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DARKNESS AND FIRE

Born From Blazing Sand

By

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Our lives are connected in eternity.

There can be millennia filled with pain, suffering, evil and sorrow.

But the one life filled with love is worth fighting for.

Prologue

The flickering torches bathed the cave in a warm, gloomy glow, casting long shadows along the giant claw marks on the walls. It was almost dead silent, save for the occasional rustle or gentle snarl. And the voice of an old man, who seemed to pull every child, every man and even every animal of the small tribe, that dwelled for the day in the cave, into his world. The children, spellbound and wide-eyed, were huddling in front of him, their glassy skin reflecting the light of the torches as they listened eagerly to his tales from a long-forgotten world.

A faint glimmer of daylight peeked through the cave's hidden entrance, but there was no sense of impending departure among the gathered Descheret. Instead, they lay on makeshift beds of fur and leather, surrounded by their large, furry mounts whose tails were gently curled around their riders, ears tuned to the Lorekeeper.

Though the children clung to every word the old man spoke, their wide eyes began to droop, and soft yawns slipped free as the hour grew late.

„And so, the world as we once knew it came to an end," the old man said dramatically, eliciting a gasp from the children.

"Enough stories for today, it's time to sleep," he added, leaning on his cane and rising slowly. His face, scarred and weathered, with a drawing of a hand in an eye on his forehead, broke into a gentle smile as a disappointed groan echoed through the cave.

The children began to stand and make their way towards their parents, but one boy remained standing at the centre of the circle.

"But how do we know they're not doing the same thing to us?" he asked hesitantly.

Everyone turned their attention to the little boy, who didn't appear older than five. His skin was dark like the rest of the clan, but his eyes were a deep blue, and he gazed up at the Lorekeeper with questions and curiosity in them.

The man looked at him with a kind, knowing expression and smiled: "You know, everything in this universe is connected by time and space. Even if you can't see it, you are bound to all your pasts and futures, and we learn from everything we have done in eternity. Everyone has their path to walk, and their destination that is meant for them."

Barely noticing, the elder turned to a young woman next to him with a knowing smile as she rocked a small bundle in her arms. She had the same dark eyes and complexion as her father, but her hair was a dark brown instead of his long white beard and shaved head.

"And what's that supposed to mean? I mean, how are *we* supposed to stop them if no one else ever could?"

Grimly, the boy crossed his arms over his chest while an amused chuckle spread across the old man's face.

"We have to believe," the Lorekeeper whispered. "We have to believe that our hearts guide us. We have to believe that every life filled with pain, suffering, and mistakes leads us to become better, and that one life in which we find our destiny is worth all previous suffering. And we have to believe that one day, we will find someone who has the power to change everything in a new direction."

Once again, the old man turned around, ready to end the story time for the day.

"But how are we supposed to know who that is?" A scowl came over the boy's face as he followed the elder defiantly.

"No one can tell you for sure," the Lorekeeper replied. "There's an old saying from long ago that says the eyes are a window to the truth. And so the old tales tell: the Chosen is marked not by blade or crown, but by the—"

He fell silent, as his daughter placed her hand on his shoulder, gentle but firm, and turned to the boy.

"... but by the goodness in its eyes," she explained. "You must trust that you will find this goodness and love, and you will know who will change our destiny — for good or for bad."

The boy tried to speak, but the woman cut him off again: "Enough stories and legends for one day. Tomorrow night we have to move on."

With a huff, the boy turned and trotted back to his parents and their mount, dropping onto his mother's lap, who smiled at him with that quiet, overwhelming tenderness — a feeling the Lorekeeper's daughter herself never thought she'd be capable of feeling so soon, without the time such a bond was meant to take.

Slowly, peace returned to the cave as she leaned towards her father and gave him a reproachful look. She knew what he was thinking and wasn't sure if she believed him or not. But she knew one thing for certain: she had to protect this tiny, little soul in her arms from all the evils that would come its way, and she would do whatever it took to make sure it grew up with all the love and care it deserved.

Tenderly, she kissed her father on the cheek and smiled down at the bundle in her arms as the baby watched her with its deep purple eyes.

Chapter 1

Egypt, Old Kingdom

As Anun slipped almost unnoticed between the trembling, emaciated figures of the masses, barely able to hold their scant offerings, his stomach gave a loud, hungry rumble. It had been days since he had last eaten a proper meal, and despite the great feast and the incredible reward their master had promised them, something deep inside told him that the situation would not improve for him. He had tried to fulfil his duties, tried to do the only thing that might have satiated his hunger after so long, but one look at the empty offering plates of the people made him forget his hunger immediately.

The rataplan of ceremonial drums echoed through the streets as Anun forced his way deeper through the throng, inching closer to the towering temple in the centre of the city. With every new step, the gaps between the people seemed to shrink. Not only because the masses kept pressing forward, as if hoping to bask in the divine light. But also because every new step brought him closer to the city's highborn, with their silky robes, glistening emeralds, and plump, sweaty bellies — too consumed by their own grandeur to notice him.

It was far more hazardous to be among the untouchable few than to stay back with his own kind. But they were the only ones who wouldn't have to fight for their very survival if they happened to lose one or two of their most valuable possessions. So Anun took the risk and slipped past the palace guards without drawing a single glance, fully aware that on any other day, they'd have caught and broken him by now. But on a day like this, when everything was filled with jubilation and joy — at least among those who still had the strength to celebrate - he didn't hesitate.

And he wasn't the only one. With a smile on his face, Anun watched a girl slipping through the crowd, too small to be seen, as she tried to reach the baskets and offering plates of the priests and nobles in hope of finding something to eat. But her legs seemed too short, her arms too small.

Barely noticeable, Anun reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny date — a truly unique piece of fruit, as fresh and juicy as he himself had ever seen. Different from all the old, half-rotten fruits left for the common people to eat, this was the kind of fruit that only the rich and privileged in the city could afford. His stomach growled again as he looked at the date, imagining how delicious it would taste. As quickly as the thought came, he pushed it back into the depths of his mind — as if *he*'d ever let him eat this wonderful fruit.

Anun knelt next to the girl and offered her the fruit without a word. Startled, the girl looked up at him — then at the date in his hand. Her eyes widened. Anun nodded softly, holding the date out to her. Tears ran down her cheeks as she reached for the fruit — slowly, as if unsure it was really meant for her. Then she smiled, barely, before turning and running off.

Suddenly, it grew quiet. The drums fell silent, the cheers of the people faded away, and even the giggling of the jackals and the screeching of the birds seemed to die down. Anun turned around and his eyes landed on the temple's entrance — past the mass of people, past the palace guards, hundreds of steps above him. He squinted as the sunlight hit him full in the face, making the unbearable heat seem even more intense.

And then, all at once, it struck him like a bolt of lightning from a long-awaited summer storm. He could not imagine ever having seen anything so unequalled. Not the temple itself, but the young woman whom the pharaoh presented to the people with his raised chin, puffed chest and yet without a spark of kindness on his face. Although they had the

same golden complexion and some of their features were similar, the girl hardly resembled her father. She seemed like a drop of water in an endless sea of sand, like a cold cloth on a burning wound, like the shadow under the devouring sun.

For one moment, Anun wondered if she saw herself in the same way. With her beauty and her origins, she would probably get everything. And indeed, a small part of her seemed unapproachable. Not because of her pride — no... it was something else. Something vulnerable in her eyes, like a silent scream that sent a painful twinge through his throat.

As sweat slowly trickled down Anun's neck, all movement around him seemed to slow, leaving him with nothing but jumbled thoughts. He was well aware that he had never seen this girl before and that he knew nothing about her. And yet, every trace of clarity vanished from his mind. All he could think of was running to her, holding her tight, and taking away the pain he saw written all over her face. But deep down, he knew they would never let him near her. They would hunt him down faster than a cheetah its prey.

Those maddening thoughts clung to him — louder than any reason, harder than the truth: what if it was all worth it? What if she fell into his arms and, together, they ran beyond the world's end, where not even Apophis, the great serpent god, could find them?

Her eyes met his. Without moving, without even blinking, he stared deep into those strange shimmering purple eyes with their pitch-black rim. Those eyes whose colours seemed to change endlessly... purple-green, purple-blue... But as he watched the play of colour, peering deep inside, he saw more than surface beauty; he was able to explore every chasm and hope in her soul. He knew everything that would make her happy and all the pain inside her, as if he had finally awoken from a dark veil.

And then... there was nothing, almost as if her soul had been ripped right out of her. He looked into those cold, dead eyes and watched as her full lips — which had revealed a

slight smile a moment ago — contorted into a thin, harsh line. As if petrified, her whole body resembled a statue — one more beautiful than he had ever seen before.

Rigid she stood; her gaze blank; her long, slim legs covered in gauzy white fabric that showed her slender curves; layers of pure gold jewellery laid above it — treasures he could never hope to steal in his wildest dreams. Only her shoulder-length black hair waved softly in the wind.

And it was a good wind. Not like those suffocating, mighty storms that blast sand into one's eyes. It was a gentle wind, just strong enough to bring a shivering, soothing feeling. One that took the aching heat away from his maltreated body.

That was the moment he realised that even if he reached her without any harm, she probably wouldn't even perceive him as a human. She would only see him for what he was — as scum, as a thief.

As a slave.

Chapter 2

New York, 1993

Joan trudged up the creaky stairs of the house, her shoulders slumped and her eyes downcast, a heaviness in her heart evident with every move she made. With each reluctant step, more of her life flew by her; not in her mind, but hanging on the walls in all the pictures from her past — pictures of her daughter and her son, of her brothers and her parents. A familiar scent still lingered in the house; a constant reminder of her mother. It had been two months since they'd buried Mary O'Neil next to Joan's father. At last, the two would be together again.

A single tear traced a glistening path down Joan's cheek, not only filled with grief, but with joy and relief. Mary's was a good life. She'd had her darling husband, three children who meant the world to her, and five beautiful grandchildren. In all her years, she'd rarely fallen ill, and in the end, had barely felt any pain; she'd simply passed away peacefully in her sleep. But from the moment Joan's father died, Mary had changed. The corners of her mouth rarely formed a smile, she almost never answered the phone, and although she was always happy to see her grandchildren, she insisted on staying home when her family went on trips. But worst of all for Joan was that her mother could hardly look them in the eye.

At first, Joan had not been surprised; she, too, was deeply affected by her father's death. And for her mother, the pain must have been even more severe. Her parents had known each other almost all their lives. They had been so happy together — the very thing anyone would want in life.

Unfortunately, Joan had not been so lucky. For a long time, she thought she'd found the man of her dreams, the one true love — the man who had given her two beautiful

children. Until the day she walked in on him with one of his students. It had been an ugly divorce, and Mary had stood by her all the way. And whenever Joan looked at her mother, she was a little envious that she would never experience love like the one her parents had.

But Mary's grief had lasted long after her husband's death. Joan had tried to talk to her, to help her, but she became more and more withdrawn. Until one cold winter night almost three months ago when she fell asleep and never woke up again. Perhaps now she would finally find peace.

Joan hesitantly approached her mother's bedroom door. She hadn't been able to go back in there since that very morning; it had scared her too much. And even now, as she reached for the doorknob, she felt a lump in her throat. All her mother's belongings were in this room. Of course, after Joan's father died, Mary had the whole house to herself, but she rarely left the bedroom. Instead, she'd picked all her beloved things and moved them upstairs.

Joan's fingers glided over the old wooden dresser next to the bed and gazed at the pictures placed in colourful frames on top. She'd always loved them, all the moments showing her mother's life, or at least a few important milestones.

On the left was a photo of Mary as a girl, with Joan's grandmother and her mother's two siblings. She looked young in the photograph, only two or three years old, with her short blonde hair, her fringes, and a large, white, flower-like bow on her head. Looking a little grim, Mary sat upon her mother's lap — a very tall, loving, but conservative woman. At her right, stood her brother, five years older, handsomely dressed in a sailor's uniform, and her ten-year-old sister with her long beautiful brown hair.

The next frame showed Mary just after the First World War, with her little nephews and nieces in her arms, while in the centre, was a picture of Mary wearing loose beige trousers and a white blouse, with thick glasses and a French pith helmet on her head. In the

photograph, she proudly displayed a sand-covered cave entrance and an impressive ancient Egyptian necklace adorned with a dazzling jewel at its centre. Though the picture was in sepia, Joan vividly recalled the magnificent green and purple hues of the stone, which seemed to shift into countless different colours — like her father's eyes did.

This necklace was no stranger to her; for years, it had been kept securely in a locked glass cabinet in her father's study. As a child, Joan had yearned to try it on, but her mother always forbade her from doing so. Then, unexpectedly, her mother sold it after her father's passing. Perhaps the memories associated with the necklace were too painful for her to bear.

Joan looked at the final two pictures at the end of the dresser. The first showed her parents' wedding — a big, lavish affair with hundreds of guests Mary had often bragged — and the series ended with a shot from Joan's birth taken in the delivery room. Mary looked tired and exhausted in the photo — no surprise after being in labour for twenty hours — and her father was positively beaming, his grin spread from ear to ear. Joan smiled and rubbed a smudge from the frame.

She wandered across the room over to Mary's bed and saw the little music box her grandfather gave her mother before the war sitting on the side table. Carefully she lifted it, turned the winder, and Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite" began to play. Oh, how she loved that song. As a child, she often used to sneak into her parent's room to steal the music box, placing it next to her bed before she slept. Until the night she dropped it... Gently, she touched the ballerina's broken foot. Her mother had scolded her so much that night that Joan had started crying. But then she'd tenderly taken Joan into her arms and held her until she fell asleep. The next day Mary bought Joan her own little music box with the same song.

Joan was about to return the box when she spotted a stack of folded papers on the table. She picked them up, sat down on the bed, and turned the stack from side to side. They

were letters — some dirty, torn and yellowed, others much newer. Carefully, she pulled the little black ribbon that had kept the letters bound together, and her eyes were tinged with sadness as she began to read.

Chapter 3

England, 18th Century

Elaine was screaming and kicking. With all her strength, she struggled against the sinister old man who had grabbed her by the arms, trying desperately to free herself from his grip. She let her whole body fall limp and sink to the floor, but the man only yanked harder and dragged her further down the corridor.

Painfully, she pulled herself up as high as she could and bit into his hand. The man yelled out and released her for a brief moment, and as quickly as she could, she tried to jump up and run back to her room. She had almost found her feet when an explosion of agony rocked her vision, and she fell back to the floor.

A searing pain engulfed her cheek, igniting a fiery sensation that she had never experienced before. Her hand instinctively touched the tender skin, as tears welled up in her eyes. She gazed at the old man before her, her expression a mix of anguish and vulnerability, revealing the emotional toll of the physical blow she had endured.

“You pesky sprog! We'll teach you some manners!” He grabbed at her again, dragging her towards the house's entrance.

“What about my payment?” he muttered, turning to the large armchair in the corner of the drawing room. Without waiting for an answer, he flung open the front door and pushed Elaine through.

Outside it was the deepest night, and only the light of the giant house, illuminated by the small fireplace in the drawing room, gave a glimpse of the cage hidden in the large carriage parked in the driveway. From behind, another figure emerged, towering over the

older man. With a rough grip, the taller figure seized her by the arm, forcibly unlocked the cage, and tossed her inside before slamming the door shut behind her.

Elaine could not understand what had just happened. One minute she was in her room playing with the doll her father had given her for her sixth birthday, and the next, this strange man was dragging her down the stairs.

“Uncle...” she cried out in fear. In the midst of this horrific situation, a whirlwind of questions flooded her mind. What was this all about? Where was her uncle, and why hadn't he taken any action to intervene? Her eyes darted around, searching for any sign of his men coming to her aid, but there was no one in sight.

Through the bars, Elaine watched as a figure rose from the velvet-lined armchair with its gilded legs inside the drawing room and approached the entrance of the house. His hands were clasped behind his back, and although she couldn't quite see his face, her uncle's silhouette was unmistakable.

Without so much as a glance at her, he picked up a heavy pouch from the ornately carved table beside the door and tossed it over to the older stranger.

“Make sure I never see her again,” he said, his voice muffled by the whistling wind, and with these words, the man closed the front door, and darkness settled over the night once more.

As the carriage lurched forward with a loud rumble, Elaine pressed herself against the grate, eager to find a way to escape. Tears ran down her cheek as she bawled her eyes out, but no one seemed to hear her. No one from the house or at the gate seemed to notice any of this. Or even cared.

“Shut up!” a hushed hiss emanated from the depths of a dark corner in the cage.

Slowly, now that her eyes had adjusted to the darkness, Elaine could make out the shapes of the other children huddled in fear at the distant edge of the cage. Their wide eyes darted anxiously, seeking any semblance of safety amidst the encroaching shadows. She tried to orient herself to figure out where the voice had come from and, on the opposite wall, spotted a tall boy glaring at her. He must have been a few years older than her — eleven or twelve — and his clothes were old and torn.

“Your privileged life won't help you now,” he hissed in her direction. “They have sold you out! Do you understand? They never saw you as part of their home. And stop screaming, then the rest of us might grab a bit more shut-eye, dreaming of better days before the whole world comes crashing down.”

As his words echoed through her head, she watched him tenderly stroke a little girl's head — even younger than she was. She laid peacefully in his lap, unaware that something terrible had happened. But what had happened at all? Pondering, Elaine sank to the floor. She wasn't old enough to understand what it was all about. The only thing she knew was that her uncle had given her away. Just like that. For no reason at all. That was the part she couldn't grasp: what had she done to incur his wrath like that? She had always been well-behaved since her parents died. She had never complained about anything. But that no longer seemed to matter. Her hand clenched into a tight fist, nails digging into her palm as she stifled her sobs, eventually crying herself into a quiet slumber.

*

A sound alerted Elaine, jerking her awake. It was already daylight, and she had slept all night. It had not been a good sleep, interrupted by tossing and turning and a gloomy dream that had haunted her — an evil man, a carriage, and the darkness engulfing her.

Wearily, she looked up at the sky. Something was strange. She could not see its usual blue sky; instead, she saw nothing but moving treetops. Startled, she straightened up and glanced around. It had not been a dream. She was staring out through the bars of a carriage onto a never-ending path in the middle of an endless forest.

A foot moved away from under her, and she jerked. Her memory returned: Children. The whole cage was full of children — maybe eight or nine in total, plus the boy who had shouted at her in the night. They were all fast asleep.

Panic spread through her, and without even thinking about the boy's earlier words, she started screaming and kicking against the bars. She screamed as she had never screamed before, waking the whole forest and its inhabitants.

“Stow it!” rang out a voice from the coach box. But Elaine wasn't about to keep quiet. She tugged and shook the grate until the carriage suddenly stopped. Before she realised what was happening, the old man who had dragged her into the cage only a few hours ago was yanking her out of the carriage and throwing her to the ground.

“Shut your face, you stupid sprog, I said!” He slapped her hard again, right on the same spot he had the night before.

For a short moment, there was silence, then Elaine started to scream again, “Let me go! I want to go home! If my uncle finds out what—”

The man grabbed a fistful of her hair and tugged her upright, her cries so loud that the children in the carriage were forced to cover their ears. She lashed out at her attacker, barely grazing him in her attempt, but as he was about to return the favour, a loud “Stop!” rang out through the forest before he could land the blow.

Elaine managed to free herself for a moment, but the man quickly grabbed her arm again. She wiped the tears from her eyes with her free hand and looked up to see three men on horseback approaching — two dressed all in black, the third in white.

“Where are you going?” the white rider asked, as they drew up beside the carriage.

“None of your business!” Angrily, the old man tightened his grip and began to drag Elaine back to the cage.

“How much for the children?” One of the black riders had dismounted from his horse and walked up to the old man, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

The old man growled, “They are already sold. And they will do good service...” A brief smirk flitted across his craggy face, and he looked down at Elaine with a lecherous wink.

“I’ll pay double.”

Elaine looked up at the soldier with wide, fearful eyes, but his words had only seemed to annoy her captor. The old man's eyes narrowed, and he puffed out his chest. He let go of her arm, and marched right up to the knight in black, drew his dagger and held it to the man’s throat.

“They. Are. Already. Sold!”

Elaine couldn't understand a thing that was going on, but the soldier did not move an inch. The carriage driver descended from the coach box and stood beside his master, holding his own dagger. “Yeah. Now get out of here and mind your own business!”

Before Elaine could realise what was happening, the soldier had drawn his sword, and the two sinister figures who had abducted her were lying on the ground, fresh blood flowing from their throats.

“You will come with us!” uttered the soldier without a hint of emotion in his voice.

Fearfully, the children in the cage began to whimper. Elaine just stood there. She could not move. Her gaze lingered on the bodies of the two men. She didn't know whether to be grateful or filled with fear. Not even when the soldier lifted her did she dare to move an inch.

Quickly, he set her back in the wagon, without hurting her, like the man before, but also without compassion. One of the other two soldiers dismounted and unfastened the black cloak from his shoulders.

“You will be blindfolded! Whoever removes them will be left here in the forest. Whether you live or die will be out of our hands.” One by one, he tore small pieces from the cloak and tied them around the children's eyes.

Elaine wanted to fight back — she really wanted to. She wanted to scream and kick and punch. But she couldn't. She could only stare silently at the lifeless bodies on the ground until the cloth was tight around her eyes, leaving her in the darkness again.

Chapter 4

Paris, Early 19th Century

Lucien followed the scent of dead bodies and faeces, so much reminding him of everything. The stench was unbearable, but it felt like a piece of him. How long had he craved to leave this place behind? He wanted it. He wanted it so badly. But something kept him stuck here. Hadn't he already done enough to get away from it all? Hadn't he already proved that he was able to do something remarkable?

He had once tried to leave it all behind when he was young. No older than seven, he had taken a slice of bread from the kitchen one night and sneaked out of the house in nothing but his nightgown. He had spent so much time thinking about how he would do it, or whether he should do it at all. And now that the time had come, he was terrified. Scared of what would happen if he failed. He gathered all his courage and opened the door. He was silent, barely audible. Without a look behind, he stepped out, and, on tiptoes, rushed around the next corner. He stopped, relief flooding through him — joy and hope that he could finally live like all the other children he used to see every day. He turned around and—

The stabbing pain in his thigh dragged him back to the present day. It felt like his pain was linked to his memories. He winced as his fingers gingerly released their grip on the old injury etched into his leg, where he had reflexively placed them. With a deep breath, he deliberately shifted his focus away from the discomfort, forcing his thoughts onto the task at hand.

For now, he was not able to leave. He still needed to take care of certain things. Important things. Even if it were to be the last time.

He entered a small alley heading out of the marketplace on the outskirts. It was deathly quiet this time of day; only the brittle crunch of snow underfoot, the occasional cough of a beggar, or the distant whimper of a stray dog broke through the frozen night. Now and then, a dark figure crept past — full of secrets, just like him — while snowflakes settled softly on the black fabric draped around his shoulders.

Suddenly, a sweet scent filled the air — the same he had smelled a few weeks before. Oh God, how he'd craved to smell that scent again. He had been searching for it. For days he couldn't think of anything else. It was like a pristine rose garden in the middle of a dive. Although he had never possessed a keen sense of smell, this fragrance still pricked his nose with a captivating allure. Unique and delicate, it seemed to beckon him from his lonely, dreary existence in the squalid city towards something greater. His thoughts revolved endlessly around it — he was mesmerised. He needed to find out where it came from.

To his misery, the intensity of the scent faded as quickly as it had appeared, so he started to run. First to the left, where he first noticed it, but he immediately turned around and ran in the other direction. This time he was right. First to the right, then to the left. He had almost reached it.

From the narrow alley on his left, a petite silhouette turned into the dimly lit path ahead. Lucien tried to stop, but the snow-covered ground was too slick. He slid forward a few steps, stumbled, almost fell to the ground, then came to a halt. He found himself standing just behind the figure, and in that moment, he could have sworn he had finally found the source of that lovely fragrance. But for reasons he couldn't explain, his heart took off — wild and fast — leaving no room for thoughts; making him even forget how he had ended up here.

Though his attempt to stop had been far from elegant and probably anything but quiet, the delicate silhouette in front of him, covered in a deep blue cloak, its hood pulled low over the face, hadn't noticed him at all. Or had she?

All at once, she spun around. Not enough to see Lucien, but just enough for him to catch a glimpse of her long brown wisps of hair trailing from beneath the hood.

A sigh emitted from her lips, soft and gentle, and made his skin shiver. Like balm, it brushed over his body, making him feel like all his problems and pain were suddenly erased, but inside, a knot of unease twisted sharp and tight. He had heard it in her young, almost childlike voice — the panic, the fear that someone could have seen her out here. And the relief when she found no one around.

No sooner had she turned back she hurried further down the street, so quickly that she didn't notice how the scarf she had been wearing around her neck had slipped to the ground.

Slowly, Lucien picked it up, without taking his eyes off her. It was soft and gentle; like a second skin, it enveloped his fingers, while the ornaments wrapped around them, were forming new patterns and shapes. And it was warm. Not only because of the light fabric itself, which immediately took the chill out of his hands. It was warm because Lucien could still feel her body heat on it.

Just as the slow, pleasant shiver ran down his spine, the sweet scent filled his senses once more, and his gaze fell upon the scarf.

A door behind him banged open, and Lucien jerked around. A bright gleam of light burst through the door, and loud laughter accompanied by music, echoed through the night as two men with tankards in both of their hands staggered out of the rat hole.

In a panic, he swung back around and looked for the girl, but she was gone.

Holding the shawl close, he started up the street, his stomach twisting tighter with every step. What was a young girl like her, not to mention dressed in such lavish clothes, even doing in this godforsaken place? It made him sick — physically sick — to imagine what kind of filth crawled through this place after dark. But worse was the image of what those two men, even if — to his relief — they seemed to be heading in the other direction, might do to her if they found her. That thought alone nearly made him stumble as he forced himself to move faster.

The street was completely empty. His gaze swept over the crooked alleys, past dimly lit windows, and lingered on every shifting shadow the night draped across the cobbled streets, then he dashed around the corner.

That's when he spotted her. In fact, he didn't see much, just her silhouette flitting into a doorway. And her sweet-natured face, shrouded in the shadow of her cloak. Though he was only able to see it for the briefest moment, it felt as if it had awakened a voice within him he'd long since forgotten.

The door closed. He quickly tried to catch one last glimpse through the window, but she had already disappeared. A heavy feeling settled over his thoughts, a deep disappointment that he had not managed to catch her in time. And with it came a feeling unlike any before: the crushing weight lifted from his chest, the fierce, almost desperate relief of knowing she was finally safe — from whatever nightmare was waiting outside for her.

Part of him begged him to go to the door and for a moment, he considered knocking. But it was very late in the evening, and he shouldn't have been here at all.

He sighed softly, then looked around and tried to focus, tried to remember what had brought him to this part of the city in the first place. The heaviness returned, only now it wasn't in his chest. It was real — pressing down on him with each passing moment. He could

feel the full weight of the sack slung over his shoulder. He had come here for something important.

And because of the scent, that had led him so far astray. Yes! He remembered. He lifted the shawl to his nose, took a deep breath, but... the scent...it was nearly gone. The winter's chill and the snow gathered on it had all but swept away its once-sweet scent. Now he would have to wait again for the fragrance to reappear. That scent that seemed to bring his soul a little closer to freedom.

Nevertheless, he still had a lot of things to do this night. It would be awful if someone discovered him out here. The risk was too high. So he decided to forget about it for today and hoped to find both again tomorrow. The scent and the girl.

Chapter 5

Veraada, Another Galaxy, Year 67,380

The only thing to be heard that night was the loud creaking of the wooden carts and the trotting of hooves. Not even the wind made a sound or moved the sand beneath her feet as they briskly slipped through the treacherous desert.

Ra'ija looked up into the night sky and saw the planetary constellation of Asketarion along with its lights. They had never been so clearly visible in all her life, their colours changing to various shades at an almost rhythmic pace. Not only was the firmament brightly lit, but the glassy grains of the desert reflected every moment of their splendour. The desert had turned into a colourful, radiant sea that lit the way through the darkness.

Under normal circumstances, it was very difficult to cross the Paridars in the dark, but the spirits of Asketarion guided their way. It wasn't easy to spot one of them with the naked eye; a scout, carried on a small barque equipped with an eyepiece at the head of the caravan, watched the sky for hours. With the flashing of two lights, it indeed seemed to be a good night. But this time something was different...

"The spirits seem to be up to something special," an elderly woman murmured to Ra'ija with a hint of awe in her voice.

Without taking her eyes off the lights, Ra'ija touched the weighty pendant that lay around her neck, shimmering in nearly the same colours as the sky. She had never thought about how the necklace seemed to constantly change colours, but now, as she watched the same spectacle above her, a cold shiver ran down her spine.

The necklace felt glacial and heavy on her skin as usual, and yet at the same time as if the edges were burning deep into her skin. But whether the pain was real or only in her head, the trinket was all she had left to remind her of her parents; the only thing she had ever kept from them.

All she knew about the pendant was that it had once been brought to this place from a galaxy far, far away and that, to her mother, it had meant everything.

A fleeting thought flashed through her mind. Did her parents know what those lights in the firmament really meant and their link to the necklace? What if they were here, right now, among the spirits? What if they wanted to tell her something? And what if the pendant wasn't a sign of their love and affection, but a hint — a hint of something she just couldn't understand.

As if Nama had read her thoughts, she smiled warmly and spoke, “Each one of our ancestors has their place up there. Without them in their destined positions, we would be lost. Some find their place sooner, others later, but they all eventually settle into their destined positions.”

Slightly defiant but still with a venerable look, Ra'ija asked, “Do you think they're trying to show us something?”

“The spirits are always speaking to us, Ra'ija,” Nama replied. “Sometimes they know we can find the way on our own, and sometimes they know when we have lost it.” She nudged Ra'ija with a grin. “In each of these lights, you can find our ancestors. You only have to listen to them, and you will understand.”

With a gentle touch of her hand, she moved away from Ra'ija and followed the slow walk of the caravan. Ra'ija stayed behind for a moment. If only she knew what her ancestors were trying to tell her. Then, she resolutely grabbed the reins of her kuna, took a deep breath,

and caught up the small distance that her reverie had created. There was still a long way to go, and she should manage her strength well. For although travelling by night was the safest option, she still had to be vigilant.

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As time passed, Ra'ija struggled to keep her attention on the road ahead. She couldn't get Nama's words out of her head. Nama was right, something had changed that night. But it wasn't just the lights or the burning of the necklace. There was something in the air. Her body felt it, beneath her glassy skin, like a shiver deep inside. It felt like something was trying to burst out of her. Not in a painful way; it was a feeling of power that seemed to flood through her. A feeling that continued to expand inside her with each passing moment — more and more. Every fibre of her being was asking her to scream out loud, it was demanding her to scream that power into the world, as if she could change the course of destiny with it.

Again she took the pendant into her hand and clasped it tightly. But this time, it was not out of longing or missing memories of her parents — it was out of sheer fear of giving in to this demand. She knew that a loud noise, let alone a scream, would have deadly consequences for them all. No matter what deceptive feeling tried to convince her she would be armed for the fight that would follow, she could not trust it. It was not only her life that was at stake. There were so many people she was responsible for — women, men, children. They all foresaw something in her, something she herself knew nothing about. And they all relied upon her word.

Ra'ija could not remember exactly when it happened, though she still remembered very well that she was never accepted as a child. Everyone had steered clear of her and looked at her with ice-cold stares. She had been the one who didn't fit in anywhere. She had been 'the other one'. Only Nama had never rejected her. She'd raised her as her own flesh and blood

and rebuked anyone who did not treat her the same — not that it ever made a difference in how they saw her.

But Ra'ija didn't back down. Over time, she'd grown used to the stares — the whispers that followed her like shadows. And instead of letting someone see her wounds, she carved out a place no one else could fill. She studied day in, day out, she practised harder than anyone in her clan, and as she grew into a young woman, she eventually became the one who was assigned the important work — the one whose advice they asked for when the situation demanded more than routine.

Although the contemptuous looks remained the same, people suddenly began to listen to her. And more importantly: they began to trust her. So after all the struggle, after everything she had done to earn her place, how could she not take these people's trust seriously? How could she not be concerned about these occurrences and about the feelings these strange lights triggered within her?

And yet, something inside her only seemed to fuel the urge to scream — to release all the things left unsaid. With every passing minute, the feeling — once a faint, inner whisper — began to turn into a devouring force that burned through her chest. Her throat tightened with every breath, her vocal cords burned, and when she tried to swallow, the air caught and held.

Ra'ija squeezed her eyes shut in pain and clenched her hand around the gemstone on her necklace even tighter. She couldn't let them see a single crack. Strength was all she had — and all they ever saw. But no matter how hard she tried, the infinite rage simmered within her, seething like a smouldering fire. The anger engulfed the world around her, fuelled by the hunger her people endured, the pain and oppression they struggled to escape each passing day. And the glances she received everywhere she went.

With a pain-wracked face, Ra'ija opened her eyes as a neigh, followed by a gentle nudge to her face, freed her from her agony. She looked up at Le'iko, her other hand still gripping his mane like her life depended on it.

Her kuna — taller by far — looked down at her with worry in his eyes, nuzzling his head gently against hers. In all her life, Le'iko had never let her down before. He had been her companion since childhood, and from the very beginning, Nama had tried to explain that they had a special bond. And even now, he did everything he could to shield her from her own tormenting thoughts.

A small smile flitted across Ra'ija's lips as Le'iko affectionately nudged her cheek.

The lights in the sky still lingered at the edge of her vision, yet their intensity seemed to fade with each passing second. A glance over her shoulders was enough to understand why. It wasn't the spirits disappearing into the infinity of the universe as every day — it was the horizon, where the first red glow of morning was already visible.

“We have to hurry,” Ra'ija called out to the group in a hushed voice, pointing to the rock face to their right, and they quickened their pace across the hard sand, still keeping as quietly as possible. Ra'ija knew how painful it felt for others to walk this ground, for it was as spiky and sharp as a thousand tiny blades. No ordinary person could cross this desert without the right equipment. No one, except her kind.

Restless whispers began to flit through the ranks, and people clutched their belongings tighter. Ra'ija knew they only had minutes to save their people and belongings.

She couldn't remember the day ever crashing down so fast. Or rather, that she just hadn't noticed it. She had allowed herself to be distracted — by these lights, by her thoughts. And it wasn't just her. Even all the other clan leaders were far too engrossed in the miracle they had all just witnessed.

Yet *she* should have been the one to notice. *She* shouldn't have made that mistake.

The light on the horizon grew brighter and brighter, and within a few minutes, the temperature had risen unbearable. Columns of heat shimmered along the horizon, rising in invisible, wavering streams. The sand began to reflect the glare, making it almost impossible to see towards the sunrise.

“Quick!” Ra’ija shouted to the last of her tribe, as she ran toward the rock formation ahead, her footsteps quick and barely audible, bringing up the rear of the caravan alongside her. Just before the light hit the rocky ground, they reached the ledge and jumped onto the base of the rock. They ran as fast as their legs could carry them, up toward a narrow opening in the cliffside. And with one last glance back, Ra’ija saw the two suns of Veraada rising in the distance before she ducked into the dark cave.