



We Hunt the Flame

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HAFSAH FAIZAL



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To my mother, for shaping my heart, and my father, for hardening it to steel

*Love is for children, said the girl.
Death is for fools, said the shadow.
Darkness is my destiny, said the boy.
Allegiance is my undoing, said the eagle.
Suffering is our fate, said the beauty.
And they were all horribly wrong.*



ACT I

SILVER AS A CRESCENT MOON

CHAPTER 1

People lived because she killed. And if that meant braving the Arz where even the sun was afraid to glimpse, then so be it.

On the occasional good day, Zafira bint Iskandar mused that she was braver than the sun itself. Most days, she couldn't wait until the evernight Arz was behind her and she was firmly rooted in the plains of her caliphate, daama snow and all.

Today was one of those days, despite the antlers rough against her hands. She stepped free of the cursed prison of a forest, pretending her sigh was due to her task being complete rather than a product of the tightly coiled fear unwinding in her heart. The morning sun kissed her cheeks in welcome.

Marhaba to you, too, coward.

Sunlight was always faint in the caliphate of Demenhur, because the sun didn't know what to do with the snow that should be sand.

Before her, the sea of white rolled out smooth and pristine, gifting her a moment's contentment in her solitude, even as her toes numbed and the air crippled her nose. For in a caliphate where a woman's actions were always in danger of being turned against her, there was nothing easy about pretending to be a man. Not when she had the curves of a woman, and the voice and gait of one, too.

She dragged the deer carcass along, a trail of steam in her wake, the sullied snow an eerie crimson. There was a promise in the air. A stillness in

the earth and in the whispering trees.

It's nothing. Paranoia had a way of visiting when he was least desired. She was a bundle of emotions because of the impending wedding, that was all.

Sukkar nickered from the rotting post where she had tethered him, blending in with his near-white coat. While she made quick work of tying the deer to her stallion's saddle, he remained still, as sweet as the name she had given him.

"We had a good hunt today," she said to the horse who hadn't helped, and swung onto his back.

Sukkar didn't react, content with staring across the distance into the Arz as if an ifrit would leap out and swallow him whole.

"Dastard," Zafira said, a smile on her numbing lips.

Though everyone was a coward when it came to the forest—each of the five caliphates that made up Arawiya were afraid of the Arz, for it rimmed those lands, too. It was a curse they'd shared ever since the land had been robbed of magic. Baba had taught Zafira that the Arz was, in many ways, simply a forest. He had taught her of ways to use it to her benefit. Ways to believe she could tame it, when in reality she could not. No one could.

His death had proved as much.

Zafira steered Sukkar away from the forest, toward the clearing and deeper into Demenhur. But the Arz was such that it always demanded one last glimpse. She paused and turned.

It watched. Breathed. Its skeleton trees reached with gnarled fingers steeped in swirling shadow.

Some said it devoured men like vultures on the dead. Yet Zafira returned, day after day, hunt after hunt. She was aware each venture could be her last, and though she swore she didn't fear much, finding herself lost was her biggest fear of all.

Still. There was a pulse deep inside her that relished those visits into the depths of darkness. She hated the Arz. She hated it so much, she craved it.

"Akh, plenty of time to stare at the Arz every daama day," she said to Sukkar, a quiver to her voice. "We need to get back for the wedding, or Yasmine will have our heads."

Not that Sukkar cared. Zafira clucked her tongue and urged him forward, the tension escaping his taut muscles as the distance between them and the Arz grew.

Until the air heavied with another presence.

The small hairs on the nape of her neck lifted, and she threw a wary glance over her shoulder. The Arz stared back, as if with bated breath. No— whoever it was stood here in Demenhur, imitating the silence almost as well as she did.

Almost.

If there was one thing she feared more than losing herself within the Arz, it was being caught unaware by a man who could prove she was no hunter but a *huntress*, a girl of seventeen concealed beneath the weight of her father's hooded cloak every time she hunted. Then she would be shunned, her victories derided. Her identity, viciously unraveled. The thought closed hands around her heart, the *thud, thud, thud* racing a little bit faster.

She spun Sukkar to face the Arz, kicking against the strains of his hesitation as a low command drifted on the wind, words undecipherable.

“Yalla.” She urged him to hurry, voice tight.

He shook out his mane and cantered forward without protest. The air darkened as they neared the forest. Funny, Zafira was heading *toward* the unknown at the first sign of mortal danger.

The cold bit at her face. A blur of black sped from her right, a second blur from her left. *Horses*. She bit her lip and swerved Sukkar between them, ducking when something swung for her head.

“Qif!” someone yelled, but what kind of idiot would *stop*?

Sukkar. He froze at the border of the Arz and Zafira jerked in her saddle—a slap, reminding her that he had never ventured this close. Wood and sour decay assaulted her cold senses.

“Laa. *Laa*. Not now, you dastard,” she hissed.

Sukkar threw his head but didn't budge. Zafira stared into the hushed darkness, and her breath faltered. The Arz wasn't a place to turn one's back to; it wasn't a place to be caught unaware and unsuspecting and—

With a curse, she veered Sukkar around, despite his protests.

The wind howled, cold and harsh. She was painfully aware of the Arz breathing down her back. Until she took in the two horses snorting a mere four paces away, coats dark as the night sky, powerful bodies cloaked in chain mail. War horses.

Bred in one place alone: the neighboring caliphate of Sarasin.

Or possibly Sultan's Keep. It was hard to tell which, when Arawiya's sultan had recently murdered Sarasin's caliph in cold blood, unlawfully seizing control of land and armies the sultan had no need for—not when Arawiya rested under his control, and not when he had the Sultan's Guard at his beck and call. The caliphs existed for balance. He wasn't supposed to *kill* them.

Atop their horses, the men's bare arms were corded with muscle, faces cut with harsh lines. They were the color of people who knew life beneath a sun, the ebb and flow of the desert Zafira longed for.

"Yalla, Hunter," the larger man said, as if she were cattle to be herded, and her eyes fell to the scimitar in his grasp.

If Zafira had any doubts on where they were from, the timbre of his voice was enough. Her throat closed in on itself. Being tracked by gossiping Demenhune was one thing; being attacked by Sarasins was another.

She lowered her head so that her hood obscured more of her face. She braved the darkness; she slew rabbits and deer. She had never stood before a blade.

But for all their might, the men held their distance. Even they were afraid of the Arz. Zafira lifted her chin.

"Whatever for?" she drawled over the sudden hiss of the wind. She had people to feed and a bride as beautiful as the moon to say goodbye to. *Why me?*

"To meet the sultan," the smaller man said.

The sultan? Skies. The man had shorn more fingers from hands than hair from his head. People said he had been good once, but Zafira found that hard to believe. He was Sarasin by birth, and Sarasins, she had been told all her life, were born without a shred of good in their hearts.

Panic flared in her chest again, but she lowered her voice. "If the sultan wanted to see me, he would respect me with a letter, not his hounds. I'm no

criminal.”

The small man opened his mouth upon being likened to a dog, but the other shifted his blade and drew closer. “This isn’t a request.” A pause, as if he realized his fear of the Arz wouldn’t allow him to move any farther, and then, “Yalla. Come forward.”

No. There had to be a way out. Zafira pursed her lips in realization. If there was one thing other than barbarism Sarasins were known for, it was pride.

She whispered sweet nothings to Sukkar. Maybe it was the men, or maybe it was the war horses, mighty and intimidating, but her loyal horse took a step back. It was the closest he had ever gone to the Arz, and Zafira was going to torture him with much more. She gave the men a crooked smile, her lips cracked and likely colorless from the cold. “Come and fetch me.”

“You have nowhere to go.”

“You forget, Sarasin. The Arz is my second home.”

She stroked Sukkar’s mane, steeled her heart, and steered him into the dark.

It swallowed her whole.

She tried, tried, tried not to acknowledge the way it welcomed her, elated whispers brushing her ears. A surge in her bloodstream. Hunger in her veins.

Dark trees stood eerie and unyielding, leaves sharp and glinting. Distantly, she heard the gallop of hooves as the Sarasins shouted and followed. Vines crunched beneath Sukkar’s hooves, and Zafira’s sight fell to near blindness.

Except for his panicked breathing, Sukkar was mercifully quiet as Zafira listened for the men, her own heart an echoing thud. Despite their fear, they *had* followed, for pride was a dangerous thing.

Yet only silence drummed at her ears—like the moment after a blade’s unsheathing. The halt after the first howl of wind.

They were gone.

For once she appreciated the fearsome, incalculable strangeness of the Arz that made the men disappear. The two Sarasins could be leagues away,

and neither she nor they would ever know it. Such was the Arz. This was why so many people who entered never returned—they couldn't *find* their way back.

A soft hiss sounded from the east, and she and Sukkar froze. She could see little of his white coat, but years of returning again and again had sharpened her hearing better than any blade. She saw with her ears in the Arz. Footsteps echoed, and the temperature careened downward.

"Time to go home," Zafira murmured, and Sukkar shivered as he edged forward, guided by her hand, by that rushing whisper in her heart. Sated only when she moved.

The darkness ebbed away to a soft blue sky and the distant throb of the sun. At once, she felt a yawning emptiness as the cold stung her nostrils, scented with metal and a hint of amber.

The Sarasins, it seemed, hadn't been so lucky. How long ago had the three of them ridden into the Arz? It couldn't have been more than twenty minutes, but the position of the sun claimed it had been at least an hour.

Zafira didn't want to know whether the sultan had really sent for her. Or, if so, *why*. It was the *why* that caused Sukkar to snort beneath her, ever aware. *One thing at a time*, he seemed to say.

Where the war horses had stood, the snow was now smooth and—

She yanked on Sukkar's reins.

A woman stood against the plains of white.

A heavy cloak of gray, no, shimmering *silver* sat on her slender shoulders above a sweeping red gown. Her raised hood barely covered the top of her stark hair, as white as the snow. Her lips were crimson, a curve of blood.

Zafira swore the woman hadn't been there a moment ago. A gallop began in her chest.

The Arz depraves an idle mind.

"Who knew you could kill so swiftly," the woman said in a voice of silk.

Did the Arz conjure voices to its illusions, too?

"I am no assassin. I only evaded them," Zafira said, realizing a beat later that she shouldn't respond to an illusion. She hadn't killed those men—*had*

she?

“Clever.” The woman smiled after a pause. “You truly do emerge sane and in one piece.” A gust billowed her cloak. Her dark eyes drifted across the first line of the Arz trees with an odd mix of awe and—*skies*—adoration.

The woman wavered and solidified. Real and not.

“It’s a lot like Sharr, isn’t it?” Then she shook her head, every movement deliberate.

Fear simmered beneath Zafira’s skin at the mention of Sharr.

“Oh, how could I ask such a tease of a question?” she continued. “You haven’t been to the island yet.”

Are you real? Zafira wanted to ask. She demanded instead, “Who are you?”

The woman fixed her with that glittering gaze, bare hands clasped. Did she not feel the sting of the cold? Zafira tightened her fingers around Sukkar’s reins.

“Tell me, why do you hunt?”

“For my people. To feed them,” Zafira said. Her back ached and the deer was beginning to smell.

The woman clucked her tongue with a slight frown, and Sukkar trembled. “No one can be that pure.”

Zafira must have blinked, for the woman was suddenly closer. Another blink, despite her best efforts, and the woman had moved away again.

“Do you hear the roar of the lion? Do you heed its call?”

Where did this loon crawl from? “The tavern is in the sooq, if you’re looking for more arak.” But Zafira’s usual candor was hindered by the tightening in her throat.

The woman laughed, a tinkling that stilled the air. Then Zafira’s vision wavered, and the snow was suddenly clothed in shadow. Black bled into the white, tendrils reaching for Zafira’s ankles.

“Dear Huntress, a woman like me has no need for drink.”

Huntress. The reins slipped from Zafira’s hands.

“How—” The words died on her tongue.

A smile twisted the woman's lips, and with it, Zafira's heart. It was the type of smile that meant she knew Zafira's secrets. The type of smile that meant no one was safe.

"You will always find your way, Zafira bint Iskandar," the woman said. She sounded almost sad, though the glint in her eyes was anything but. "Lost you should have remained, cursed child."

The silver of her cloak flashed when she turned, and then Zafira must have blinked again.

Because the woman had vanished.

Zafira's heart clambered to her throat. Her name. That smile. There was no sign of the bleeding black or the silver cloak now. The snow was pristine as the claws in her brain loosened.

Then Sukkar was off before she could regain her hold on his reins.

She fumbled with a shout, sitting tall to keep from tumbling to the snow. He continued on a mad dash until they crested the slope and stumbled to a stop.

Zafira jerked back, cursing until Sukkar ducked his head with a dignified snort. *Breathe. Assess.* She looked back at the evernight forest once more, but the woman was nowhere to be seen. It was almost as if Zafira had imagined the entire encounter.

Perhaps she *had*. Zafira knew the Arz better than most, which was to say she understood that no one could *ever* know its secrets. To trust in its wickedness was to court a tortured death.

Do you hear the roar of the lion?

It wasn't a roar Zafira heard. Something else beckoned from the darkness, enticing her. Growing with her every visit. It was as if a thread of her heart had snagged in the forest and was trying to reel her back in.

She drew in a sharp breath. Exhaustion had conjured the woman, that was all.

And now she was late. She veered Sukkar around with a huff. She had a dress to don and a wedding to catch.