For She Is Wrath

Two



"What are you?" I whispered as a girl about my age lifted herself from the dark hole where the floor had once been. "Are you a ghoul? Finally come to devour me?"

"I'm not a very cunning ghoul if I had to get imprisoned myself to steal your soul." Her eyes roved over me, a frown deepening her face. "And you look awful. You'd think I'd find healthier humans to feast on."

She was shorter than me, with curly dark hair that hung wildly about her shoulders, dirty and matted like an animal. I pet my own and wondered what I looked like after so many months. In the early days of my imprisonment I'd braided it down my back to keep it manageable, but now I'd given up trying to look presentable. Caring about my appearance meant I had someone to look presentable for, instead of four vacant gray walls.

The girl's cheeks hung from her, like the flesh had been sucked from her bones. But if the rest of her looked dead and ghoulish, her eyes were like a crackling fire.

"I really thought I was close this time." She raked her filthy hands over her face.

I glanced at her fingernails, thick with dirt. "You're digging out of prison," I said slowly.

The girl stopped pacing and turned to look at me. "Quick one, aren't you?"

My face twisted into a scowl. "Forgive me if the sight of another prisoner breaking through the floor was startling." I was surprised I still had the capacity for sarcasm. "It's been nearly a year since I've talked to someone other than Thohfsa or the guards."

I wondered if I'd finally lost my mind and was sitting here talking to myself, imagining another person.

She looked at me, assessing. "Try three."

Three years. I exhaled through my teeth. Three years was a long time to be alone, surrounded by stone walls and the smell of human filth.

But soon enough, that would be me.

I glanced up at her through my tangled hair. This girl had managed to get beyond her prison door, something I had only done once and it ended in utter failure.

"How did you manage it? Escape?" I gestured to the mess she'd made of the floor.

"Well, I didn't quite do it, did I? I ended up here instead of outside. A year of digging and I'm in an even worse cell than the one I started in." She sniffed the air. "With a worse smell too."

I laughed, the sound cackling out of me and going so unnaturally long I was sure I appeared unhinged. I cleared my throat and gestured to my wounds. "I wasn't expecting visitors. Otherwise, I would have cleaned up."

The girl grimaced. "Thohfsa do that to you?"

"I didn't do it to myself, did I?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You're the one that tried to escape, aren't you? You nearly got me caught! The guards searched all other prisoners for weapons after they recaptured you." She tilted her head. "Did you really think you could just run out of this place in the middle of broad daylight?"

"Just like you thought you could dig your way out, but instead you ended up here?" I shot back.

"Fair enough." She stretched her arms up and looked around again. "Your cell is much smaller than mine. What did you do? Kill someone you shouldn't have?"

I grimaced. "Something like that."

More like he was already dead at my feet.

Footsteps echoed down the hall—a guard on his usual patrol. I sat up, ignoring the ache in my shoulders as I did so.

"Be quiet, or they'll find you," I hissed at her, my voice low.

We sat in silence as the echo of his booted feet sounded between us. When he had moved past, the girl raised her brows.

"Another prisoner would give me away instantly," she whispered back. "Why don't you call out to them? Collect the extra rations they provide to turn in escapees?"

I returned her astute gaze. She was right that I could get rewarded for turning her in—that's exactly what happened with me. But I would be damned if I subjected another person to Thohfsa's punishments, no matter how much my stomach growled.

But more than that, an idea was percolating in my head, one that grew stronger with every passing moment she was sitting here.

"I'm not interested in betraying another prisoner," I said honestly. "Not after my last escape. You want to try to get out of here? Be my guest." I gestured to my fresh injuries. "They'll do the same to you."

She smiled, but it was more of a suggestion on her face, as if she didn't really know how to smile anymore and was trying it on. I understood that—I'd forgotten how to smile too.

"What is your name?"

I straightened. No one had asked for my name in the past year.

Names had meaning. Names were power. I knew that if my name had been different, if my family had been different, I might not be in this prison at all. But *here,* we were all the same.

We were all nothing.

And my name had no meaning behind these stone walls.

"Dania," I answered. "My friends call me Dani."

Not that I had any anymore.

"I'm Noor." She sat cross-legged on the ground. I glanced at the small opening in my door. There wasn't another guard patrol for a few hours, but I didn't know if Thohfsa was keeping a closer eye on me after my escape attempt.

"And they won't catch me," she continued. "I *will* dig my way out of here. I am going to escape."

Her words were so sure, so *bold* in the middle of my dark chamber, that a startled laugh escaped me.

The idea that had begun to take over screamed louder as I looked at the gaping hole she had made in the floor.

"It would be faster to dig with two people." I said the words slowly, as if they were just coming to me, as if I didn't plan them.

This girl had dug here, and if she had dug here, she could dig out as well.

We could dig out.

Her eyes narrowed on me, so shrewd I felt as if my very bones were being examined.

"Yes, it would be." She cocked her head. "I've been digging for a year. By my estimation, your cell is on the other side of the prison. I must have gotten turned around when they brought me in. I've been digging the wrong way."

"Ah." I leaned toward her, keeping my face a mask of calm, as if I casually welcomed visitors to my dingy cell all the time.

"Don't they notice you digging?"

She shook her head. "I'm always back to put my waste and food bucket out. I'm never gone more than a day—I don't really have enough candle left for the light." She waved her hand over the bag of supplies she had dumped on the floor. A small stub of wax and a dented tin cup spilled out from the opening.

My eyes widened at the two foreign objects. I'd never been given so much as a spoon to eat my lentils.

"How did you get those?" I never thought I'd have wonder in my

voice as I looked at a rusted tin cup, but it was funny the things I missed when they were taken away.

The girl grinned, but no humor lit in her eyes. "You really want all my secrets, don't you? The guards are very interested in why I'm here and what I have to offer them. Sometimes they give me things in exchange for information, or with the expectation that one day I will return the favor."

"Well, they certainly don't offer me any kind of favor."

"Didn't you just kill one of them?"

I scowled. "What did you do that was so special?"

Noor leaned back on her hands. "I was an assistant to a chieftain who cultivated Emperor Vahid's crops of zoraat."

I sucked in the air against my teeth, surprised she'd said the words so simply.

As if she hadn't just admitted that she helped grow the entire source of the emperor's power—the coveted seeds he'd bargained for with a djinn to take over the empire. Djinn were powerful magical beings who did not part with their gifts lightly and who you did not want to bargain with if you could help it. They didn't even exist in our world, but in the world of the unseen.

"My chieftain stole a large amount of zoraat and hid it, along with a small fortune," she continued.

I whistled low. Ever since Vahid struck a bargain with a djinn for those first magical seeds, they had been guarded intensely—after all, they were how he had forcibly annexed the five kingdoms and the northern tribes under his new rule. Zoraat had given him healing magic, an endless food supply, and an indestructible army. But Emperor Vahid solely controlled that power, and he wasn't willing to share.

"I can't imagine the emperor took kindly to *that*."

"No." She looked away, her eyes shadowed. It was a moment before she spoke again. "The emperor killed my chieftain for his betrayal." She swallowed, a harsh smile twisting her lips. "And Emperor Vahid

didn't believe I knew nothing about where he had hidden the seeds, so he had me tortured and thrown in here."

I grew still. "And did you? Know where he had hidden them?"

Another shadow of a smile passed her lips. Instead of answering, me she swept her gaze around the room again, lighting her eyes on the tally of days I had etched into the wall, a macabre countdown to my death.

"Comfortable lodgings, don't you think? This is the ends of the earth, a barren island where they throw those they don't want others to find."

I sat up straighter at my unanswered question. Access to the emperor's stash of djinn magic was considerable power.

If Noor possessed it, she could control anything.

The kingdom. The emperor. The world.

As if Noor could read my machinations, she focused those sharp eyes on me once more. "Why are you here, Dania? What did *you* do?"

I swallowed. The truth felt hard to say out loud, even though it repeated through my mind on a daily basis. Saying it out loud meant it was real, and that I hadn't just imagined it. The lump in my throat grew thick.

"I was tricked. Accused of murdering a chief from the northern tribes." I kept my eyes down, studying my hands, trying not to think of the burned husk of a body that had sat at my feet the day they arrested me, devoured from the inside out.

"Murder and treason."

Noor whistled. "And did you do it?"

An echo of my own question. Two could play this game. "As soon as you start telling me the truth, I'll start telling you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "If you're going to join me, I need to know whether you're likely to stab me in the back."

"After a year in here, I would do anything to escape. But to answer your question, no, I didn't kill him."

I clenched my fists. I wasn't the one who'd killed him. I knew exactly who had, and why.

I repeated their names nightly.

Especially the one person I never saw coming.

"I was . . . betrayed. Framed. I thought I could trust someone, but it turns out he wasn't on my side."

Those words stung the most.

More than admitting I'd been outwitted.

It was the sheer fact that I'd been betrayed by my best friend, my first love, and that was the reason I was rotting alone in a dark cell, on a forgotten island.

Mazin had been the one to put me here.

Even just thinking his name had anger thrumming through my blood like the gathering of water behind a dam threatening to break loose. Soon, it would. But today, a slow exhale calmed the rage simmering beneath my skin.

"I can't do much about it, not when I'm in here, and they out there."

Noor toyed with the edge of her filthy kurta, the dirt coloring the garment so that it was crusted and gray. "And what if you weren't in here anymore?"

I closed my eyes at her words, at how they latched on to my heart with sharp hooks and refused to let go. "If I wasn't imprisoned anymore, I . . ."

I thought of my family, of my father who must be worrying about me. Then I thought of those who'd framed me.

Mazin to whom I'd trusted with my whole heart, for him to skewer it beneath his scimitar. Darbaran, the head of the palace guard who'd arrested me. Emperor Vahid who'd used me to get rid of a powerful political opponent without a thought about my life or my family. I curled my bruised and bloodied hands into tight fists.

If I were free, I would make them all pay the price for what they had done.

They would feel every bruise, every moment of humiliation and betrayal.

But somehow, I couldn't say it. Not yet. Not when I'd only repeated these words to myself for the past year.

"I'm not sure."

Noor gave me a look as though she didn't believe me, as if she could see every thought I'd had for the past three hundred and sixty-five days and was aware I knew exactly what I would do as soon as I broke out of here.

She chewed the inside of her cheek.

"I want freedom," she said finally. "I want it so badly I can taste it. But I also want retribution. Emperor Vahid stole my entire life from me. And I want it back."

Her words were vehement, and suddenly we weren't just two girls sitting in a prison cell together with no hope of a future. For a moment it felt like we might have the power to actually do something.

"And you're right," she said finally. "Digging on my own takes an awful long time."

I stilled, afraid to move.

"It would be much faster with a partner." She glanced over at me. "Though you'd need to recover first." She reached forward, as if to touch me, and I shriveled back in surprise. I hadn't been touched by another human in kindness since before my arrest.

But instead, she extended her hand. I glanced at it warily, before reaching out in return. Her fingers curled in mine and we shook hands, sealing our bargain.

"Together, it won't take us another year to get out of here," I said, my voice as hopeful as the rising pressure of possibility in my chest.

She nodded, and that spark of hope spread through me.

"But you didn't answer my question. If you were free, Dania, what would you do?"

Mazin's face filtered through my mind, the one who had thrown me in this hell and left me here to suffer. Who had abandoned me to the royal guard, and served the emperor above all else.

But there was someone more important than revenge.

Holding my baba's newest blade in my hand.

Sparring with him in the practice yard.

Hearing his low chuckle when I bested all the other students.

Sharing a meal with him in the low light of his smith.

All the things I had longed to do came rushing forward, as if the dam inside me had broken lose and it wasn't anger that released, but pure longing.

"If I were free, I would find my father."