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PART I

THE CITADEL



CHAPTER I

*We died in blood, their guns in our hands,
Our treasures chipped away like earth.
We died in homes, no longer our lands,
But oh, what did they birth?*

—SONGS OF ASTOLA, COLLECTED AND COMPILED BY
MAHIRA NAZIR

YASEEMA

The knock at the door was likely for my cousin, but she was in no shape to go gravedigging tonight.

For a moment my heart lurched to my throat, and I scrambled to pack up the scrolls and books I had littered across the kitchen table, betraying me. My mother's two thick gold bangles lay on the table, and I wrapped them up in her old dupatta, my fingers resting on them for a moment in reverence, before sticking the bangles back in the flour tin and hiding them from sight. There was a small chance it was the Citadel patrols conducting an unplanned raid, and they certainly couldn't find out what I had been searching for in the darkest hours of the night.

But it wasn't the Citadel patrols.

As I suspected, I opened the door to find Bair, his sunken eyes staring darkly at me, the rusted shovel slung over a shoulder that didn't look as if it could support the weight.

"Safiyya can't dig tonight," I said, adjusting the spectacles on my nose to peer through the darkness at him, wanting to usher him away as quickly as possible.

There was a limited amount of time to hunt for the key to unlock the hidden vault, and he was cutting into it.

Bair's face didn't change at my abrupt words, but his body swayed slightly as if he were about to faint. My stomach gave a twist. The darkness under his eyes had increased since I'd last seen him, and he had a slight rasp in his breath that spoke of more than just illness.

Exhaustion. Malnourishment. Desperation.

"Have you eaten?" I asked, despite everything in my body screaming at me to get rid of him. I couldn't afford this type of treason as well. And I couldn't afford the time it would waste to do it.

Bair shook his head, his eyes darting around the kitchen as if it was a trick. As if his gaze could ask, *what would I have eaten?*

I glanced behind me to make sure my papers and books were safely tucked away, then met his eyes once more.

That dark, desperate stare broke me.

"Come." I beckoned him inside, chewing my lip.

If the Citadel found out that Bair and Safiyya were burying our dead, contrary to the Citadel's edicts that prevented us from doing so, we'd have patrols on our doorstep in an hour. The Citadel—and by extension, the Angrezian Empire—viewed Astolan attempts to follow our traditional customs as both backward and rebellious. If we didn't bury those who had died, the Citadel would cremate them, which meant they would never get their proper funeral rites. And they would never get a chance to cross over into the afterlife.

If Bair and Safiyya got caught, they'd likely be executed.

The Citadel would then have an excuse to search our tiny house in Ginshal Village at the edge of the mango orchard and would discover more than just the treason of going against the antiburial edicts. They'd discover my research, the maps to other lost fae relics I was searching for, and my mother's bangles.

They'd find an entire revolution.

But Safiyya could barely lift her head from fever, and Bair couldn't bury the bodies on his own. Not when he looked like he'd blow over with a strong wind.

And given that, he needed to be fed before anything else.

Nani would complain at giving away a portion of the small ration I

received from my job, but if Bair died on our kitchen floor, I'd have to bury him too.

Besides, I was one of the few in the village that received the extra rations from the Citadel, due to my work there. And I was one of the few Astolans who was even allowed to work for them.

I spooned a bowl of too-thin lentils into a chipped bowl and handed him a flat piece of bread dusted with mustard seeds to accompany it. Although it wasn't much, Bair stared down at the offering as if it were a viceroy's feast. Looking away as he devoured the soup, the familiar buried anger rose in my blood at seeing how starved he was.

"Thank you, Haz Yaseema," he said between hurried bites, not even pausing to consider if he should call me by the honorific.

I stiffened. "It's just Yaseema, Bair. I've known you since we were both babes."

He nodded, but didn't look up at me when I corrected him.

After a few spoons, his hands no longer shook. I stepped into the hall, my feet pressing into the date palm mat. Pausing before Safiyya's door, I let out an exhale before cracking it open.

"Safiyya," I whispered, my voice soft in the darkness. She was a small mound on the bed, her black hair strewn about the pillow looking almost as wild as mine. The hoarse bark of a cough answered me, so rough it hurt my chest to listen to it.

There was no way she could go out sounding like that. I'd already spoon-fed her crushed black cardamom seeds in honey and made her a very weak kahwah tea with the last of the cinnamon and ginger, but she needed medicine, something that was in short supply to us.

She certainly couldn't slip into the night with Bair, illegally bury bodies as our funeral rites demanded, and then run back to our house without attracting attention.

Something heavy sat in my chest at the thought of telling Bair that Safiyya couldn't help him help the villagers, who desperately wanted to bury their dead having to burn them instead.

Could I do her job?

Should I?

I had been searching for the key to the fae vault that might change everything for Astola, that would bring the magic we once had back to us. Getting caught burying bodies against the new edicts might jeopardize that.

This might be too foolish of a risk.

It was one thing to ignore what Safiyya did when she left the house in the middle of the night, to pretend she wasn't actively engaging in open rebellion every time she slung the shovel over her shoulder, but it was another thing to do the same.

It was so *public*.

Everything I did was done alone and was relatively untraceable.

But *everyone* in our village knew what she was up to at night. Her acts against the Citadel were smaller than mine, but no less deadly.

It isn't treason if I haven't pledged loyalty to them.

It isn't treason if they invaded.

Safiyya's sharp retort filled my mind, what she *would* have said had I run the options by her.

But for now, moonlight spilled across Safiyya's supine form on the bed, and I could make out the sheen of sweat on her forehead. She coughed again, and her entire body shook.

"Safiyya," I said softly into the room. "Bair's here."

"Hold on," she croaked, trying to rouse herself. "I'm coming."

"You shouldn't be going out. Not when you're so ill. Leave it for tonight. The dead will keep."

A heavy, wet cough wracked her body, and I winced.

"No, I have to go with him. It's the only time we have. Soon the Citadel patrols will find the body and we won't be able to bury him anymore." It was painful to listen to her voice, and even worse to watch her struggle to rise from the bed.

It's the only time we have.

I felt the same every night. Poring over the ancient texts, trying to find clues to a key I didn't know if I'd ever locate. It was the last piece of the puzzle I needed to be able to cross the wall into the fae world.

And from there I could finally find the crown that could take down

the wall completely, bring the magic back to the earth, and stop the famine decimating our people.

Safiyya came to a seated position and then swayed, as if she were about to pass out.

My breath caught in my chest, and I clenched my hands tight at my side. I knew what I had to do, even if I didn't want to. If I didn't, I'd just be pouring over ancient texts and making myself delirious looking for the one relic I'd been searching for since my mother had left. Without a way into the vault I'd found, I had no hope of recovering the fae Queen's bracelet before the Citadel did. How many hours had I devoted to searching for a key to an ancient fae vault, only to come up empty-handed? And here my cousin was, about to pass out on the wooden floor of her room.

In all the months I'd been looking, I'd never come any closer to unlocking the vault door, and I certainly wouldn't be able to now, hours before the Citadel was planning to excavate.

My eyes fluttered closed for a moment, my decision easing the heaviness from my shoulders and solidifying my resolve. "I'll do it with him."

She froze at my words as she struggled to stand, and blinked at me in the scant light. "You will? But you hate me doing this. You hate me doing anything that goes against the Citadel."

I frowned, but she couldn't see my face in the darkness of the doorway. To everyone else, I was a model scholar, working in the Citadel archives and helping them unearth the magical objects that gave Astola its life magic.

Even Safiyya didn't know the extent of my treason.

She didn't know about my hunts for fae relics at night. Or the times when I'd even managed to steal them out from underneath the nose of the Citadel.

Because every single fae object removed from our land was a death sentence for us. The life magic imbued in every crown, necklace, goblet, ring, and all the other relics hidden in the earth kept our crops alive and our rivers flowing. And every time the Citadel dug one up and shipped it off to the Empress, more people died.

Everything depended on the lie that I embodied by day—I was a scholar for the Citadel, helping them find the ancient magical relics.

If it ever got out that I betrayed them by stealing the fae objects instead, both Safiyya and Nani would suffer the consequences of such duplicity.

They might still.

"Yes, I do," I said finally. "I'm worried about you whenever you go out, of course. And I'd rather you didn't try to bury the dead when the Citadel has specifically declared that illegal. But you can't go, not like this. So that leaves me."

Safiyya chewed on the side of her lip, her eyes glassy. She didn't want to give in, I could tell by the look on her face.

I smiled, despite myself. She'd be defying the Citadel on her deathbed, which was, fortunately, not today.

"Safiyya," I said in a cajoling way, "I promise I won't make a mess of it. But Bair needs someone who isn't going to keel over the moment they try to lift a body. I'll go. I'll wear your cloak so no one will even know it's me."

That seemed to settle it for her, and she collapsed back into the pillows on her bed. "Thanks, Yas," she murmured, her eyes fluttering closed, letting sleep claim her once more.

I closed the door and turned back to Bair, resignation on my face. "I'm coming with you tonight instead."

He lifted his gaze from the last few lentils in the bowl, his jaw falling slack. "The Citadel won't like that."

"That's an understatement," I snapped. "With hope they'll never find out. Besides, you can't do this on your own." My tone was too harsh in the faint light of the kitchen, and I exhaled, measuring my temper. It wasn't Bair's fault that Safiyya was sick. And he didn't know I'd had other plans for this night; no one did.

And it wasn't any of our faults that we were now forced to bury bodies illegally under the cover of night.

I grabbed Safiyya's dark cloak from the hook beside the door. This needed to be done, and as much as I didn't want to thwart the Citadel and give them another reason to reconsider my loyalties, to shine the light of suspicion on me and unveil my other secrets, I would do it.

If I didn't, the Citadel would burn the bodies, and their spirits would be left wandering.

Like my father's.

At least with these villagers we could do the proper burial rites and release their spirits into the afterlife.

Safiyya's cloak was hefty, bought during a winter when the Citadel had made a rare discovery. I had done the research in my position as a scholar, hoping to get to the fae relic first. Rage burned inside me when I'd been unable to steal the delicate gold tikka that had been vital for the rice fields in our area. When the tikka had been discovered by the Citadel and shipped off to the Empress, the lush fields had dried up over the next few months, the fae life magic gone.

I wanted to scream when they congratulated us and gave bonuses to the scholar department. The Empire didn't seem to realize the damage they did to Astola with every stolen fae artifact.

Or maybe they just didn't care.

"Hide your hair." Bair's voice was rough and determined.

I glanced up at him and a flush stained his cheeks, making him look healthier than he had in years. "It's distinctive," he muttered as he waved his hand in my general direction, shifting uncomfortably on his feet and avoiding my eyes.

He was right, my hair was a wild mane next to Safiyya's sleek tresses.

My fingers brushed my curls, trying to tame them under my hood. I grimaced, pushing them under the heavy fabric and having little luck. My hair wouldn't be controlled, and I ended up braiding the thick mass over my shoulder instead and tucking it into my cloak.

Because I certainly didn't want to be recognized this night.



CHAPTER 2

I killed someone today.

And I don't regret it.

What is regret for one death, when I'm standing atop a massacre?

—LETTER FROM KIYAN TO HIS FAMILY, UNSENT

KIYAN

It's got to be here.

I'd torn up the entire room, opened all the books, emptied out every drawer, and still the map eluded me. Why did they have to hide it so well that even their own family couldn't unearth it? I raked my hand through my hair, leaning back in the armchair of the tiny forgotten library of the palace. If the map to Queen Azari's vault wasn't here, I didn't know where it would be.

And if the Viceroy got to the ancient Queen's crown before I did, our entire Court would be decimated.

I cast my gaze out of the window, toward the towering Mountain in the distance.

Tirich Mir. The Mountain that loomed over the River Court, reminding us of what we had lost. The Mountain with a hidden door and a hidden royal family trapped in a Golden palace waiting to be found.

"Aren't you supposed to be tracking down rebels, boy? You're not being a very good hunting dog right now, despite your reputation."

I jolted upright, tearing my eyes away from Tirich Mir, as General Faisal slinked into the room, picking up a piece of paper and attempting to read it before he furrowed his brow and tossed it aside.

My gaze flickered to the letter scrawled with the language of the Salt Court, a missive from one of my soldiers at the front line. Faisal likely didn't even know how to read.

I snorted to myself, then masked my amusement. "What do you want, Faisal?"

"So touchy. You should be overjoyed I'm back." He walked around the chair toward me and then stopped, leaning against the wooden desk, his face expectant, daring me to ask why he was here instead of fighting for Salt in the war against the other peri Courts.

I narrowed my eyes, giving in to his goading. "And why is that?"

"Because you now have help executing all those rebels you once called friends."

My fingers pressed so hard into the wood I was surprised it didn't crack in half.

But I didn't react, keeping my face a smooth mask. Everything depended on me not reacting.

Instead, I stood, slowly, a calculated smile curving my lips. I planted my hands on the desk and leaned forward as though I hadn't a care in the world.

My words were low and quiet. "There's whispers the rebels are trying to bring back the royal family."

All the color leached from the general's face, and I almost laughed. Behind his monstrous exterior, he hadn't the strength nor power to go up against the might of the River Court at full capacity, and he knew it.

I tilted my head, crossing my arms over my chest. "I'm trying to find their source and if there's any truth to the rumors. The last thing you need is for the royal family to escape from Tirich Mir and wreak havoc on the carefully preserved *peace* you've crafted." My words fell light and mocking—on the edge of what I could reasonably get away with.

"That's . . . not possible." He took half a step back, panic lacing his tone. "They're trapped in the cursed palace by dead Queen Azari's magic. If there was any way to find and unlock the door to the Golden Palace, the Viceroy would have found it and killed them."

I nodded, keeping my face blank. "And that's exactly what we're looking for. If the rebels have the ability to bring the royal family back, we want to know." My voice was solemn, even though my heart was hammering so loud in my chest it felt as if it were going to burst free.

So that I can get to them first.

A familiar longing settled in my stomach at the thought of my family finally being released from the Golden Palace inside Tirich Mir mountain. At the thought of us taking it all back.

At no longer having to hunt and execute members of my own Court.

"It's impossible," the general said again, shaking his head, the color still not returning to his face. "The curse on Tirich Mir is as impenetrable as the River wall to the human lands."

"Nothing is impenetrable," I muttered under my breath. The same thing I'd been telling myself all these years.

Nothing is impenetrable.

I walked past the general, but his voice stopped me, his demeanor changing back from acute fear to his usual smug vileness.

"I almost forgot to tell you. You're needed in the dungeons." A smile slithered through his voice, and I paused, my stomach dropping.

Faisal only experienced joy at the expense of other's pain.

That meant whatever was in the dungeons wasn't good.

My eyes slid to the pulse at his throat, thinking how easy it would be to use my magic to command a thorn from the roses on the desk to slash his throat clean across.

Death by flower. Fitting for such a man.

"Why? There are no new prisoners down there." I knew every single one, and had a plan of escape for them all.

His greasy smile returned in full force. "We've caught more of your rebels."

* * *

I wove through the halls of the River Palace, keeping my footsteps brisk but measured. The general followed behind, huffing to keep up as I barreled toward the dungeon.

There was no way he'd actually caught a rebel, not with the safeguards I'd put in place to prevent that from happening. The members of my guard were all loyal to me, and when it came to it, loyal to the Court of River. They would never allow a true member of the Red Jasmine Insurgence to slip into the hands of the Salt soldiers. I'd made sure of it.

But when I arrived at the dungeon, I stopped short.

Two boys were on their knees on the stone floor, their heads bowed. They weren't in cells with the other prisoners, but hands tied behind their back in the main room. A small window in the corner of the dungeon allowed the afternoon light to illuminate the tears on their cheeks, the blood on their mouths.

They were no older than thirteen, their limbs too big for their bodies, not yet properly grown into their skin. One had longish hair, cropped at his nape, the other a shorn head, as though he'd scraped it over with a shaving blade, the bumpy shape of his skull giving him an eerie look. Cuts and bruises marred their hands and necks, evidence that they'd already been tortured.

One was struggling to remain upright, shaking against the pain of his wounds.

The general entered the dungeons behind me and leaned against the entrance door.

I breathed through my nose and curled my hands into fists at my sides, anger heating my blood.

"Who did this?" My voice was low and violent.

"I did," the general replied, picking his teeth with his nails. "They were caught by a Salt patrol trying to drum up support for the rebel cause. They needed a little roughing up, but I'll still leave the real torture for the Viceroy." A laugh tainted his words, and I nearly bared my teeth at him.

"They're *boys*," I said dismissively. "They know nothing of the rebels."

"Weren't you just a boy when you decided to join the Viceroy? Children can still fight. They still commit treason, can still attack our troops. Don't be so soft, dog."

I didn't bother to spare him a glance. "The Viceroy entrusted me to deal with the rebels. Surely you have better things to deal with, given Salt is actively fighting wars with every other peri Court right now." I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to calm the fury tainting my voice.

If I could, I'd rip the general's head from his body and dump him in the River.

If killing him meant I wouldn't damn every other peri in my Court, he would have been dead years ago.

"We've had a few victories of late," Faisal said with a smug grin, his

voice bouncing off the walls of the stone dungeon. "Nothing like the way the Court of River folded, though. You can't fight Salt with water," he said, the air between us thick with tension.

I flinched at the words, the mantra often repeated by the soldiers of the Court of Salt.

His teeth shone in the flickering torchlight, and I was reminded of the day they'd come, remembered the heel of his boot on my father's face as the Viceroy had laughed. Right before they'd slit his throat. *Run, Kiyan. Run.*

My father's last words to me before they'd taken him. Before they'd cursed him, drained his magic, his youth, his memories, his ability to form language and know who I was.

And coward that I was, I had listened to him, and I had run.

"Besides, I felt the need to bloody my own hands today." Faisal flexed his fingers out in front of him, bringing me back to the River Palace dungeon.

I had run, but I hadn't gotten very far.

My own fists balled tightly at my side. I'd sooner cut his hands off than let him touch these boys again. But this was about more than them. It was about their families, anyone who knew them. He'd keep them alive with torture until they turned in their own sister, brother, grandmother. It was how they rationalized their murder of us.

We were the barbaric threat, and they the civilized peacekeepers.

I looked at the bloodied boys in front of me, evidence of the Salt Court's *civilization*.

"Nevertheless, if they know anything about the Red Jasmine, I will be the one to find it out," I gritted out through clenched teeth, trying to maintain my composure.

"Really? Good. I'm in the mood to watch."

"I won't be doing the kind of torturing you like," I reasoned with a grim smile.

He raised a brow at me in challenge. "I had assumed not. Not when the Viceroy is so *particularly* good at it. He'll purge their minds before they can call for their mother."

Something curdled in my stomach at his mention of Reza again. The Viceroy wasn't due back for a few weeks yet and I didn't want him

involved in any hunt for the rebels. Better for him to be kept away defending the Empire of the Court of Salt.

But these boys wouldn't last that long under Faisal's torture.

The general pushed away from the door, striding from the dungeon. "Just don't be soft on them—if they are old enough to fight, they are old enough to bear the punishment of betrayal. No one in River is really innocent anyway. You're all guilty by birth."

My blood boiled, a river of fire inside my veins, but still I pressed my hands to my sides and didn't look toward him. He could needle me all he liked; he'd never get a reaction.

I waited until he left, until the Salt soldiers took their leave at my nod, until only my personal guard remained. I glanced over at them, and they turned around, their backs facing us.

And then it was just me and the two children unfortunate enough to be caught by the wrong side at the wrong time, in a Court that was no longer theirs.

I knelt down in front of them, the cold of the dungeon permeating my trousers.

The boy with the longer hair kept his eyes downcast, but the other met my gaze, defiance flashing across his face.

Regret sank into my stomach at seeing it there.

The general had seen them, tortured them. There was no helping them escape now, and not when it would endanger others by leaving them alive. The only thing I could wish for them was a quick end.

Magic rose at my fingers, the dirt under the stone listening to my call. A small green vine rose from the soil, uncurling a thorn at the edge, sharp and deadly. It started as a sapling, but then grew to a thick rope, winding around the bars of the cell nearby.

"I'm sorry," I said to the defiant boy. "But you don't want to be alive for what he'll do to you."

The thorn pierced his heart before he could respond, slicing neatly through the center of his chest. He collapsed against me when the vine withdrew, and I bowed my head onto his shoulder.

I didn't weep, because all my tears had turned to fire.