

LBRIS

We know
books

SPICE ROAD

MAIYA IBRAHIM

H

HODDER &
STOUGHTON

CHAPTER ONE

We will fight, but first we will have tea.

Not quite the motto of the Shields, but just as apt. Ordinarily I would be outside Qalia's walls with my squad, defending our lands from a never-ending onslaught of monsters: djinn, ghouls, sand serpents, and whatever other nightmare one can only conjure in the clutches of a fever dream. But even now, when we are home on mandated rest, we are facing a hard day of training—and I am certain Taha ibn Bayek of the Al-Baz clan can't wait.

Whenever we are in Qalia's barracks together, Taha's squadmates challenge me to spar him. It is a pathetic attempt at settling which of us is the better Shield, but Taha himself has never commented on the ongoing rivalry. In fact, for the two years I've known him, Taha has acted as if I don't exist, apart from the occasional snide comment. I've no doubt his squadmates will try again after the tea ceremony, but I have rejected their other challenges as a waste of my time, and I

am not about to have a change of heart, even with him coldly staring at me like that from across the tea room. If one knows his reputation, and who in Qalia doesn't—a talented archer and beastseer who can control the minds of falcons—one would be forgiven imagining a young man with a keen gaze. But Taha's eyes are troublingly placid, the washed-out green of grasslands that have seen too much sun and not enough rain.

Tea ceremony etiquette is to watch the person preparing the Spice, but I wish he would deviate from tradition just this once and stop tracking my every move. I untie the drawstring on the silk pouch of *misra* and remove ribbons of bark. They have been carefully stripped from the ancient *misra* tree standing in Qalia's Sanctuary a few buildings over, as it has done for a millennium. I have led tea ceremonies enough times that I could do it with my eyes closed, but I still marvel over what is in my hands. Magic.

The light of the overhead lanterns winks in the gold-veined bark as I hold it to my nose and inhale deeply. Every Shield in the room does the same. Perhaps they too hope to decipher what scent the *misra* possesses. Once, I thought it smelled like life itself. Another time, stars and dreams. This morning, it is as bitter as the old ash of a fire long burned down to dark. Of someone gone, but not forgotten. It reminds me of Atheer.

It has been a year since I last saw my big brother and best friend. I was kneeling like this, preparing the *misra*, but I was at home and the Spice still smelled pleasant then. He joined

me, seeking conversation with that faint, mystifying air of desperation about him.

“There are things in life greater than duty and rules, Imani,” he said.

“Like what?” I asked. His eyes took on a somber gleam, as dry as dying light reflecting off a dull blade.

“Truth,” he said quietly. “The truth is greater than everything; it is worth sacrificing everything for. And I have seen it.” He waited then, for what, I don’t know. Felt like it was all he did in those last few months before his disappearance, wait for something. But I said nothing, and after a time, he left home and did not return. I never asked him what it was, that truth. I didn’t want to know.

My fingers tremble as I place the bark in the stone mortar. I clench my fists to steady them, then take up the pestle and grind. The aroma floods the room; it wafts up to the ceiling and weaves through the rug fibers. My nose wrinkles; the back of my throat stings. I restrain a cough. My squad leader, Sara, kneels in the front row, inhaling the scent in appreciative drags. For her, the Spice is agreeable, like savannas after rain and her mama’s jasmine perfume. Not withered things and words left unsaid. Once I asked my auntie Aziza, who commands the Order of Sorcerers, why the Spice smells different from person to person, ceremony to ceremony. “For the same reason different sorcerers possess different affinities: magic is a mirror,” she answered. I wonder what this bitterness reflects about me when it is all I have smelled of late.

The tea must be taken in silence, allowing the drinker to dwell on the Great Spirit's gift and prepare to receive the magic. The two dozen Shields in the room are silent, but it is my mind that chatters defiantly, and I am strangely afraid they know it, as if my thoughts are leaking from my ears. While I scoop the Spice into the silver teapot, I think of Atheer. While the tea steeps and the others meditate, I imagine the rough wilderness he mysteriously disappeared into. Which of the elements did he succumb to in the end? The unforgiving sun, the howling sandstorms, the freezing nights? Or perhaps it is like some cruel people whisper, and it was none of those, for he took his life before any could claim it.

Taha clears his throat. I open my eyes. Everyone is watching and waiting. My ears burn; heat swims under my leather armor. I pour tea into the small cups lined on the tray and take it around the circle before settling back in the center with my own. It is customary to wait for the one leading the ceremony, and everyone follows suit only when I put the cup to my lips. Then we drink.

The hot tea goes down biting and belligerent. The magic in it is an ancient gift from the Great Spirit of the Sahir, granted to protect our people, on the promise that we will in return protect the Sahir from monsters and outsiders. For a time, misra allows its drinker to manipulate one affinity of the land that the Great Spirit presides over. For some, it is the affinity of sand, or wind. In my late brother's case, he was a skin-changer, capable of transforming into a lion. For me, it is the affinity of iron, specifically the dagger I keep on me

always. The duration that a cup of misra lasts depends on the sorcerer—the more skilled one is, the more efficient they are in the use of the magic.

“The tea will awaken in you an affinity that accords with your natural strengths,” Auntie explained in our first private magic lesson. “Think of the misra as a seamstress who takes a sheet of silk and fashions something with perfect dimensions, unique to you. At first, the silk will not look like much, but in time, it will be something new and yet entirely expected. So too will the affinity that the misra stirs in you. And if you wish to hone it, you must dedicate years of study, training, and reflection.”

I am halfway through my tea when a fast knock interrupts the quiet, and one of the arched doors to the ceremony room bursts open. Dalila, my younger sister’s best friend, stands in the frame. Her sweaty mahogany skin and pitching shoulders immediately set me on edge.

“Sorry,” she gasps, looking across the solemn gathering.

“Why are you interrupting our ceremony?” asks Taha, getting to his feet.

Dalila shrinks half a head, holding on to the brass door handle for dear life. “I’m sorry. I just . . . Imani, may I speak with you?”

I quickly drain my tea as Taha strides over to her. Like his infamous father, he is imposingly tall and muscular, and he liberally uses his frame to intimidate. It doesn’t help that he is attractive, at least outwardly, with his burnished ebony hair and hard-cut jaw—and he knows it.

“Silence is sacred to tea ritual,” he says in a pitiless voice. “Don’t you know that basic tenet, girl? Shut the door and wait outside like you were supposed to.”

“Easy, Taha. There’s no need to berate her,” I say, standing as well.

He turns and glares down his straight nose at me. “The rules apply equally to everyone, including you and your friends. Shocking, I know.”

His squadmates trade smirks; the other Shields in the room look as uncomfortable as I feel. It’s strange, I used to feel offended when Taha pretended I was invisible during lessons, given we share unique things in common. At seventeen, I am the youngest Shield in recent history, but at eighteen he is the second-youngest, and we both have family members on the Council of Al-Zahim that governs our nation. His father presides over the Council, and my auntie is Master of the Misra. Regardless of one’s opinion on *how* Taha’s father became Grand Zahim, I thought a boy from a modest clan, now the son of the most powerful man in the Sahir, would want to socialize with others in similar positions, like me. The sting only worsened once our squads began venturing out on missions. I would hear secondhand stories of the many people he heroically saved and the terrifying monsters he vanquished against impossible odds, and although I did the same, he never once acknowledged my existence. Perhaps that was a blessing in disguise.

“Dalila, why are you here?” I ask, turning my back on him. “You should be in school.”

She shifts on her feet. “Well, yes, we were *supposed* to be, but Amira . . . she’s in trouble.”

Not again. I have lost count of how many times my sister has played truant this past year, and I have dreaded the moment her truancy leads to something worse.

“Honestly, when are Imani’s siblings *not* in trouble?” remarks Feyrouz, one of Taha’s beautiful but mean-spirited squadmates.

Snickers chorus behind me. I pivot and scan their sneering faces for even a hint of shame, but I would have better luck finding guilt amongst thieves. They are too emboldened by Taha’s position as the Grand Zahim’s eldest son to fear getting in trouble for mocking a Councilmember’s niece. Happily, Sara is not cowed. She descends from a proud, wealthy clan of merchants, and there have been more than just a handful of famous warriors among their ranks.

“Word of advice, Taha, seeing as this is still very new to you: encouraging nastiness is unbecoming to someone of your station.” She snatches the tea tray off the floor as if she means to strike him with it. It isn’t necessary; her riposte seems to have sprouted a hand and slapped Taha across the cheek, how sour he looks. She nods at the door. “I can finish up, Imani. You go.”

I salute her. “Thank you. Please tell Captain Ramiz I’ll return to training as soon as I can.”

“Don’t worry about it,” interrupts Taha. “I’m sure this situation will be kept hush-hush the way you’re used to.”

My pulse stutters. The other Shields frown, several exchanging confused glances.

“What are you talking about?” Sara asks.

I cut Taha the most murderous look I can muster, hoping he finds in it a promise to shut his mouth if he is not up to the task.

He calmly stares back at me. “Oh, it’s nothing. Right, Imani?”

I can hardly believe it. The first substantial thing Taha has said to me in two years, and he makes it about my brother. After Atheer disappeared, it was discovered he had been stealing misra from the Sanctuary, a telltale sign of magical obsession. By a majority, the Council determined to keep the matter secret to protect my clan’s reputation. Judging by how chafed Taha is about it, I doubt his father was pleased with the verdict. But this is neither the time nor the place to address him.

“Yes, nothing,” I mutter as I shepherd Dalila out and close the door behind us. The lightness I should have felt escaping his intimidating presence is swiftly substituted with dread. “What happened to Amira?” I ask.

Dalila breaks into a jog down the sandstone corridor. “We were horse-riding outside the walls, and when we stopped for a break, her horse—your brother’s horse, I mean—he snapped his tether and bolted.”

My chest twinges at the second abrupt mention of Atheer this morning. “You mean Raad, the black stallion?”

She nods. We descend the ceremony hall’s main spiral stairwell and cross the shadowy, lantern-lit vestibule,

enveloped in the clashing scents of burning incense and the tea ceremonies happening upstairs. The sunny quadrangle outside is wall-to-wall with Shields grouped around their sparring squadmates, their stern-faced seniors watching on and barking advice. Magic fills the air alongside the strident quarrel of swords—in the middle of the large group before us, a Shield shoots a ball of fire from his palms, but the onrushing flames are smothered by his opponent manipulating a cyclonic gust of wind.

“Amira sneaks him away from your place whenever we go riding,” Dalila breathlessly explains as I carefully navigate her past a surge of superheated air. “He’s always been a little unruly, but today was something else. You’d think a devil was in the saddle caning him! When he started for the Forbidden Wastes—”

My eyes bug. “The *Forbidden Wastes*?”

“Hey, I *told* her to let him go, I warned her of the evil things living in there, but she refused to listen.”

“Of course she did.” I bite my tongue before I curse my sister in front of my fellow Shields. It was months of hurtful speculation after Atheer died. The last thing I need is people realizing Amira is on a wayward path of her own and deeming it a worthy topic of conversation.

I signal the smoking stable hand to fetch my horse. “So you let her go on her own?” I ask, turning back to Dalila.

“*Let* her? No, Amira almost killed me shoving me out of the saddle when I refused to go any further. She stole my horse!”