

CHAPTER ONE

I sat straight up in my bed. I knew someone was coming because my two insane brothers, Jafer and Mir, were screaming bloody murder. They occupied rooms flanking mine and never failed to alert me of intruders' presences in our corridor. One could not find better guard dogs than my brothers. I'd chosen to live in the palace's old library tower just to be near them. Well, also to be near my beloved books.

I sighed and grabbed the dagger hidden under my pillow. Although I was not ranked high enough in line for the throne to pose a threat to my brothers, I still kept weapons at hand. One could never be too careful—certainly not here. In the Kapisi Palace's Cage, no prince was safe.

The *Kafes* or Cage System—which entailed locking all princes inside one section of the palace until one was crowned as the next ruler—had been put in place by my great-great-grandfather, Sultan Mudel Ban II, after his numerous sons ripped the kingdom of Telfar apart in a bloody fratricidal war. Back then, princes were spread throughout the country, each governing a province as preparation for the throne. The Ban Dynasty never believed the eldest son should automatically become Sultan.

Slinging a blue silk robe over my shoulders and with my dagger firmly in hand, I moved to the door. I slid its small window open and peered through the wooden grid set behind it. A servant stood in the corridor. He was dressed in the yellow and black silk of the Vizier's attendants, with the traditional, striped baggy pants that made them all look like giant bees.

"Prince Amir," he said, bowing to me. When he straightened, the small yellow hat precariously perched atop his head almost fell off.

"What do you want?" I asked, while scratching my short beard. "Speak!"

The servant glanced nervously at my screaming brothers' doors. "Thousand regrets for disturbing your rest, Your Highness, but a terrible thing has happened. One of your brothers has passed away and... and Master Hassan begs for your council."

I couldn't say I was shocked by the news of one of my brothers' demise. Princes died regularly in the Palace's Cage. However, the fact that Hassan, the Grand Vizier's assistant, was requesting my presence certainly surprised me. To ask a prince to leave his room in the middle of the night to see a corpse was highly unusual.

Careful, Amir, this may well be a trap. My eyes went to the mirror set in the corner's end of the corridor. Its angle gave me a view of the stairwell on the right. Its steps were empty. Yet I wasn't reassured. The Cage might have put an end to war, but it had not ended fratricide. Instead, a set of rules had been put in place. Now murder had to be sanctioned by the Grand Vizier. Now it needed a reason. A bruised honor was the one most often used. Princes, like peaches, bruised easily. *Have I offended someone lately?* Dammit, I could not recall.

I returned my attention to the servant. “Why me?” I asked with narrowed eyes. “Why my council? There are other princes in the Cage, why not ask for theirs?”

The servant swallowed hard. “Because... because of the way your brother died.” The servant’s voice became a murmur, “It’s not a normal death—not normal at all. Huh... and because of Your Highness’s knowledge of magic and its dark incantations. Everybody knows Your Highness studies these... things.”

I blew air through clenched teeth in frustration. I knew better than to waste my time trying to explain that alchemy, botany and astronomy had nothing to do with magic. These were true sciences, proven things—not superstitions. I glanced at the thousands of precious, antique books filling the walls of my chambers. The palace’s old library did hold a great many volumes concerning the dark art. Now that I was thinking of it, only the Grand Vizier owned more magic books than I did. Not that I had ever felt the urge to open one. *Magic*—I shook my head; to me it was nothing but irrational old superstitions. I didn’t need to see my brother’s corpse to know that magic wasn’t involved in his death, some evil certainly, magic—no. Yet my curiosity was stirred, and although this went against my strongest belief—that one should lay low and not attract attention to one self—I agreed to follow the servant. I had to prove my point: I had to prove that magic didn’t cause my brothers’ death—more so, I had to prove that magic didn’t exist.

Clad in a dark blue kaftan, the long overcoat worn by nobles, and armed with the sword I kept by my door—just in case of an attack—I joined the servant in the corridor. I didn’t leave right away, though. First I needed to calm down my two brothers. Moving to the door on my left, I looked through its opened grid. Mir, I noted, had hidden deep inside the darkness of his room and was back to his usual mumbling, so I left him alone and crossed the corridor to the facing room.

As I approached Jafer’s door, his hand shot out of the broken grid of his door. “Beware of the dark clouds,” he said. “Its evil is coming.”

I gripped his hand. “Don’t worry; I’ll be careful of the clouds. Now go back to bed, Jafer.”

He squeezed my hand hard. I didn’t move. I knew not to fight Jafer; it would only make him hold on longer. So I just waited for him to let go, telling him that everything would be fine, that the demons, ghosts and clouds were all gone. Like always, I had chased them all away. Sometimes I would sing to him—music helped fight his dementia—I wouldn’t do so now. I didn’t have the time and the presence of the servant bothered me. My singing might have been good enough to sooth Jafer’s nerves, but little else.

“They’re coming to kill us, aren’t they?” I heard Mir ask through his door’s grid. Contrary to Jafer, Mir knew that the only demons roaming the palace were our brothers. They were his worst fear. A fear I shared to a lesser extent.

“No, Mir,” I said. “Not tonight. Tonight you’re safe—you too, Jafer.”

Reassured, Jafer loosened his grip. “Promise you won’t stay away long.”

“I’ll be back in no time,” I promised, then left with the servant.

The palace was eerily silent at this hour of the night, especially when considering that it housed 5000 people. Built on the fringe of the Oborandi desert 300 years ago, the Kapisi Palace was now three-quarters surrounded by the sprawling city of Tulag. Only its back wall still faced the desert. Made up of dozens of buildings enclosed within high, fortified

walls, many had called the palace a town within a city. The Cage alone counted over 500 souls and had its own kitchen, baths, courtyards and stable. It was spacious. It had to be. My father, Sultan Mustafa Ban had produced over 250 sons, of those 117 managed to survive the harem's intrigues and reach adulthood, which in Telfar was fourteen. Father produced just as many daughters. My sisters, however, were less valued than we were. Kept in the harem, they served as bargaining chips to reinforce or create alliances with the rulers of other kingdoms and the nobles of ours. Although Telfar was a kingdom ruled exclusively by men, history told of many decisions influenced by clever harem favorites. And many Sultans owed their crown to their talented mothers.

We took the direction of the Cage's kitchen, traveling in near total silence. I had never seen these somber corridors so devoid of life before, as if the servants, who usually could be seen everywhere, were fleeing before us. I found it quite unsettling. When we turned into a long alley pierced by windows, a chilling breeze hit me. I stopped and looked out the nearest one. "Why did they have to build the Cage on the only side of the palace facing the desert? All we can see through these windows is either sand or one of the palace's courtyards. Is a view of the city too much to ask?"

The servant sunk upon himself, like an overly submissive dog fearing a kick from his master. "Thousand pardons, Your Highness."

I rolled my eyes. Turning back to the window, I gazed at the desert. The full moon's dim light gave the sand dunes the appearance of finely milled gold. "Tulag is said to be one of the most beautiful cities of the world. Is it true?"

"Oh, yes, Your Highness."

For a second I was jealous of this servant's freedom. How could I, a prince, live to the age of nineteen and never see anything besides the ornate walls of the Cage or the harem? This was a sin. Worse still was the knowledge that I might die without having seen the city, like so many of my brothers already had. Could I escape my brothers' traps long enough to see the crowning of the next Sultan? Would I be free after? In the Telfarian tradition the throne went to the prince who proved himself the most capable. Often he was also the most devious and ruthless, and his crowning was almost always followed by bloodshed as he rushed to eliminate his brothers before they could unite against him. So even if I lived to see the next Sultan's crowning, I would probably die soon after. My hands curled into hard fists. *No, not me. I will live, and I will see the city.* I had made that decision long ago, foregoing the throne as the goal of my life. I never cared for it anyway. It was freedom I craved. I wanted nothing else. Freedom was *my* goal.

"Prince, they're waiting," the servant said.

I shot one last glance at the full moon shining above the dunes then followed the servant. Minutes later, we reached the end of this long alley where Hassan and a small group of guards awaited us. The light of their torches made the corner glow bright amber, as though the walls themselves were on fire.

My first thought was that Hassan looked frightened. A young man in his early twenties, he hadn't grown a beard yet. Tonight, his bare cheeks lacked their usual rosy glow. Right now he seemed ill at ease in the striped pants and black tunic his position as the Grand Vizier's assistant required. Hassan was new to the job, less than a year. He got the position after the previous Vizier's assistant lost his head for failing to discover who stole a precious vase given to my father by the King of Karpel. It was certain that Hassan kept his predecessor's fate at the top of his mind, which surely added to his present fear.

However, it was his wide-opened eyes that caught my attention. They darted around the corridor as though he was expecting to see something rush out of its shadowy corners.

Finally, his eyes met mine, and he immediately bowed. “Prince Amir, I beg your pardon for disturbing your sleep. But I’m in great need of your assistance.”

I frowned. There was too much relief in Hassan’s voice. No one could be that happy to see a prince, we were not a pleasant bunch. I looked at the group of guards standing behind Hassan. The two on his left trembled so strongly they were barely able to stand.

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Enforcing the Cage’s rules is the Grand Vizier’s duty. If this is an unsanctioned death, why isn’t he here?”

“The Vizier has been called to the Summer Palace by the Sultan and won’t be back for a few days.”

“Still, why seek me and not the physicians?” I said, more than a little annoyed.

Hassan wet his lips. “Your Highness is... hmm, well-versed in abstract and complicated things.” Hassan gestured for the guards to move aside. They obeyed all too gladly in my opinion, revealing the limp body of a young man sprawled on the floor. Despite the fact that he had the fair skin and red hair of the Nordic people, his purple and gold kaftan indicated that he was one of my brothers: only a prince could afford such a sumptuous garment. *So now we’re 116!*

I sighed. His look was his downfall. Hard not to attract attention when one was so... brilliant. Being noticed meant having your potential evaluated. Never a good thing when one lived caged with so many power-thirsty brothers. To say that you didn’t want to become the next Sultan, that surviving was enough for you, was useless, even if true. For many of my brothers, only dead princes posed no threat. I counted myself lucky for being of average size, for having the dark hair and brown eyes shared by most of my siblings. Because of this I could blend easily in their midst. With its high cheekbones, square chin and short well-groomed beard, my face was one of many alike—unremarkable. I cultivated every bit of this blandness. I slumped whenever I was with shorter brothers, tried to sound dull when with dimwitted ones, and mimicked the affectations of my high-ranking brothers when near them. Even in my choice of clothes, I was careful. Blue and green were the predominant color of the palace’s walls, and therefore of my kaftans. Even my name, Amir, was common. There was at least four or five other Princes Amir still alive—a real blessing.

I gazed at my dead brother with some sadness. He was born with little chance of evading attention. I believe his name was Hamed. If my memory was right, his rank was lower than mine, seventy-eight, or something alike. *How badly did they want this boy dead that they couldn’t wait a few days for the Grand Vizier’s return? Who did you offend, brother? You obviously made a deadly enemy.*

My eyes left my dead brother to find Hassan. “I don’t see any marks on him, no blood either. Not on the ground or on his clothes—”

The guards gasped and stepped back. I stopped talking. A ray of moonlight from the nearest window had just fallen upon Hamed’s face. My brother’s skin was as gray as cold ash.

“Strangled?” I said.

Hassan shook his head. Turning to the two trembling guards I had noticed earlier, he said, “These two saw everything.” Lowering his voice to a whisper, Hassan continued. “Prince Hamed was looking well and traveling toward the two guards when suddenly he

stopped in front of one of these windows, clutched his throat and began making choking sounds.”

“*Poisoned?*” I hushed. “I cannot believe it! Poison is the weapon of women and cowards. Has one of my brothers stooped that low, Hassan?”

Hassan didn’t answer, which I thought was very prudent of him; instead he continued, “The guards rushed to Prince Hamed’s help only to be pushed back by—” leaning closer to me he whispered the last words—“pushed by some invisible cold hands.”

I blinked. I wanted to laugh but the seriousness of Hassan’s face prevented it.

“Prince Amir, these men are terrified. They say that an evil power was at play here. That’s why I called for you. I’m sure you can find a logical explanation for this bizarre event. It would reassure these guards and therefore the rest of the household.”

I was pleasantly surprised. Hassan wanted me to kill a potentially disruptive rumor, to snuff it before it turned the heads of maids, cooks and all other servants and affected their work. My opinion of this young assistant increased favorably tenfold. Nodding, I took one of the guards’ torches and moved to the nearest window. With my eyes fixed on the flame, I stepped closer to the window, then left, then back. It should be about here. *Ah, there it is.* A cold draft struck me. Goose bumps instantly covered my skin and the flame of my torch blew sideways. Gesturing toward a second window on the opposite side of the alley, I said. “I think I’ve found your cold hands. It’s the draft running between these windows.”

Unconvinced, the guards looked around uneasily, yet didn’t dare contradict a prince’s words. At that instant a violent breath of wind pushed me forward, blowing out the flame of my torch and molding my kaftan to my body as snugly as a second skin.

“Ohhh!” the guards made.

“See. It was wind. As for what killed my brother, it’s poison. I just don’t know which kind—yet.”

Sighs of relief were exuded all around and the tension in the alley eased. Seeing that things were back to normal, Hassan sent the guards to fetch a stretcher to carry the dead prince away.

I gave the torch back to one of the departing guards then kneeled beside my brother. The grayness of his skin puzzled me. His lips were blue, I noted. “This poison has strange side-effects. I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Hassan crouched beside me. “Prince Amir, now that we’re alone, I think Your Highness should... touch him.”

“What?”

“I couldn’t tell this to Your Highness in the guards’ presence. But there’s something about your brother’s death that wind and poison can’t explain. If you touch him you’ll understand.”

I studied Hassan’s features carefully. Green eyes, pale golden skin with a rosy hue, his look was typical of the inhabitants of the island of Salo. These islanders were renowned for their sense of logic. “I thought people from Salo didn’t believe in magic,” I said.

“We don’t. I didn’t...” He cringed. “I don’t know anymore.”

As we both looked at Hamed, my dead brother’s skin paled under our eyes. He was now the color of old bones, and his lips, near purple. Whatever had killed Hamed obviously wasn’t done with him. Something else was being robbed from my brother besides his life.

I went to touch his neck and struck a cold wall. Icy knives pierced my hand, traveling along my arm up to my elbow. I reared back, my fingers all crooked with pain. Wrapping my hand in my kaftan's sleeve, I tried touching my brother again. Once more the cold wall blocked me, but this time it was less solid. I could feel it giving away like half-frozen water. Grinding my teeth against the frigid vice circling my hand, I pushed with all my might. As my knuckles made contact with my brother's skin the cold wall vanished, leaving me breathless.

"You broke the spell," Hassan said. "Colors are returning to your brother's cheeks."

Although I was watching my brother's complexion return to normal, my mind refused to believe what my eyes were so clearly seeing. *This can't be. There must be some sensible explanation for this phenomenon, some logic that didn't involve magic. It has to. Yes, I'm sure it does. I'll prove it.*

"Is something wrong, Your Highness?" Hassan asked, making me realize that I was panting loudly.

I shook my head. "Not a word of this to anyone, understand? Not until we know more."

Hassan nodded vigorously.

Without another word, I rose. It was then that I caught a glimpse of a tall silhouette hiding in the shadow further down the alley. After careful scrutiny, I saw that the spy was either blond or wore a gold-colored turban. I moved slightly to the left. Ah, yes, he was blond. I remembered having seen this blond brother only twice before. I couldn't recall his name though. One sure thing, he was better at hiding than poor Hamed.

"Show yourself, brother!" I called. Just then the guards returned with the stretcher, crowding the alley and blocking my sight of the spy. They immediately began the unpleasant business of moving my brother's body. By the time they cleared the way the blond spy was gone. I approached the dark spot where the blond had hidden. There was an alcove cut in the wall, the type used to display statues or vases.

"Show yourself," I said again. No sound. Gripping my sword, I stepped inside the alcove. It was small, dark and empty. I exhaled, relieved. Confrontation never appealed to me. Not that I lacked courage, far from it. But as courage was considered a ruling quality by my murderous brothers, I tried to display as little of it as possible. When I turned around, a familiar smell touched my nose: the dry, dusty smell of old books. I sniffed the air—moldy old books. *That's odd! I thought I was the only prince who loves books.* Yet it wasn't odd enough to concern me further—after all, the palace was filled with antique decorations, and the smell could be of something else.

I was about to leave the alcove when my eyes fell upon a shiny object dangling from a wood splinter poking out of the wall. It was a gold locket hanging on a chain. I cupped it in one hand, turning it around with a flick of the finger. It was exquisitely made. Definitely not a servant's piece of jewelry. I ran my thumb on the star-shaped flowers and swirls of ribbon chased on top of the locket's cover, then flicked it open. Inside was the portrait of a very young woman, a girl on the threshold of womanhood, painted on porcelain. Her beauty took my breath away. She was splendid, a true vision of femininity, with cascading gold curls, eyes wide and warm, and a skin as velvety as a ripe peach. As I gazed upon her lovely face, my throat tightened and my hand began shaking. The force of my reaction shocked me. She wasn't the first exotic beauty I'd seen. The palace was filled with them: dancers from the eastern country of Tomel, singers from the island of Irabus, bath attendants from Erasor. My father was a great collector of exotic beauties.

His harem counted over 200 women from thirty different kingdoms. It was also why I had brothers in every skin shade imaginable. So normally I wasn't easily impressed by pretty faces. Still, the locket's beauty did impress me. She had the look of a princess, I thought. The miniature was certainly the work of a master.

I closed my fist around the locket. *Who was she?* I wondered. For all I knew she could be here, in Kapsi Palace. I watched Hamed's body being carried away by the guards. For some reason, I had the feeling that this woman was linked to my brother's death.