was your name?"

Zainab smiled. "Princess Zainab Al-Hazred Fatima Bashir Ammalaiyla, at your service. This is my brother, Prince Kabir, of the same name."

While the Decree of Cessation may not have stopped the man in his tracks, Zainab stating her full identity did. His eyes widened, and Kabir saw the enormity of the situation hit him like a charging beast. Kabir wasn't sure why, but the man's belligerence melted away into a show of meekness.

"Oh. Please excuse me, your highness." Shockley walked away, stunned.

Kabir shot Zainab a confused look. "Your highness?" he whispered.

"No idea. Now I know she's your type, but I saw her first."

"What?"

A coy smile crossed her face, and she waved flirtatiously at Janine Woodard.

"That's the woman from the Jewels," Kabir whispered.

"Fine! You saw her first, then."

Kabir rolled his eyes and turned to the accompanying investigative force. "Search the place. Accountants and Officers, pair up. Officers, assist them in any way needed. Investigators, interviews are to be conducted in twos. And activate your Link interfaces, everyone, if you haven't already. Otherwise, proceed at your discretion, and document anything strange or notable."

With that, the team dispersed to their duties. Kabir made a show of overseeing the officers as they searched through file boxes and drawers. All the while, he tracked Caleb Reynolds as inconspicuously as he could. The other man looked to be overseeing the Harrier Group employees, but Kabir got the sense that this was also an

act. Reynolds' shark grin never wavered, even when an officer spilled a stack of important-looking documents all over the floor. Eventually, as predicted, Kabir lost track of him. He called Zichang.

"Got eyes on him," Zichang said without preamble. "I intercepted him on his way out of the office. Link said he was headed for a storage closet, but he gave little indication as to his intentions. He had some documents with him, said he didn't think they were relevant, which was a lie. He handed them over anyway, then headed downstairs."

"Right, check what he might have been trying to do with those documents." After Kabir hung up, a notification from Faruk popped up in the corner of his vision. "Tracking him out in the street."

Kabir sent an acknowledgment via thought-transcription and turned his attention to the room. He scanned for the officer assigned to surveil Shockley, but he was nowhere to be found. He got a text from Zichang.

"Fucking incinerator," it read.

An accompanying translucent photo partially filled his vision, one of a soot-stained black box with a sizable metal pipe attached to it

"Good thing you got those files. Secure them with the rest of the evidence we're gathering, then catch up with Faruk. See what you see," Kabir responded.

Smaller offices lined the edges of the suite, and Kabir peeked into them one at a time, searching for the officer and Shockley himself. Suddenly, a thud sounded from the conference room. Kabir rushed in, expecting to encounter a belligerent Harrier Group employee. Instead, he found the young officer restraining Shockley, holding his face down on the large conference table with one arm twisted behind his back. Blood trickled from Shockley's nose.

"Let me go! What is wrong with you?!" Shockley bellowed.

"You disrespectful dog—how dare you?!" the officer yelled. Kabir thought his name was Mikail.

"What's going on here?" Kabir asked.

The officer let go, and Shockley massaged his wrist. "You starry-eyed fuck! Scummy-bottomed freaks! You're all trash. How do you like that?!" Shockley yelled.

Officer Mikail decked Shockley, knocking him to the ground, then dropped down and wrapped his hands around the man's neck. Kabir leapt to Shockley's defense, pulling the officer off him. Surprisingly, the young officer went for Shockley again, and Kabir had to fight to hold him back.

"Need some help in here!" Kabir yelled. Then he slipped behind the officer, grabbed up his arms into his own, and placed his hands behind the officer's neck to immobilize him. Simultaneously, Kabir brought the officer to his knees, then pushed him to the floor. Officer Mikail thrashed and struggled as Kabir tried to keep him down.

Three other officers rushed in to help restrain Mikail. Kabir adjusted his grip to give them space to wrap a silvery restraint cord around Mikail's wrists. The sindform-putty cord fused instantly in a secure grip, and Kabir let go. Kabir got to his feet and noticed that Officer Mikail was wearing a silver ring inset with a yellow stone, identical to the ones from the casino. The other officers got Mikail to his feet and put him in a chair while Kabir checked on Shockley. Zainab had him sitting up and was looking him over. She shined a light in his eyes against his protests.

"No sign of concussion. Take a breath, please?"

"Get off me, I'm fine!" He bellowed.

"And your breathing seems normal. Thank you, Mr. Shockley. Would you like for us to call you a medic to double-check and document your injuries?"

Shockley sighed. "That won't be necessary. I'm fine."

"What happened?" Kabir asked.

"I was talking on my communicator when that animal attacked me!"

"He was disrespecting Empress Fatima!" Officer Mikail yelled. "I understand Ermenish!"

He said the Crazy Star Bitch sent her kids to jam up his operations!"

Kabir raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? That's it?"

"Then he used those slurs! Starry-eyed! Scummy! They call us those things! I hear them when they think we aren't listening!"

Kabir glanced back at Shockley, who looked away, apparently pretending to not have heard. So the Ermenish had slurs for people from the Empire. Or were they just for the Stellari? Either way, Kabir found the concept interesting.

"That doesn't give you cause to attack him. You should know better. This incident will be filed as an assault and you will be tried to the fullest extent of the law. Given your status as a Security Service Officer, the process will be expedited. A Magistrate will meet you at the station. I'm sorry, Mikail. You fucked up real bad."

The officer scowled. His lack of contrition took the other officers by surprise. Kabir was taken aback as well. He didn't know the other man, but this conduct was out of character for any Security Service Officer. Come to think of it...

"Mikail, are you Linked?"

Mikail smiled. "Proudly, my Prince!"

This took Kabir even more by surprise. He'd never heard of anyone expressing pride towards being Linked. Contentedness, sure, but pride?

"On second thought, Mikail, I'll recommend the Magistrate come later. Please take him to the station, officers, and have an investigator take his statement, then report it directly to the Chief. Mark his case as urgent."

Mikail huffed but didn't struggle as they took him away. Shockley eyed the officer with naked malice and a bit of fear. Janine Woodard helped him to his feet.

Kabir removed his hat in a show of respect. "Mr. Shockley, on behalf of the Lion City Security Service, I'd like to issue a formal apology. Your attacker is going to be prosecuted fully for that assault. As a member of our Service, he is subject to stricter

regulations than your average citizen. If you like, I can arrange for you to receive updates on the prosecution process."

Shockley considered Kabir, then shook his head. "That won't be necessary. But I would like to speak to you in private, your majesty, if I could."

Zainab's eyes shimmered red, then she frowned and rolled her eyes. She shook her head minutely at her brother and he got the message. This was an attempt to haggle.

"That won't be necessary, sir. You can say your piece openly."

This took Shockley aback, but he composed himself quickly. "Well. I was just going to say that I could overlook the assault by your officer if you were to, let's say, reconsider this interference with our operations."

"Why would we want to overlook the assault?" Kabir asked, genuinely confused.

Shockley gave a knowing smile. "Come on, detective, I know how this works. Cops watch each other's backs. I know what it's like to be a team player. If this nonsense stops, your officer can go back to his life. And we can get back to business as usual. A win-win for all involved."

Kabir put his trilby back on and looked Shockley dead in the eye. "Being a team means holding one another accountable and maintaining high standards of conduct. Mikail has power. He abused his power. He will face consequences for that abuse. And this case will go on as planned."

Shockley grimaced at that as if it were a foul smell. "And if we go to the press with this?"

"Please do. The Security Service is a transparent organization."

"You're being absolutely unreasonable! My superiors will hear about this—"

Janine Woodard placed a hand on Shockley's shoulder. Her expression was neutral, but beneath that placidity, Kabir detected an edge.

Shockley started, then relaxed. "Fine. Do what you will," he huffed.

He turned to leave, but Zainab blocked his path.

"One more thing, Mr. Shockley. Our mother is, in fact, a crazy bitch. Tread carefully."

Zainab punctuated this with a disarming smile and stepped aside. Shockley narrowed his eyes at her, then walked out.

"Now where were we, Janine? May I call you Janine?"

The woman didn't seem to hear her. She looked Kabir up and down appraisingly.

"That was a clean takedown. Almost gentle. Why did you go so easy on him?" Janine asked. This was the first time Kabir had heard her speak. Her voice was deep but airy, almost a whisper, and her Stellari was impeccable.

He raised an eyebrow. "I suppose because he's a fellow officer, and I didn't want to hurt him."

"And if he wasn't a fellow officer?"

"Well. If he weren't, I still wouldn't have needed to hurt him. So I suppose I'd still have gone easy on him."

"Would you have hurt him if you had to?"

"I... suppose. Why do you ask?"

Janine's expression retreated from intrigued back to neutral. "Just curious, is all. Yes, I'm more than happy to help, Princess."

Zainab shot Kabir an annoyed glare before turning her focus back to the investigation. Kabir accompanied them to Shockley's office, where Zainab went through the physical and digital files with input from Janine. This went on for some time, and uncovered things that weren't new or interesting to Kabir, but that Zainab found utterly fascinating. At least this was helping to gather a body of evidence. Kabir was about to resign himself to another day of being fifth wheel to a series of financial documents when he received a text from Faruk.

"Lost him. But found some other suspects. Calling for backup. Come quick," the text read. Faruk followed this up by sending an address for a location in the Fabrication District.

After taking his leave of Emerald Tower, Kabir sprinted down the pedestrian paths to retrieve his transport from storage. He activated the briefcase-shaped device, and its shifting metallic plates expanded outward. It was a motorbike like Zainab's, but red with black accents. He mounted the bike and zoomed onto the motorway. The Fabrication District was largely home to factories and manufacturing plants. The smell of heated sindform filled his nostrils as he sped towards Faruk and Zichang's location. He found them right next to the transport storage station, where he deposited his motorbike.

"Did you tail him down here?" he asked.

Faruk shook his head. "He's slippery like a gekkie. Lost him just a few blocks away from Emerald Tower. Who is this guy?"

"Someone with secrets. Moves like a hunter stalking prey. I was hoping to get more answers out of him, but that'll have to wait. Why'd you come out here?"

"We didn't get to check this place out yesterday, so we changed focus after Reynolds gave us the slip."

"Yeah! This place," Zichang pointed to a one floor building which housed three empty shopfronts. "It's listed under a subsidiary of a subsidiary of the Lion's Jewels. We saw a bunch of these yesterday, places they've just left empty. Looked like another dead end —"

"But then we saw people were inside," Faruk finished. "I recognized one of them from that warehouse in New Sheipon. Not taking any fucking chances. Got a fully equipped Risk Response Squad coming out. They'll lead the entry."

Sure enough, a few moments later, a van transport arrived, and fourteen officers filed out of its back hatch. They wore flexible armor and carried tall metal shields. Attached to each shield for quick access was a standard sindform multitool shaped like a baton.

Additionally, they all had small silver capture balls attached to their belts. Of course, being hunters, the officers dressed in motleys of other pieces kept from years spent on the Hunt. One officer wore a sword on her back, while another carried a long feathered dagger on his belt. Yet another wore shoulder armor fashioned from shairian hide, black leather with orange stripes.

After some brief introductions, the team mobilized, splitting up and taking places outside each back exit. Faruk, Zichang, and Kabir hung back to support the rearguard outside, and to prevent any escapes. As was typical, the officers exchanged very few words in planning this operation. It was just another hunt.

The vanguard teams breached the doors simultaneously, and right away, Kabir heard shouting. Three people came rushing out the front, only to be met by the rearguard. The armored officers threw their capture balls, and each met its mark. In an instant, the balls stuck to the suspects, goofified, and wrapped each one in net-like tendrils to immobilize them. They fell to the ground and flopped around like fish. After a few moments, the squad sounded the all clear. An officer jogged out of the building to meet the three detectives. Despite the successful mission, he wore no satisfaction on his face, only shock.

"Something you need to see, detectives. Follow me, please."

The officer led them into a backroom. When Kabir saw the display, he understood the officer's bewilderment. Among the detainees squirming and shouting from the floor was a pile of duffel bags stacked in a pyramid. The officer leading them shaped his multitool into a pair of long tongs, then gently unveiled the contents of the bag on top. Inside were several red blocks, attached to one another with a mess of anbaric wires. Zichang broke the silence first.

"Oh, fuck... is that—"

"Yeah. Explosive charges," Faruk finished. "A lot of them, considering how many bags there are. Whatever they were planning, it was supposed to be big."

Kabir let out an enormous sigh. He couldn't be sure whether it was out of relief, or consternation.

Chapter Seven

As the Central Station team worked on processing all the detainees, Security Service personnel from other stations found more explosives in disused Harrier Group properties all around the city. Empire-wide alerts went out to all Link-connected devices to find those few Ilavalsi they hadn't caught. Furthermore, if someone using an ocular Link interface crossed paths with one of the fugitives, a notification featuring the suspect's face would flash across their eyes, and they'd be able to quickly relay that information to the Security Service.

The Ilavalsi plan had been to cause explosions throughout Lion City during the Nightmare. This would have thrown the city into chaos during a time in which, from the perspective of the Ilavalsi at least, the populous were at their most vulnerable. Of course, the Ilavalsi didn't know that even if the explosions had gone off, many people wouldn't have been as vulnerable as they thought. Still, the destruction and loss of life would have been considerable, so Kabir was glad they'd put a stop to the attack. From what he could make sense of, the attack was meant as an ideological insult to the Stellar River Empire as a whole. He didn't quite understand the sentiment, nor what good random violence would do to further their Maw worship. The whole thing seemed senseless.

The Ilavalsi said nothing of any connection to the Harrier Group. Any evidence that the corporation itself had anything to do with the foiled attack was circumstantial. Everything from the planning and organization of the attack to the construction of the explosives pointed to one man, Rashid Safi. With all the evidence catalogued, and all offenders either detained or on the run, the only things left to do were to find Safi or wait for something to turn up in the Harrier Group side of the investigation. Kabir wouldn't be much help with digging into financial paperwork, but he planned to volunteer for the manhunt. At least, until Chief Mirza squashed his plans with an odd directive.

"Sorry, sir. What was that?"

The Chief didn't look away from the flat terminal screen at his desk. "I'm ordering you

to take the rest of today and tomorrow off, that's what. You've been logging too many hours, Prince. It's time for a break."

Kabir knew better than to argue, but he couldn't help but give a small protest. "Sir. I can still work. I didn't even get injured this time."

Chief Mirza scoffed and looked up with shrewd eyes. "That's beside the point. This is the biggest case this city's seen in decades at least. And I checked, you've literally never taken time off. In a city, no, a country with such limited crime, you've somehow managed to overwork yourself! I know officers in Blackeagle who'd scoff at how much you work, and they actually have slums, and crime. You don't even know what those are! You are hereby ordered to take a fucking break. Is that understood?"

Kabir bit back a retort. "Yes, sir."

Kabir listlessly ambled out of the office, then out of Central Station. With nowhere to be, he headed home the long way. A text message from Zainab flashed across his eyes as he walked.

"Hey! Taking the day off. Wanna hang out?"

Kabir sighed. "Sorry, got another case," he responded, verbally transcribing his reply before mentally hitting the virtual 'send' button.

An undulating ellipsis flashed across his eyes for a moment before her response came through. "Okay. Have fun!"

When he reached the Garden District, Kabir found people setting up an outdoor festival for the Day of Anticipation. The wide square was full of people, and he noted that some local shops had set up stalls. Benches sat in rows in front of a raised stage, and nearby he saw Aisha in a tense argument with the man setting up a stall next to her. After a short but vigorous discussion, her and the man's eyes shimmered red, and they visibly relaxed and simultaneously burst into laughter. The man packed what little he had set up and waved off his employees when they came by.

"So sorry, Auntie. I hope you sell lots of parathas!" the man said. He walked away pushing a dolly stacked with savory smelling crates.

Aisha put her hands together in thanks. "You too, behta! May It never awaken!"

Kabir approached her stall. "Everything alright, Auntie?"

"Kabir! Yes, everything is fine. That young man was about to set up his paratha stand next to mine. I told him how are either of us going to make any sales if we're right next to each other? We were able to work it out. How are you doing? Are you going to stay for the festival?"

Kabir scanned the square. All around, people gathered in clumps of enthusiastic conversation. Children played in the fountain at the center. And the smell of good food and spice filled his nostrils. Though the music hadn't started yet, he saw his city as it was: safe, prosperous, and alive.

"Yeah. Why not? You got any specials for the festival?"

Aisha beamed at him and pulled a foil-wrapped paratha from under a heat-lamp.

The show began with a solo artist with a guitar, who played some lamenting love song. It wasn't Kabir's cup of tea, so he got up and bought a cup of tea and some cake rusk from a nearby stall. After the first few acts had finished, a Daantwwali troupe came onto the stage to set up box-shaped harmoniums and hand drums. At the head of the troupe was Kabir's older sister, Bushra, dressed in a red and gold shalwar-kameez that hugged her ample frame. She was taller than Kabir, almost the height of their older brother Abdul, with greying long, wavy hair that went down past her shoulders. Her face lit up when she spotted him and she shot him a smile and a wink. Then, she and the others sat in formation upon the stage itself. This included Bushra's son, Mahmoud, who took a seat next to her. When the young man squeezed the side-bellow of his harmonium for a sound-check, Kabir knew he was in for a blissful time. He finished his tea and what was left of his rusk, then got in line to buy a beer.

Kabir took his seat in time to catch the beginning of the first song. A pair of players thumped their drums slowly as Mahmoud and Bushra's harmoniums sounded their reedy breath. Then Bushra began to vocalize, flowing between prolonged hums, chants, and lines of poetry sung in alternating volumes and tempos. Mahmoud joined her, and they went back and forth, one taking over where the other left off, and

occasionally interrupting the flow of the other. After some time, Bushra belted out a powerful verse, the first line of a couplet that would form the chorus. This was the cue for the rest of the players to join in, and they repeated the line, filling the square with a wave of sound.

The song enchanted the crowd, who joined in when the backing players clapped in rhythm with the music. Led by Bushra and Mahmoud's dynamic verse-choruses interspersed with chants, the Daantwwals took the listeners on a journey through a story about two long-lost brothers reuniting after their paths diverged in their youth. The rhythm and tempo of the backing harmoniums, drums, and claps ebbed and flowed, rose and fell as the tale unfolded. Kabir had heard this song before, and Bushra had always been coy about its meaning when he'd asked. She was evasive about a lot of things regarding her music and faith, a quality he found both amusing and irritating. When the song finished, the crowd burst into applause and whistles, and Kabir joined in the raucous accolades. He got a couple more beers and settled in time for the next song. Somewhere in there, he fell asleep in his chair.

Kabir found himself in a field of red flowers. The pale light of the full moon touched each petal, illuminating a large circle beyond which was nothing but pitch black. The moon was not high in the sky, but floated above the ground ahead. Kabir thought he could reach it if he walked far enough. He trekked through the field, the moon getting larger and larger with each step. Eventually, he stood right in front of the grand, pale sphere. He reached a hesitating hand out to touch it. Instantly, it rotated to reveal a black slit running vertically down the middle, the pupil of a giant eye. Kabir recoiled and backtracked, reaching for his sword. But the scabbard at his waist was empty. The pupil changed as he retreated, slowly spiraling into rows and rows of teeth, a circular mass of fangs. Kabir turned to run, but a cloaked figure blocked his path. It grinned at him.

Kabir jolted awake in his chair. Bushra's group was mid-song, a calmer, more meditative number than before. The enthralled crowd swayed to the music, and no one payed Kabir any mind. Most people didn't know that Daantwwali music had its roots in Maw worship. The devotional poetry that formed the bulk of the lyrics served as lessons in line with those of Bushra's Maw-worshiping order. Indeed, some songs sang praises to

UI Maw using the many names and adjectives ascribed to It, like the Eminent, the Imminent, the Powerful, the Hungry. The Daantwwals performed in such a way that the overall effect was more sublime than terrifying. And so, despite its arcane origins, Kabir had always enjoyed this music. Though, this was the first time he'd fallen into an actual trance while listening to it. After the Daantwwals finished the song, he stood up and waved goodbye to Bushra. She grinned and shot him a glare that he knew translated to, "don't be a stranger."

It was earlier than usual when Kabir made it home. As much as he dreaded the prospect, he decided to spend the rest of the evening meditating with the tablet, though he wasn't sure meditating was the right word.

Kabir retrieved the stone from its place under the sink and sat on the sofa. He was about to remove the velvet pouch when a knock came at the door. Much to Kabir's surprise, Zainab was there. Rather than one of her usual loose, flashy outfits, she wore black tight-fitting athletic wear, and she'd tied her hair into a ponytail. Kabir tried to come up with potential excuses to get out of whatever workout she'd surely planned for them. But instead of ordering him outside, she shoved a heavy gym bag at him, let herself in, and kicked her shoes off.

"You need something?" Kabir asked, closing the door behind him. He placed the bag on the floor.

Zainab's expression was one of barely contained fury. "Another case? Really?"

He shrugged, trying to give as little away as possible.

"Chief Mirza gave you the day off! I could tell you were lying. Then when I asked him at the station, he told me the truth. So drop the fucking act, Kabir."

"Okay! Fine, yeah, I wasn't at work. I just didn't want to hang out is all."

Zainab regarded her brother coolly. "Five years, Kabir. It's been five years since Dad died and you left the Hunt to join the Security Service. It's like, ever since he died, you want nothing to do with me! I see you, what, every few months? I know everyone grieves in their own way, but I've given you more than enough space. What the fuck?!"

"Sorry, yeah, I've been distant—"

"But then," Zainab interjected. "We work this case together, and I realize there's something else. What are you up to, Kabir? Why have you been such an asshole?!"

Kabir glared at her for a moment, then softened. "I'm sorry. There is something going on, but I can't get into it. I'm sorry."

Her face contorted into fury, then fell neutral. Kabir realized what she wanted to say, and why she couldn't.

"Why didn't I just take the Link? That's what you want to ask," he said. "And again, I can't get into it right now."

"Fine. Then talk to me about something else. Like, what happened to you and Dad? I read your statement, but you and I never talked about it. No more surface-level shit. Let's talk about something actually important. What happened that day? And how did you get un-Linked?"

The question took Kabir by surprise. After he'd given his official statement, no one ever asked about the un-Linking. Kabir thought it was because the subject was taboo, but clearly, the topic wasn't off-limits. Kabir took a moment to steel himself against the memory.

"Dad and I were on patrol. We got ambushed. Marauders, we assumed. He... went down. I killed some of them and the rest ran away. Then I wasn't Linked anymore."

Zainab's eyes shimmered red. "You're leaving stuff out. You always leave stuff out! I literally read the report, Kabir. I know about that weird box they had. I know about the missing time. Why are you acting like you can't trust me?!"

"It's—"

"I don't even care about all that! I don't even care that there are things you'd rather not talk about. I don't care that you're keeping secrets! The thing that bothers me, that hurts me, is the fact that you've been pushing me away. And I don't want to be pushed away, Kabir!"

Tears crept down her face as she yelled, filling Kabir with pangs of guilt he hadn't felt in some time.

"I... I'm sorry, Zainab. I really am. I know I've been avoiding you. I know I'm a really shitty brother. There is a reason. I... just can't talk about it yet. Someday, sure. Just not yet."

Zainab wiped her tears away and considered Kabir with an expression that seemed neutral at first. Then Kabir noticed she was clenching her fists. An awkward silence fell between them as Zainab stared him down.

"Fine," she finally said. "But you're not getting away that easily this time. If you're going to insist on being an aloof shithead, I'm going to have to kick your ass."

"You're going to beat me up?"

"No. We're going to fight. Come on." Zainab put her fists up. She adopted a stance with her hips facing forward, her legs slightly more than shoulder-length apart, and her left leg taut like a spring.

Kabir scoffed. "We're not fighting."

"Yes, we are."

"No, we're not. Grow up."

"You don't have anything better to do. So we're going to fight."

"You don't know I don't have anything better to do."

Zainab's eyes shimmered red, and she scanned her brother's face. "What's in the bag, Kabir?"

"What, this one?" he pointed to the gym bag on the floor. "It's YOUR bag! You threw it at me!"

"Not that one. The one on the sofa. The black velvet pouch. Seems important to you."

Kabir cursed his traitorous eyes for flitting to the pouch holding the tablet. Still, he tried

putting on his most expressionless face and shrugged. Though she said nothing, the whites of Zainab's eyes filled with the dull-red of Battle-Link. An evil smile crossed her face as she made a move towards the sofa.

About the Author

Chicagoland born and raised, O. A. Bhatti is a Pakistani-American author with a penchant for fun and unusual stories. When not busy with his day job and being a father, he works to bring his eclectic interests (heavy metal, arcane mythology, professional wrestling, education, TTRPG actual plays, folky music, immersive sims, role-playing video games, everyday carry, social justice, and more) together in his writing.

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