

THE
SILVER
KINGDOM

Praise for
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‘This swoony, sparkling romantasy stole my heart.’ Mia Kuzniar, author of *Forest of Hearts*

‘A stunning, sweeping romantasy filled with electric chemistry, intrigue and witty banter that had me kicking my feet. I thoroughly enjoyed this book.’ Sara Jafari, author of *Heavensent & Hellbent*

‘An utterly gripping fantasy that we need more of; this is the kind of story you don’t want to leave ... Devastating and addictive. This is fantasy at its finest!’ Sarah Mughal Rana, *Sunday Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Dawn of the Firebird*

‘A beautifully-woven tapestry of elemental magic, post-colonial politics and forbidden love.’ Morgan Owen, author of *Gladiator, Goddess*

‘The immersive world building, captivating characters, and an intoxicating romance with *chef’s kiss* banter between the MCs meant I couldn’t put this gorgeous YA romantasy down!’ Ellis Hunter, author of *Blood Bound*

‘Suffused with rich worldbuilding, *The Silver Kingdom* had me entranced from the first page. It glitters with political intrigue, a thrilling romance and spellbinding characters. This is a must-read for romantasy readers!’ Niyla Farook, author of Indie Book Award-shortlisted *Murder for Two*

‘I haven’t been this obsessed by a book in a long time! Everything is executed to sheer perfection. I absolutely loved both the protagonists; they’re fierce, the banter is electric, and their chemistry will send shivers down your spine. I couldn’t put it down.’ Tasneem Abdur-Rashid, author of *Odd Girl Out*

‘Utterly brilliant and hits on all levels.’ Ayesha Ansari, Bookseller

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RADIYA
HAFIZA

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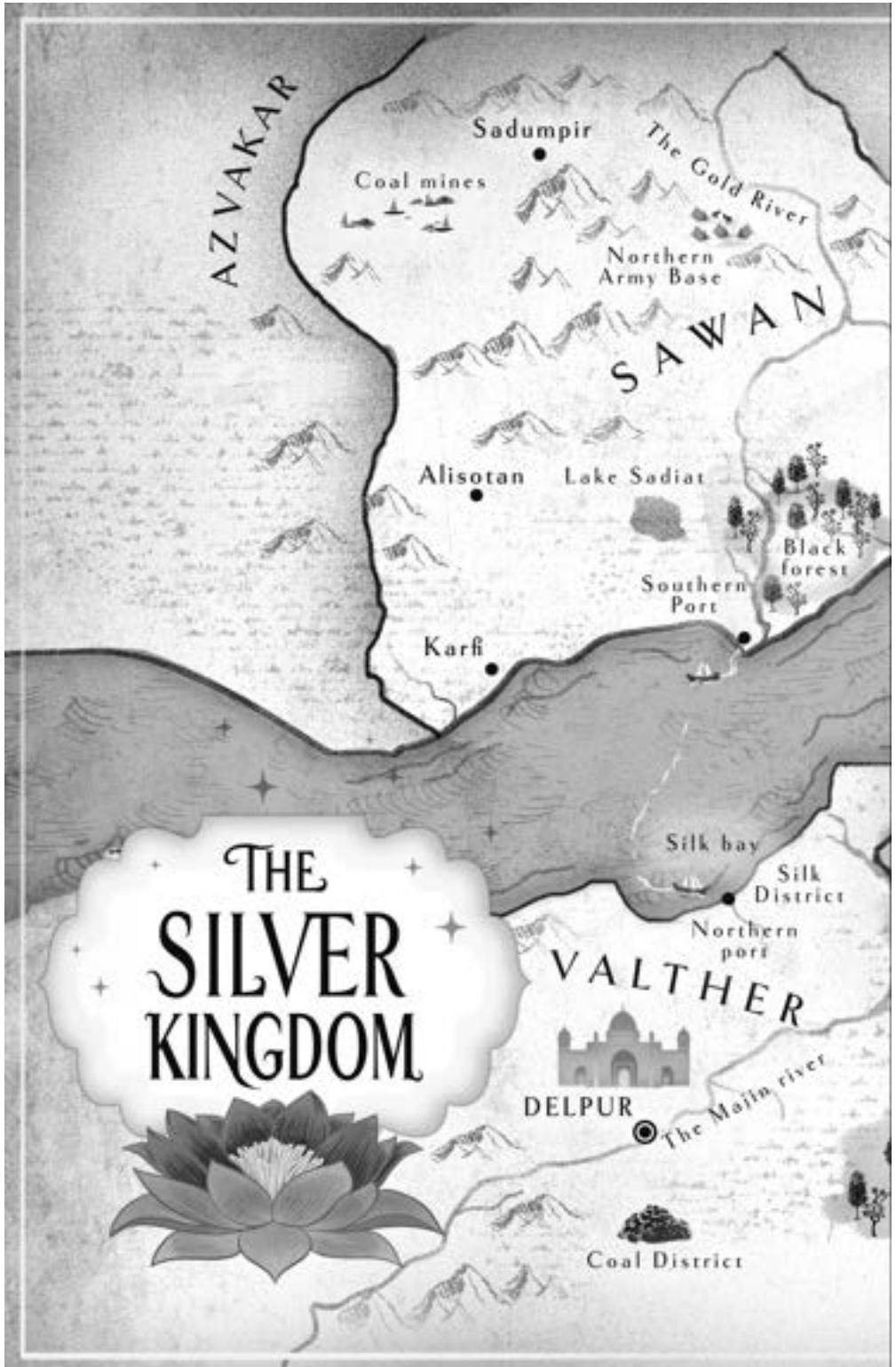
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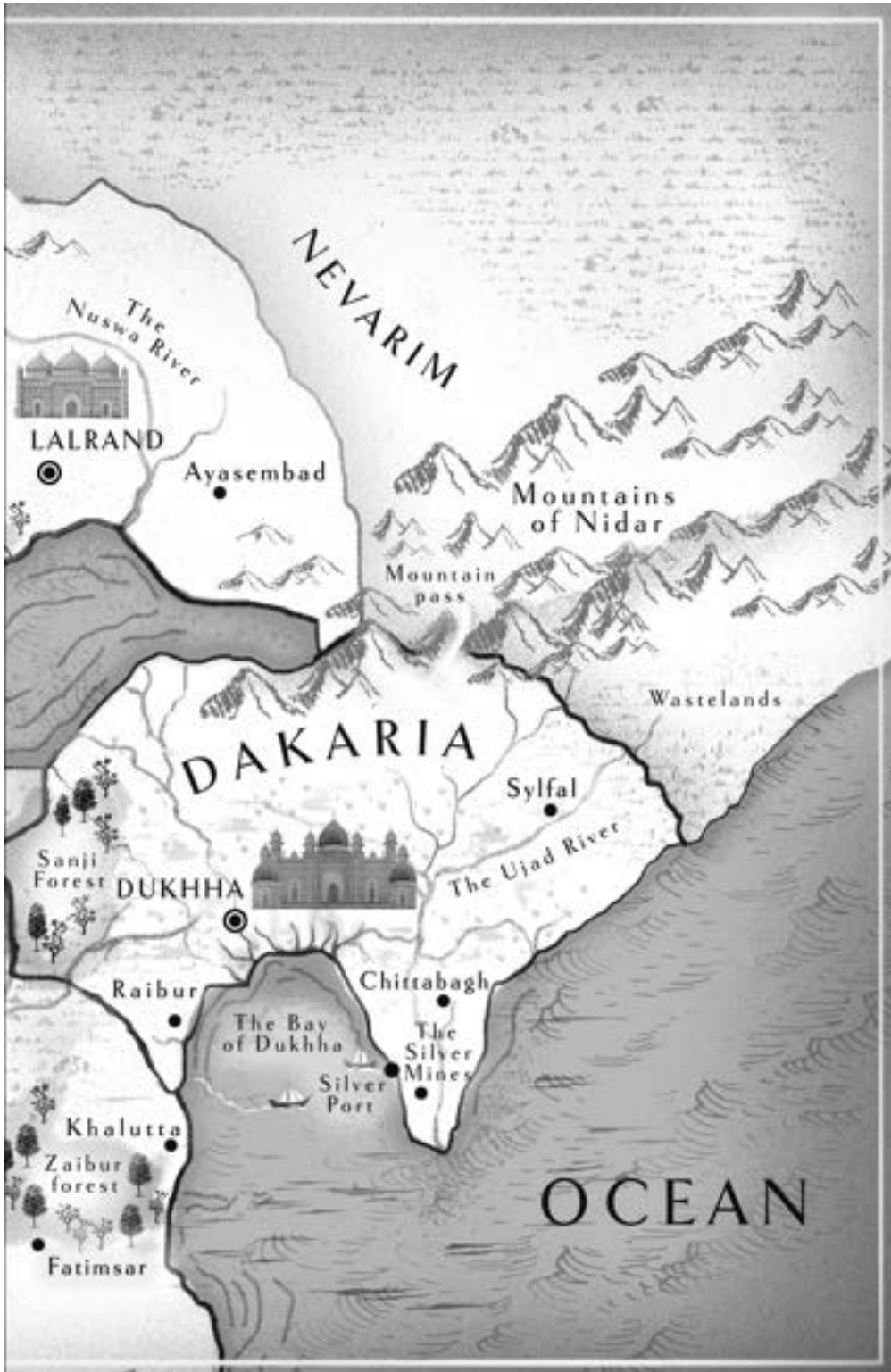
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*In loving memory of Bushra
The girl I grew up with, the sister of my heart*





‘Though parted our two loving souls combine,
For mine is all your own and yours is mine.’

—‘Layla and Majnun’, NIZAMI GANJAVI

PART I



Prologue

It was almost time.

I looked up to the stormy sky: dark purples and greys swirling above. Eighteen years ago, there had been a cosmic shift. Many had written it off as chance, or a misstep of fate.

But no more. I could feel it. Such power had a presence in the atmosphere. Change was coming.

For decades, my people had lurked in the shadows, relegated to the outskirts of society. Finally, the time was coming for us to be free. For our saviour to lead us in the darkness.

‘Captain, where do you want the silver?’ one of my men asked, carrying a large sack and sporting a bloody wound on his arm.

I looked away from the sky, across the wet deck of my ship.

‘Put it in the pit. We’ll take it back to the base for melting.’

He nodded and took the silver and dragged it down the dank steps towards the inner cabin.

I leant over the railings, watching the rabid waves crash towards the mainland, where the royal army stood aboard their ship. Soon I would have my vengeance. I was only just getting started.

1

Zayd



Even in the dark, my arrows never missed their marks. I nocked another to my bow and prepared to strike until every last pirate fell.

It was taxing, protecting the Silver Port. At night, there were raids aplenty. The last few months had been a blur as we'd held off attempts to slaughter us. Everybody wanted our silver.

The weak moon only afforded a sliver of light amidst the dark ocean, but it was better to have an element of cover than risk being seen. I ducked down as an arrow came whistling towards me and clattered onto the deck. I jumped up and fired off another arrow, focusing on the figures lining the invading ship some fifty yards away.

I let out a ragged breath and wiped the sweat off my brow.

'Second line of attack, now!' I shouted.

The soldiers around me ducked as the second flank, who had been hiding along the middle deck, rose up and set off a rain of burning arrows.

Terrified cries rang out from the enemy ship as bodies splashed into the ocean. I looked through the gap in my

ship's railing and heard frenzied shouting as the pirates took cover.

Their ship began to turn away. We continued our attack; I had to make sure they didn't come back. I waited until the pirates' ship was beyond our reach before commanding my troops to stop their onslaught.

The air was heavy with laboured breathing as the soldiers around me slowly relaxed. One came carrying a torch, the flame billowing in the wind, casting a golden glow about the ship alongside the burning arrows some of the troops still held. Three bodies lay slumped on the wooden deck. We murmured prayers for the dead as a number of us carefully took them below deck to the resident healer to shroud them for burial.

'Anas, write to their families immediately,' I said to my second-in-command.

'Right away, Your Highness,' he said with a nod, heading for the captain's cabin.

I exhaled another hard breath. A throbbing pain in my shoulder pulsed beneath the fabric of my clothes. I removed my armour and found a bleeding cut. I'd been sliced in the gap between my shoulder pads. Sighing, I found a clean cloth and stemmed the flow.

Another day, another wound. Some soldiers were given medals; I was gifted scars.

'If you give me a moment, Your Highness, I can tend to that,' Alom, the healer, said from the other side of the room. 'It looks terrible.'

'Perhaps it will scare off any potential brides,' I muttered. Alom snorted.

After Alom had patched me up, I returned to my post. I looked out to the dark sky, the smoky clouds parting to

give way to the moon. White light rippled amongst the black waves, the horizon clear of enemies. For now. The cold ocean air bit at my face, sending a chill down my spine.

I cast a glance back towards land, the shoreline just visible in the dark. Something flickered in the distance.

I squinted, trying to make out the strange orange light. The sound of hooves thundering our way filled the air. I locked and loaded an arrow before I could take another breath.

A familiar trumpet sounded. The green-and-red flags of Dakaria flapped in the wind as the royal guard neared.

‘Stand down,’ I shouted at the soldiers who had raised their weapons, lowering my own bow.

The guards approached the shoreline and dismounted. I made my way down the ship’s ladder and into a small boat where Anas was waiting. He rowed us back to land. I jumped out once we reached the shore, wading out of the cool water to meet Noor, the head of my palace guards.

He jogged forward, bowing hastily as he stopped in front of me. ‘Your Highness, I have urgent news from Her Majesty.’

‘Time to go home, is it, Noor?’ I asked, taking the scroll. I tore it open and read over the brief updates about trade and building progress. And then at the bottom:

His Royal Highness Zayd Anwar Hussayn is discharged from the Silver Port and will return post-haste due to the Sultan’s ailing health.

I looked up at Noor. ‘Ailing health?’ My insides flooded with dread.

‘I am afraid Sultan Anwar is quite unwell, Your Highness,’

Noor said, worry lining his face. ‘Perhaps we may talk more discreetly in the carriage?’

‘Let’s go,’ I barked. ‘Anas, send a messenger every twelve hours to update me,’ I instructed, striding away.

Noor pulled open the black carriage doors and I sank against the dark leather seat. I closed my eyes. It had been weeks since I had slept a full night. Every time I tried to shut my eyes, the alarm would sound, signalling a new attack. My soldiers were drained. We had lost two hundred and seventeen men over the past three months. With more forces needed around Dakaria’s borders, as well as by the sea, we were thin on the ground – despite having lowered the age of recruits to sixteen.

‘What happened to Father?’ I asked Noor as the carriage trundled away.

‘He has not recovered from the influenza, Your Highness,’ Noor said. ‘The healers say the infection has spread to his lungs.’

‘Can they not do anything?’ I demanded.

‘They are trying, Your Highness, but ...’

‘But what?’

‘The Sultan and Sultana want to hold your coronation within a matter of months. They are not sure how long the Sultan has left.’

Each word was a blow to my gut. ‘What do you mean *how long he has left*? How many healers have been consulted?’

‘A dozen or so, Your Highness.’

‘I want another dozen at the palace by morning,’ I commanded. ‘The Sultan will be cured.’ I ignored the grave look in Noor’s eyes. ‘And make sure Sayyidah Shafiya is amongst them. I believe she will be able to assist with some other matters as well.’

He looked at me quizzically before nodding.

I stared out at the darkness, grinding my teeth. *Coronation? Within months?* Dakaria was in no position to lose my father. We were only just beginning to become an equal player amongst our neighbouring states. The Sultan was respected by our neighbours' rulers, loved by our people. I would need to build these alliances all over again.

Ours was a small nation, bordered to the west by Valthar, a large country whose fabrics were sought all over the world and which boasted an abundance of natural minerals and resources for mining. Sawan was our northwestern neighbour, similar in size to Valthar, with impressive infrastructures that rivalled those of more powerful nations. They had struck gold decades ago, after the Great Revolt, and climbed out of the hole the colonialists had left us in. By comparison, Dakaria was still catching up - our tea and rice fields and vast fishing waters the main sources of export. And now our silver.

We rode through old towns by the sea - clay huts and wooden houses, aged buildings in dire need of renovation. As we travelled farther into the cities we began to see foundations were being laid for new homes. We finally had the wealth to start developing our country. The muddied lanes would be replaced by paved roads, improving transport around the kingdom so that rainfall couldn't hinder travel in the monsoon months. There was much work to do, many areas to improve, but we were on the right path thanks to the Sultan's unwavering commitment to our people. Though even he couldn't protect us from the leeches attempting to take our silver.

My eyes drooped as we neared the large moonstone palace in the centre of Dakaria, shining against the dark

night. The flags of Dakaria rustled in the wind, sitting atop the palace's high-domed turrets and minarets. I longed for my bed, instead of the thin wood-and-cotton excuses I'd been beholden to on the ship.

Our horses trundled the path alongside a trailing fountain of water that stretched from the palace gates to the central courtyard. Fond memories of trying to wrestle my younger brother into the spray flickered across my mind.

The carriage finally slowed to a stop, and I dismounted, desperate to stretch my legs. But first I needed to see my father. I headed towards his quarters.

Noor intercepted me. 'The Sultan is asleep, Your Highness. It is three in the morning.'

I sighed and changed direction, marching off towards my wing of the palace.

'Good morning, big brother!' a loud voice boomed as the door to my chambers was thrown open.

The bane of my existence - also known as my younger brother, Yunus - sauntered in, hopping over an armchair to sit down. He grabbed a paratha from the table of breakfast laid out for me in my parlour.

'Haven't you eaten already?' I griped. I was too exhausted to deal with his foolishness right now.

'You're much leaner than I am; you don't need all this food,' he said, smirking. 'My muscles, on the other hand, do.'

I snorted. 'What muscles? You've barely turned seventeen and you think you have the body of a soldier.'

Something flashed across Yunus's expression. 'Beauty, brains - some of us are just born with it all, Brother,' he said, devouring the paratha in a large bite.

‘Animal,’ I muttered, leaning back in my chair.

‘Your Highness, you look terrible,’ he said, feigning care. ‘Do they not feed you on the ship?’

‘If you had an ounce of military experience, you might understand why five course meals are scarce,’ I retorted.

Yunus’s face fell. ‘Not all of us can go and risk our lives, even if we want to.’

‘Such a difficult life you lead, Brother,’ I said dismissively. ‘Why didn’t you write to me and tell me Father was this ill?’

‘Mother made me swear I wouldn’t. She didn’t want you to leave any sooner than you had to.’

‘Still, you should have told me,’ I said. ‘How can I be Sultan if I am the last to know everything?’

‘Yes, poor you: it must be so tough to be heir to the throne,’ Yunus snapped. He swiped a bowl of vermicelli steeped in sugar and milk and downed it in one gulp. ‘Delicious. Farewell.’

I grunted in response. Yunus’s loud boots carried him away, the door slamming shut behind him.

After I had finished eating, I glanced briefly at the clock beside the window. It was almost eight. The morning sun was slowly rising, turning the skies from their dark hues into strokes of violets and blues. Father should be awake by now.

I changed out of my nightwear and put on a pair of navy trousers and khamis, strapped on my leather boots and grabbed my cloak.

Outside my door, Noor stood guard. He bowed as I strode out. ‘Good morning, Your Highness,’ he said. ‘Your mother is waiting for you—’

‘Tell her I am going to see Father first.’

‘Yes, Your Highness,’ he said, muttering something to a guard beside him, and fell into step behind me.

I headed down the corridor, basking in the comfort of being home again. I had missed being on solid ground these past few months; trading the cold, creaky ship for the palace was a welcome relief. I walked through white hallways lined with arches, their ceilings carved with silver geometric patterns that resembled a million small suns, past the endless portraits of ancient ancestors who had ruled the region before us, and made my way down the spiral staircase.

The air was mildly cold outside, a silvery sheen of moisture from the early morning rain coating the green lawns and towering oak trees that encircled the palace grounds. It was the last of the winter chill as spring encroached. I longed for blistering Dakarian summers; the sea's cold felt like it had settled into my bones. I walked past more guards into the east wing, making my way up another winding staircase to the room I sought.

A couple of servants were in the room, taking away Father's breakfast. Hakim, a grey-haired man who had grown up with Father on the palace grounds, came in carrying his medicine.

I watched them flit in and out of his room, feeding him this and that, until we were alone. When I had left for the Silver Port, Father was able to do everything by himself. It was disorienting to see him so weak now.

'Beta, do not be angry with me. Come,' my father wheezed from his bed.

He was propped up against a number of pillows, his plush bed so large that it made him seem even smaller beneath the rich velvet sheets. He had once been a mighty man - when I was a child, he had towered over me - but in a matter of weeks he had shrunk to this weakened figure.

To the people of Dakaria, he was their strong Sultan, but I had never seen my father so frail. His dark hair was streaked with more white than before, the usually neat beard around his lined, round face haggard. His brown eyes were clouded, filmy.

‘You should have called me home earlier,’ I said, attempting not to sound irate. ‘I would have come, Father.’

‘Our soldiers needed you more,’ Father said wearily. ‘No sign of any let up?’

‘None. It seems everybody wants our silver.’

‘We must do something soon: an alliance with someone to give us more soldiers.’

‘I’m working on it,’ I said, trying to be reassuring. ‘You don’t worry, Father. Just concentrate on getting better.’

Father nodded, his eyes beginning to droop again. ‘Have you had your breakfast yet, beta?’

‘Yes, abbu, I have. You can rest now. I will go to see Mother.’

‘I used to feed you when you were small,’ Father continued with a sigh. His eyes roamed over my face, as though he were seeing me through the haze of another time. ‘You were dreadfully picky. We were worried the future Sultan would never eat his vegetables.’

I grimaced. I couldn’t say much had improved on that score.

Father put his cold, wrinkled hand on top of mine. ‘I want to die knowing our kingdom is secured – that you will reign on, and your children after you.’

I bristled. ‘We *will* find a cure for whatever is ailing you. I am sending for more healers today. Clearly the ones here already are not doing their jobs.’

‘Death is calling me, beta,’ Father said, his eyes fluttering.

‘Sometimes I can see the angel of death, waiting for me. I do not have long.’

The hairs on my body stood up. ‘You are not dying,’ I said angrily, squeezing his hand back. ‘You still have many years in you yet.’

Father looked at me with a weak smile. ‘You can fool everyone else, but you can’t lie to me. You wear the truth on your face. A noble Sultan you will make.’

I was unable to meet his eyes.

Father began to snore. I looked back at him – his eyes were finally shut, and his head sagged to one side.

I gently patted his hand before withdrawing, casting a quick look around for supernatural beings, but his room was empty. Perhaps he was hallucinating in his weakened state, imagining angels and shadows.

Hakim stood outside the door with Father’s guards.

‘Look after the Sultan. I will return in the evening.’

I headed back into the main wing of the palace towards my mother’s study. The doors were opened for me, revealing a rich oak room bathed in morning light. Mother’s desk was overflowing with maps and books as she pored over papers. She looked up through her silver-rimmed reading spectacles.

‘Zayd, finally come to see your mother?’ she said, a playful smile on her oval face.

‘Good morning, Mother. Looking as radiant as ever,’ I said, dropping into the chair opposite her.

‘Charm will get you far in life, beta,’ Mother said. ‘Did you see your father?’

Something in my chest stung. I’d barely returned home but already sorrow had settled over my family.

‘You should have told me sooner.’

A shadow fell across her features. 'I know, dear, but I didn't want to worry you. You were needed at the Silver Port.'

'Noor is arranging for more healers to arrive this afternoon. There will be someone out there who can do something,' I said.

Mother looked at me sadly, folding her hands together. 'We must begin preparations, Zayd. Your father hasn't got long left. You will be Sultan soon, and you will need to produce heirs to keep the line secure.'

I balked. 'What?'

Mother took a deep breath, her olive eyes firm. 'I have found you a wife.'