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books

# THESE INFINITE THREADS

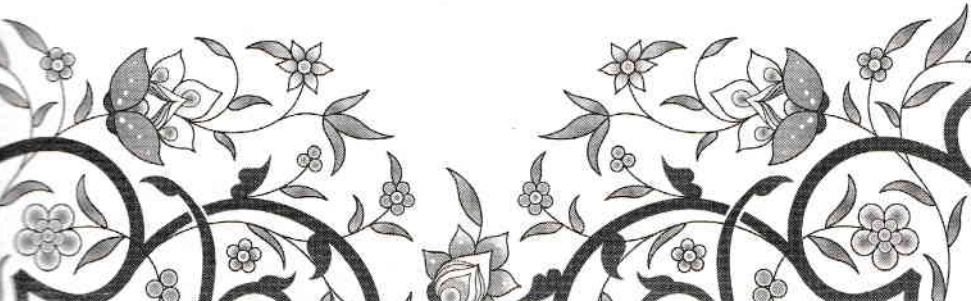
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"DON'T!" KAMRAN SHOUTED. "THE FIRE –"

The words died in his throat.

He watched Alizeh charge toward the thigh-high blaze with an astonishment so complete he sank to the ground, the cold of the stone floor seeping through the tattered silk of his trousers. Kamran had the benefit of heavy layers and jewel harnesses at least; the fire had been unable to devour him with any speed. But Alizeh – Alizeh wore little more than a whisper, so fine was the fabric of her gown.

*The fire will melt the flesh from her bones.*

He thought it even as she crossed the blaze without care, her gossamer dress inhaled in an instant by the fiery ring, an abomination magicked to life by the young Tulanian king. Cyrus, the monarch in question, stood just opposite Kamran, sword still held aloft in anticipation of a fatal blow, his hand stayed only by the sight of Alizeh, who headed toward him now. As if from outside himself Kamran watched as she batted away flames from her dress with bare hands, snuffing the fire as one might a light. He stared down at the remains of his own disintegrated garments, then at the blood dripping between his knuckles. Slowly, he looked back up at Alizeh, possessing clarity of mind enough to register that she'd emerged from the inferno unscathed, even as her gown

suffered. He blinked at the impossibility of it; he was either dreaming or deluded. He could not make sense of her.

No, he could not make sense of anything.

Alizeh, who'd nearly tripped over the king's fallen crown in her haste, had sent the weighty heirloom spinning toward Kamran as she ran. He stared at that crown now, stared at it as a sudden tremor seized him, shock and cold combining, reminding him –

His grandfather was dead.

King Zaal was supine before the world, blood pooling beneath his lifeless body in the imperfect oval of an open-mouthed scream. His grandfather had bargained with the devil to extend his life – and in the end Death had devoured the king swiftly and without dignity, the sovereign and his sins withering in unison. The limp, corded muscle of twin white snakes still soldered to the pale shoulders of a beloved king painted a scene so grotesque it inspired in Kamran a sudden impulse to heave; he braced his unsteady hands on the icy floor and wondered, with increasing horror, how many street children had been sacrificed for his grandfather's serpents.

It was an imagining too monstrous.

Kamran was ill with disillusion, with denial. He willed himself to remain calm, to marshal his thoughts, but an unidentified agony clawed at his consciousness, the pain seeming to emanate from his left arm. He wished to be someone else. He wished to turn back time. Above all he wished, without a mote of hyperbole, that Cyrus had been allowed to kill him.

The whispers of their heretofore silent audience had been growing steadily in the interlude and now built to an alarming crescendo, the din awaking in Kamran years of training and awareness. His mind sharpened against the gossip, duty piercing the fog of grief and replacing it with anger, focus –

A sudden clatter.

Kamran looked up in time to see Alizeh toss Cyrus's sword to the floor, the young man flinching as glinting steel struck marble. The foreign king stared at Alizeh with an astonishment to rival Kamran's, fear torpefying his features as she rounded on him.

"How dare you," she said. "You horrible cretin. You useless monster. How *could* you –"

"How – how did you –" Cyrus fumbled back an inch. "How did you walk through the fire like that? Why are you not – burning?"

"You despicable, wretched man," she cried. "You know *who* I am, but you don't know *what* I am?"

"No."

Alizeh struck Cyrus across the face with the force of a bludgeon, the impact so violent the young king staggered, audibly striking his head against a column.

Kamran felt the shock of it in his bones.

He knew he should rejoice in this moment – knew he should celebrate Alizeh's actions against the depraved royal – but his mind would not submit to relief, for the scene unraveling before him did not align with reason.

Cyrus appeared entirely too unnerved.

The trepidation in his eyes, his astonishment at her

approach, the blind steps he took backward as she advanced – it made no sense. Alizeh had insisted to Kamran but moments ago that she did not know the southern king; yet Cyrus, who'd more than proven his ruthlessness, displayed every sign of alarm in her presence. If they were truly strangers, why would he cower now at the unarmed advance of a girl he did not know? She'd tossed his sword to the floor, insulted him repeatedly, and slapped him in the face – and the young king who'd minutes ago buried a blade in Zaal's heart hadn't so much as lifted a hand in his own defense. He'd only stood there and stared at her and all but *allowed* her to strike him.

Almost as if he feared her.

Kamran dared not breathe as a terrifying suspicion dawned in his mind, the thought provoking in him a spasm so acute he thought his chest might crater.

From the first, Kamran had been mystified by Alizeh's transformation at the ball. In a matter of hours her injuries had miraculously healed, she'd discarded the iconic snoda of her servant's uniform, and her drab work dress had been replaced by an extravagant gown no maid could ever afford – and still he'd denied the truth, so desperate was he to absolve her of artifice. Finally, he understood.

*He had been deceived.*

His eyes flickered again to the fallen figure of his grandfather.

King Zaal had tried to warn him; he'd begged Kamran to see how Alizeh was tethered to the prophecy, to the end of Zaal's life – and only now that his grandfather was dead did

Kamran understand the magnitude of his own folly. Every foolish word he'd spoken in her defense – every stupid, childish action he'd taken to protect her –

Without warning, Cyrus laughed.

Kamran looked up; the southern king appeared pale and disordered. From where he knelt, Kamran could not see Alizeh's face; he saw only the horror in Cyrus's eyes as he looked her over. The young man had killed his own father for the throne of Tulan; he'd newly murdered King Zaal, the ruler of the greatest empire on earth; he would've killed Kamran, too, had he been granted but a moment more to accomplish the task. Now the copper-headed tyrant steadied himself slowly, blood seeping from his lips, smeared across his chin. Of all the adversaries they might've encountered, it seemed they'd both been cowed by the poor, gentle servant of Baz House.

"Damn the devil to hell," the Tullanian king said quietly. "He didn't tell me you were a Jinn."

"Who?" Alizeh demanded.

"Our mutual friend."

"Hazan?"

Kamran recoiled. He'd not been prepared for the blow of yet another betrayal, and the impact of that single word lanced through his body with a ruthlessness against which he had no defense. That she was somehow allied with Cyrus was torture enough – but that she'd gone behind his back with *Hazan*?

This was more than he could bear.

She'd playacted at fear and innocence, had outmaneuvered

him at every turn, and worst of all – *worst of all* – he had fallen, madly, for her manipulations. In all the time he'd known her, Alizeh had clung to her snoda, fighting to hide her identity even in the midst of a rainstorm; now she stood unmasked before a sea of nobles, glowering at the formidable sovereign of a neighboring nation, declaring herself to the world.

All this time, Alizeh had been making plans.

Already Kamran had been attacked by grief and anger; he struggled even then to digest the magnitude of the last moments, could hardly piece together his discordant thoughts about his grandfather – but now – Now he was expected to make sense of this? He, who prided himself on the strength of his instincts – he, who believed himself to be a capable, intuitive soldier –

“Hazan?” Cyrus laughed again, his hand trembling almost imperceptibly as he wiped blood from his mouth. “*Hazan*? Of course not *Hazan*.” Cyrus locked eyes with Kamran and said, “Pay attention, King, for it seems even your friends have betrayed you.”

Alizeh turned suddenly to face him – eyes wide with panic – and her obvious flush of guilt was all the evidence Kamran required. Just hours ago he would've sworn an oath that her desire for him was as palpable as the press of satin against his skin; he'd tasted the salt of her, had felt the exquisite shape of her body under his hands. Now he knew it had all been a lie.

*Hell.*

This was hell.



But to say that this revelation had broken his heart would be to misrepresent the truth; Kamran was not heartbroken, then, no – he was incandescent with rage.

*He would kill her.*

Any naive, lingering softness in Kamran's heart evaporated. He'd been seduced by a siren while being deceived by his own friend – and had all but spat in the face of the only person who truly cared for his well-being. King Zaal had sold himself to evil in the pursuit of Kamran's happiness – and the man was repaid with only disloyalty and treason. This dark night had been wrought by Kamran's actions alone; he understood that now. The entire Arduanian empire had been left vulnerable because he'd been frail of mind and body.

Never again.

Never again would he allow a woman to own his emotions; never again would he be made weak by such base temptations. He swore it then: this monster from the prophecy would die by his hand – he would drive a blade through her heart or die trying.

But first, Hazan.

Kamran caught the eye of a guard hovering – awaiting orders – and with a single glance he issued his first decree as king of Arduania: Hazan would hang.

Kamran experienced no victory as he watched his former minister seized, then dragged away; he felt no triumph at the sound of Hazan's feeble protests ringing out through the astonished silence of the room. No, Kamran suffered only the ascent of a terrifying madness as he forced himself upright, daring to bear weight on his injured arm in the process, and

realizing only in the excruciating effort that his legs, too, had been badly burned. His skin and clothes were sticky with blood; his head felt leaden. It was a truth he was loath to admit: that he did not know how much longer he could stand here without the aid of a surgeon. Or a Diviner.

No. The royal Diviners were dead. Slaughtered by Cyrus. Kamran's eyes squeezed shut at the reminder.

"Iblees."

His eyes flew open at the sound of her soft, traitorous voice. Kamran's heart began pounding anew, startling him with its intensity. He couldn't decide then what disturbed him more: to realize that she and Cyrus shared a *mutual friend* in the devil, or to discover that his body still wanted her, still heated at the mere sound of her voice –

She had disappeared.

Panicked, Kamran searched for her and was unsuccessful; instead he saw Cyrus, still staring intently at what could only be Alizeh, who'd a moment ago been speaking –

Without warning, she materialized.

Alizeh stood in precisely the same spot, except now she appeared hazy, oscillating in and out of focus with a dizzying consistency.

Was she doing this to him? Had she access to dark magic?

Where once was Alizeh stood now a milky blur of movement, her voice warped and waterlogged, reverberating as if she were speaking from inside a glass jar.

"Sssstttt you you sspeakthe the the vvvvil . . ."

Kamran dragged bloody hands down his face. As if each revelation weren't already more annihilating than the last

– he was now blind and deaf, too?

“Sssssendyyou you iiiinterest heeeee my my llllife?”

His injured legs failed as his mind fractured; he trembled, hands grasping at air as he sought purchase, and fell hard onto one badly burned leg. He nearly cried out in agony.

But then, a mercy –

The Tulanian king spoke, his words lucid: “Is it not obvious? He wants you to rule.”

A terrible thunder filled Kamran’s head. There was no time to rejoice in the restoration of his hearing. The demon-like monster with ice in its veins had been foretold to have formidable allies, and here was further evidence of the Diviners’ wisdom, of his grandfather’s warnings –

The devil himself was assisting her.

The crowd was growing louder now, and he could hear *them*, too, whispers having evolved into shouts and hysterics. Kamran was reminded once more that all the nobles of Ardunia were collected in this room; the highest ranking officials from across the empire had been brought together for an evening of decadence and celebration; instead, they would bear witness to the fall of the greatest empire in the world.

Kamran did not know how he would survive it.

He heard Cyrus laugh again, heard him say clearly: “A *Jinn queen* to rule the world. Oh, it’s so horribly seditious. The perfect revenge.”

Again, Kamran attempted to draw himself up. His head pounded with a vengeance, his eyesight still an uncertain thing. The room, the floor – Cyrus himself – were all perfectly