ALL THIS TWISTED GLORY

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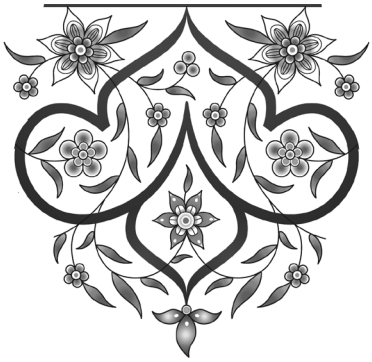
For Ransom

"But, my lady, I have sworn an oath to the moon to paint the earth crimson with his blood."

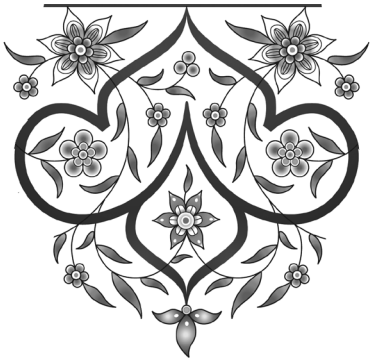
– Abolghasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*



"Speak your name and tell me, who shall cry over your headless body?"

"You will not last long enough to benefit from knowing my name. But if you must know, my mother named me 'Your Death.'"

– Abolghasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh*



PART ONE

IN THE BEGINNING

در آغاز

THE HEM OF HIS INKY cloak scissored through tall grass as he moved, his frantic pace inciting small riots of sound that seemed to scream between his ears with every footfall. Hands of heat grasped at him, his heavy attire stifling. Cyrus of Nara could feel his heart clamoring in his chest, panic breeding panic as he fought the impulse to run. He felt much like rain in search of a river, trying in vain to orient home. Occasionally he stiffened – head turning in sharp, birdlike movements, breath catching as if he'd been startled by a ghost.

No. Not a ghost.

Far worse.

It was unproductive to panic, he reminded himself. There was no benefit to losing one's mind. If there were, Cyrus would've happily mislaid his mind at the palace, where it might've lived forever with his father, the king, and the surfeit of oppressions the older man had earlier laid at his feet. Instead, the young prince had done the more reasonable thing in a crisis and promptly retched into a nearby planter.

Now Cyrus took a shaky breath.

He forced himself to slow down, to assemble his thoughts. The overgrown lane was perforated by gopher holes camouflaged by weeds and wildflowers; he'd twisted

an ankle too many times along this path, and no matter his desperation now, he could not afford to be injured.

The route he traveled was marked by the bones of a deserted train track, these origins all but invisible save two parallel beams of steel corroding in the expanse, the drama of so much floral anarchy ablaze around him. Among other creatures, thick neon snakes were known to doze in the warm grass, their appetites easily awoken. How many times in his youth Cyrus had limped onward in agony from here, poison brimming in his blood, he'd lost count. As a child, he'd found such heart-pounding adventures exciting; he'd learned over time how to catch a serpent by the throat with a flick of his wrist, how to uncurl smoke from his fingers and send it slithering into the distance. He'd once loved stomping through these wilds: challenging trees to duel, digging for treasures he'd buried himself. Each caper had exposed a new challenge, a new beast, a new agony to conquer. The trek was now nothing more than an essential commute – and nothing short of devastating.

Life, he feared, would never be the same.

His heart thundered harder as he approached the mouth of an obsolete train tunnel, its crumbling interior choked by a tapestry of climbing vines, the scent of life so fragrant it chafed the mind. Blue-winged birds and shafts of brilliant sun stole through fissures in the rotted structure, drowsy blooms unfurling in this gloss of light, dust motes suspended and glittering. The tunnel was a portal to another world – one in which, once upon a time, he'd intended to live forever.

A green locust latched onto the young man's shoulder as

he entered the underpass, the contrast of bright on black like a shriek in the void. Cyrus pulled his cape more tightly about his body as he moved, something akin to grief webbing between his ribs.

In the narrowing distance, the sight of so much green spiraled into a blitz of white. A thicket of waist-high clouds rose up from the ground, and he traversed this odd stretch with care, for the experience was not unlike wading through frost. It was just as his legs began to freeze that the cloud path thinned beneath his feet, and Cyrus suppressed a shiver.

A palpable veil of magic hung always above the many acres encircling the Diviners Quarters in Tulan, shrouding the central temple and its many outbuildings. There were few indeed who knew the old train tunnel ran perpendicular to this ancient site, and fewer still who were granted permission to enter from this path.

The Tulanian prince had been three years old the first time he'd visited these hallowed grounds. From birth he'd been a frustrated child: he'd cried easily, screamed freely, and though he knew himself capable of speech, he'd been uninterested in the performance. The day his nursemaid had lovingly stroked his head and said he was *quite beautiful for an idiot*, the child had thrown a wooden block at her face. Only when the woman responded in fury did Cyrus remember that violence was frowned upon, and as she rounded on him, he'd bolted for an open window, registering the nanny's horrified shriek only as he tumbled out the other side like a potato. He'd bounced three times off the hip of the fatally steep roof before plummeting to the ground, where he'd

landed with a final, unexpected bounce.

The boy had badly scraped his hands and knees; a bruise blossomed along the back of one arm and part of his cheek. Still, he'd not cried. Like a fern uncurling, Cyrus had risen slowly and with surprise, pushing copper locks out of his face with small, dirty hands, only to discover himself at the center of a halo.

Never before had he seen Diviners up close.

They'd stared down at him, faces obscured, black cloaks so dark they seemed to leave holes in the world.

There you are, little one, he'd heard someone say.

The child had rubbed his head in wonder, marveling that they'd managed to put the voice inside his mind. It was only then that Cyrus laughed, that he spoke aloud his first words with delight.

"That was magic," he'd said.

The nanny was still screaming as she ran out into the gardens, half the palace staff at her heels, all wild with hysteria. Her services, she'd later discover, would no longer be required.

It was that fateful day Cyrus had decided who he wanted to be, and every year the conviction had rooted more deeply inside him. The king and queen had felt this a fortuitous discovery, for the boy had not been born to ascend the throne and would require some lesser, dignified preoccupation in life.

Cyrus of Nara was the spare, of course; never the heir.

It was his older brother who'd shadowed their father from

infancy. It was his older brother who'd prepared for a life of decadence and power.

Cyrus, on the other hand, had spent every free hour in his youth tearing down the secret train tunnel with abandon, flowers blooming in his hair as he hurtled himself through the clouds and into the arms of the Diviners. Over the years, he'd devoted himself to the study of divination, forsaking the high shine of the material world for the hazy wonders of the ethereal – and was endlessly mocked for it by his royal family. Learning the basics of magic they could understand, but no one believed a prince would willingly strip himself of a title and refuse an inheritance of riches only to join the ranks of nameless Diviners.

Cyrus hadn't cared.

He'd locked away his gold and jewels, cut off his hair, and whittled down his wardrobe to simple black garb. He took preliminary vows on his eighteenth birthday and spent the next year and a half living exclusively at the temple, seldom leaving the grounds as he prepared for the final ceremony. He was among the youngest students allowed to advance to this first rung of priesthood, and now, as he approached his twentieth year, he was only weeks away from being given official robes, from having his lips sealed with a magic that would bind him forever to –

Stop.

Cyrus froze, his breath catching. The icy cloud path had connected, ultimately, to the roof of a stone cottage, one of several in the crescent of outbuildings on the Diviners' land.

The young prince stood atop one such building now, a spongy rug of moss yielding under his boots. His fears hardened as he lifted his head; never had Cyrus been denied entrance to these grounds.

Slowly, he looked his old teacher in the eye.

The man glided forward, his dark robes mesmerizing in motion. Tulan's Diviners were distinguished by their black cloaks, the curious material shimmering like liquid metal, heavy with secrets. The elder pulled back his hood an inch, baring a hint of his face to the cold light. What was visible of his brown skin was smooth despite his advanced age, though his eyes were milky with cataracts. Still, there was no censure in his energy; in fact, there was a compassion that emanated from deep within the man, even now. At once, Cyrus understood.

You already know, he said soundlessly.

The Diviner canted his head. *We have always known. But we were not meant to interfere.*

The young prince felt his heart wrench at this revelation, the words landing as a betrayal even as his mind knew better. To be a Diviner was to be burdened by knowledge and bound by brutal limitations; powerful as they were, the priests and priestesses were not allowed to obstruct the free will of others, and they were not allowed to offer unsolicited guidance. Cyrus understood this better than most.

Still, his eyes flashed with heat as he stood there, for he knew now, with a categorical certainty, that his dreams had died; his role had changed forever. Never would he become a

Diviner. All he'd ever wanted, all he'd ever worked for. His life, his future –

The teacher tilted his head once more, this time the small motion delivering Cyrus to the ground, where the violet walls of the temple rose behind them to breathtaking heights. With fresh heartache the prince registered the press of a barrier between their bodies, magic keeping him at bay.

These hallowed quarters would never be his home.

Please, he said desperately. *I've come to seek your counsel*.

Slowly, the Diviner shook his head. *There are only two choices, little one*.

Cyrus moved to speak, a fragile hope gathering in his chest, but his old teacher lifted a hand to stop him. It was with unmistakable sorrow that the man looked him in the eye and said –

Few can die. Or many.

ONE

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"WHAT ARE YOU – ARE you *eating an orange?*"

Kamran turned as he spoke, his face taut with dismay, to study the young woman seated in the night sky beside him. For hours now they'd been soaring through the heavens, and whereas he'd only grown frigid with disquiet, Miss Huda half reclined atop her magical bird, staring up at the stars and eating a piece of fruit for all the world as if she were the heroine in some impassioned novel.

"Yes, why?" She'd paused in the act of lifting a section of orange to her mouth and suddenly startled. "Oh! Forgive me, Your Highness – would you care for a piece?" She held out her sticky palm, upon which sat a sticky wedge, and Kamran recoiled.

She'd offered him the fruit she'd been about to put in her own mouth. It was as if the girl had no manners at all.

"No," he said curtly.

How Miss Huda had procured the citrus, or why she'd thought to tuck away an orange in the midst of so much mayhem, he'd never know, for he'd no intention of –

"I filched a few from a passing tray before we left the palace," she supplied, pausing briefly to chew and swallow. A wash of starlight illuminated her artless movements, her eyes glassy as she stared at him with ill-concealed admiration.

"I hope that's all right. I grow a little light-headed when I take too long between meals."

Kamran made a noncommittal sound, turning away.

Of all things, he'd not meant to encourage conversation. All this time their unlikely troop had been little able to converse – the constant noise and turbulence of their journey making long chats impossible – but the headwind had finally settled, and the relief among their quintet was nearly palpable. The stunning winged beasts that carried them drew together in a tight formation as they began their slow descent into Tulan. Not long before they touched land.

Meanwhile, Kamran's mind was waterlogged with fear and weariness. Grateful as he was for the extraordinary circumstances of his escape, the shine of their journey had begun to dull under the steady scour of his thoughts. He'd no interest in holding forth with anyone.

"Oh – can I have some?" came Omid's eager Feshtoon. "I'm so hungry."

The boy had recently decided to communicate exclusively in Feshtoon while the others responded in Ardanz. This new system of communication had lately given their conversations an interesting texture, developed only after the child had discovered, to his supreme delight, that all in attendance were fluent in Feshtoon.

Even, apparently, Miss Huda.

Kamran had been surprised to discover the illegitimate miss was properly educated. He knew the assumption made him seem cruel, but neither could he condemn himself for the thought; it was, quite frankly, bizarre for someone of her

uncertain station to be brought up with a governess. Then again, her father was known to be an eccentric.

"I'd love a piece as well, if you've enough to spare," added Deen, the apothecarist. "It smells heavenly."

This much was true.

The air around them had been scented by the spritz of orange oil, and as Miss Huda broke apart her rations to share with the others, their excited voices and ensuing conversations served only to provoke the prince. He'd barely tolerated most members of this unlikely group even in the best of spirits, and now, rumpled and unsettled, his patience had worn thin.

"Leave her be," came the whisper of Hazan's familiar, scolding voice. "She doesn't mean to vex you."

"Who?"

"Miss Huda."

Kamran registered these words with surprise, turning to face his old friend as if dealt an insulting blow. "*Miss Huda?* You think I preoccupy myself now with thoughts of Miss Huda?"

Hazan did not smile, though his eyes indicated some private amusement. "Do you not?"

"If I think of her at all, it is only to marvel at the many inelegant turns of her mind."

Now Hazan frowned. "That seems unfair."

"Earlier," he said, lowering his voice to a hiss, "she tried to *eat* her way through a cloud. Her jaw, can you imagine?" He mimed a biting motion with his hand. "Snapping her head around, making some ridiculous voice, just to entertain the

child. She appears to have no sense of propriety whatsoever."

Hazan's face remained impassive as he said, "I believe she called it *the hungry cloud monster* voice."

"Oh, and you approve of this, do you?"

"Not everyone takes themselves as seriously as you do, sire. They have neither the energy nor the interest."

"Are you implying that I'm vain?"

"I'm not implying it, Kamran. I'm delivering the statement to you directly."

"You're an ass."

"It's a mercy I don't stare too long in the mirror, then, contemplating the contours of my face."

Reluctantly, Kamran cracked a smile.

"You've never been allowed to drop the crushing weight of imperial expectations," Hazan said quietly, staring now into the distance. "Others are not so encumbered as you. That does not make them inferior."

Kamran gave a small shake of his head, appraising Miss Huda once more from afar. When he forced himself to imagine her beyond the outrageous crime of her gown, he was able to glean the finer details of her features. It was not that she was an unattractive girl; it was simply that he found her lacking in refinement. She was loud and indelicate and childish, and being in her orbit made him feel restless, as if his clothes were two sizes too small.

She laughed, then, laughed until her body shook, and he turned sharply away, the cheerful sound grating his nerves. "If only I might experience the luxury of being so unencumbered," he muttered. "A cold day in hell that would

be."

Hazan offered him a grim look of understanding, and Kamran, deciding he deserved some relief from his mental punishments, allowed himself to slouch a little in his seat.

He sat astride Simorgh – a legendary bird who'd offered him escape in his most desperate hour – while the others had settled upon the steady backs of her four children. The Ardunian prince hadn't known what to expect when he'd first climbed aboard the magnificent, towering creature, her wingspan as wide as a room. He'd been so overwhelmed with awe and gratitude for the privilege of her company that it hadn't occurred to him to wonder whether the long journey from Ardunia to Tulan would be easy. It was bad enough that he'd been tossed together with these motley souls – all of whom had been lodged into his life by virtue of knowing the same enigmatic young woman – but the addition of exhaustion, hunger, fear, and unprocessed grief had made the very occupation of his body nearly intolerable.

Kamran had wanted Alizeh – Alizeh and nothing more – and instead he'd been forced to collect the orphan, the by-blow, and the misanthrope; as if his life were some children's quest game and he'd been dealt a set of cards he had no choice but to play. Considering how rarely Alizeh seemed to allow others a glimpse into her life, these characters were precious indeed – but had he not been so blinded in his pursuit of a young woman, he might've known the bliss of an existence apart from these people.

To compound his churlish mood, the prince had heated unevenly. Despite the warm engine of the bird's body, his

extremities were all but numb with cold, the bow and its quiver of arrows slung across his back slowly digging into his flesh, and – though he'd never admit this aloud – he'd been carefully ignoring a need to use the facilities for nearly an hour.

Still, Simorgh had proven a mount both unshakable and shockingly plush; her silky, iridescent feathers were a gratifying cushion for his tired body. He'd hardly slept in days, so upended had been his life. If only he could be certain he wouldn't topple out of the sky, Kamran might've dozed against her neck. Now, as the steady, gentle motions of flight threatened more than ever to lure him to sleep, he struggled to keep his eyes open. Silently he was grateful for the occasional, bracing slap of cold against his face.

"Are you still hungry?"

Kamran looked up, a soft wind tousling his hair, only to realize the question had not been addressed to him. Miss Huda had procured a banana from some secret pocket in the billowing folds of her horrifying dress and was now straining across the dark expanse of the universe to hand the fruit to Omid, whose eyes had lit up even as his mouth was still full. He scrambled eagerly to accept the offering and, in a moment that caused Kamran to stiffen in alarm, the two of them knocked heads and nearly fell out of the sky.

Omid and Miss Huda promptly dissolved into gales of laughter, delighted to have nearly killed themselves with stupidity. Even Deen, the grouchiest of the four companions, had managed a smile.

It made Kamran irrationally furious.

He didn't understand that what he felt as he watched them

was not anger, exactly, but a mix of longing and resentment. Omid, Huda, and Deen had come on this journey only for a bit of adventure, for a touch of the magical. They were not here as he was: in a desperate fight for his life, his throne, and his legacy. That they might laugh so easily, recline so freely, snack as they chatted – it made him seethe with indignation. Secretly he longed to know such cheeriness; but being unable to express these feelings even to himself, he simmered in his frustration instead, allowing the familiar arms of anger to bolster him as he sat in the sky, slowly eaten away by unknowns.

His thoughts of Alizeh, of course, loomed largest.