



Rebel of the Sands

By Alwyn Hamilton

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The *New York Times* bestselling novel by the Goodreads Choice Awards Best Debut Author of 2016, published in 15 countries!

Mortals rule the desert nation of Miraji, but mythical beasts still roam the wild and remote areas, and rumor has it that somewhere, djinn still perform their magic. For humans, it's an unforgiving place, especially if you're poor, orphaned, or female. Amani Al'Hiza is all three. She's a gifted gunslinger with perfect aim, but she can't shoot her way out of Dustwalk, the back-country town where she's destined to wind up wed or dead.

Then she meets Jin, a rakish foreigner, in a shooting contest, and sees him as the perfect escape route. But though she's spent years dreaming of leaving Dustwalk, she never imagined she'd gallop away on mythical horse—or that it would take a foreign fugitive to show her the heart of the desert she thought she knew.

This startlingly original Middle-East-meets-Wild-West fantasy reveals what happens when a dream deferred explodes—in the fires of rebellion, of romantic passion, and the all-consuming inferno of a girl finally embracing her power.

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR *Rebel of the Sands*:

“Romantic, thrilling, hilarious, and just plain great fun.”--**Starred Review, *Kirkus Reviews***

“This atmospheric fantasy combines magic, mythology, and the Wild West to create a riveting tale...an exciting, romantic adventure that is unique and all its own.”--**Starred Review, *Booklist***

“If the best of the Old West and the coolest parts of Arabian Nights had a baby who then rebelled by going steampunk, the result would be this gem of a book.” --**Starred Review, *BCCB***

“Readers will be drawn into the story and won’t want to put this book down.” --**Starred Review, *School Library Connections***

“*Rebel of the Sands* is a winning bit of storytelling, as well as a homage to storytelling itself. It evokes such disparate influences — *1,001 Arabian Nights*, Hindu lore and Navajo myth, as well as, inevitably, the triumvirate of Tolkien, Lucas and Rowling — that at times you wonder whether Hamilton can pull it all off. She can. She has circled a spot on the map and claimed it for her own.” --***The New York Times Book Review***

“Debut author Hamilton combines elements of Western and Middle Eastern civilization and lore with her own mythology, crafting an enticing, full-bodied story . . . successfully mingles romance with thrilling stakes, and hints at a welcome sequel.” --***Publishers Weekly***

“A perfect combination of American Westerns and Arabian myths . . . Fans of Sarah Maas and Victoria Aveyard should give this one a try.” --***VOYA***

“*Rebel of the Sands* is vivid, romantic, and wildly entertaining. You will cheer for Amani the whole way as she escapes the bonds of oppression and finds her own power, and you will mark your calendar for the sequel.” --**Rae Carson, bestselling author of the *Fire & Thorns* trilogy**

“Buckle up for a wild ride! *Rebel of the Sands* is a stunning debut full of irresistible energy, heart-stopping action, and a new voice that sings.” --**Alison Goodman, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Eon* and *Eona***

About the Author

Alwyn Hamilton was born in Toronto and spent her childhood bouncing between Europe and Canada until her parents settled in France. She grew up in a small town there, which might have compelled her to burst randomly into the opening song from *Beauty and the Beast* were it not for her total tone-deafness. She instead attempted to read and write her way to new places and developed a weakness for fantasy and cross-dressing heroines. She left France for Cambridge University to study history of art at King’s College, and then to London, where she became indentured to an auction house. She has a bad habit of acquiring more hardcovers than is smart for someone who moves quite so often. Follow her @AlwynFJH.

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ONE

They said the only folks who belonged in Deadshot after dark were the ones who were up to no good. I wasn't up to no good. Then again, I wasn't exactly up to no bad neither.

I slid from Blue's saddle and tethered her to a post behind some bar called the Dusty Mouth. The kid sitting against the fence was sizing me up suspiciously. Or maybe that was just his two black eyes. I tugged the wide brim of my hat lower as I stepped out of the yard. I'd stolen the hat from my uncle, along with the horse. Well, borrowed, more like. Everything I owned belonged to my uncle anyway, according to law, down to the clothes on my back.

The doors of the bar banged open, spilling out light and noise and a fat drunk with his arm around a pretty girl. My hand snapped to my sheema before I could think better of it, checking it was still tightly fastened so the better part of my face was covered. I was wrapped up to my eyes, and even hours after sunset I was sweating under the padding like a sinner at prayers. I figured I looked more like some lost nomad than a real sharpshooter, but so long as I didn't look like a girl it didn't much matter. Tonight I was getting out of here with at least my life. All the better if I got out with a few coins in my pocket, too.

It wasn't hard to spot the pistol pit on the other side of Deadshot. It was the noisiest building in town, and that wasn't saying nothing. A great big gutted-out barn at the end of the dusty street, it was swarming with bodies and blazing with light, propped up against a half-collapsed prayer house with a boarded-up door. Might be that once upon a time the barn had served some honest horse trader, but that was years ago by the looks of things.

The crowd thickened the closer I got. Like buzzards swarming to a fresh carcass.

A man with a bloody nose was pinned up against a wall by two others while another drove his fist into the man's face over and over. A girl called out from a window with words that'd make an iron dragger blush. A group of factory workers still in their uniforms huddled around a nomad in a busted-up wagon who was shouting about selling Djinni blood that'd grant good folks their hearts' desires. His wide grin looked desperate in the oily lamplight, and no wonder. It'd been years since anyone round these parts had seen a real live First Being, let alone a Djinni. Besides, he should've known better than to think desert dwellers would believe Djinn bled anything other than pure fire—or that anyone in Deadshot would believe themselves good folk. Everybody in the Last County went to prayers enough to know better on both counts.

I tried to keep my eyes forward, like I'd seen it all before.

If I climbed past the buildings, I'd be able to look across the sand and scrub all the way home to Dustwalk, though there'd be nothing but dark houses. Dustwalk got up and went down with the sun. Good honest behavior didn't belong to the dark hours of the night. If it were possible to die of boredom, everyone in Dustwalk would be corpses in the sand.

But Deadshot was alive and kicking.

No one paid me much mind as I slid into the barn. A big crowd was already gathered in the pistol pit. Lines of huge oil lamps hung from the eaves, giving the gawkers' faces a greasy glow. Scrawny kids were setting up targets and dodging a big man's blows as he shouted at them to move faster. Orphans, by the looks of them. Likely kids whose fathers had worked in the hulking weapons factory on the outskirts of Dustwalk until they'd gotten blown to bits by faulty machinery. Or until the day they'd gone to work drunk and burned themselves too badly to live. Gunpowder wasn't hardly safe work.

I was so busy staring that I nearly walked straight into the giant of a man at the door. “Front or back?” he demanded, his hands resting carelessly on a scimitar on his left hip and a gun on his right.

“What?” I remembered just in time to pitch my voice lower. I’d been practicing imitating my friend Tamid all week, but I still sounded like a boy instead of a man. The hired muscle at the door didn’t seem to care.

“It’s three fouza to stand at the back, five to stand at the front. Betting starts at ten.”

“How much to stand in the middle?” Damn. I hadn’t meant to say that. Aunt Farrah had been trying to smack the smart mouth off me for a year now with no luck. I got the feeling it would hurt more if this man tried.

But he just frowned like he thought I might be simple. “Front or back. There’s no middle, boy.”

“I’m not here to watch,” I said before I could lose the last of my nerve. “I’m here to shoot.”

“What are you doing wasting my time, then? You want Hasan.” He shoved me toward a heavysset man with billowing, bright red trousers and a dark beard slicked to his chin, standing behind a low table piled with coins that bounced as he drummed his fingers.

I took a deep breath through my sheema and tried to look like my stomach wasn’t trying to escape through my mouth. “How much to enter?”

The scar on Hasan’s lip made it look like it curled up in a sneer. “Fifty fouza.”

Fifty? That was almost everything I had. Everything I’d been saving up in the last year to escape to Izman, the capital of Miraji.

Even with my face covered from the nose down, Hasan must’ve seen the hesitation. His attention was already wandering past me, like he figured I was about to walk away.

That was what did it. I dropped the money on the table in a jangling handful of louzi and half-louzi that I’d scrimped one by one over the past three years. Aunt Farrah always said I didn’t seem to mind proving myself dumb if it meant proving someone else wrong. So maybe Aunt Farrah was right.

Hasan eyed the coins skeptically, but when he counted them with the speed of a professional money-grubber he couldn’t deny it was all there. For a brief moment the satisfaction tamped down on my nerves.

He shoved a piece of wood at me that dangled from a loop of string like a pendant. The number twenty-seven was painted in black on it. “Had much practice with a gun, twenty-seven?” Hasan asked as I put the string over my head. The tag bounced off the wraps I had forced over my chest to flatten it.

“Some,” I hedged. We were wanting for almost everything in Dustwalk, in the whole Last County for that matter. Food. Water. Clothes. There were only two things we had too much of: sand and guns.

Hasan snorted. “Then you ought to know enough to keep your hands from shaking.”

I pressed my hands close to my body to still them as I walked into the pit. If I couldn’t hold a gun steady it wouldn’t much matter that I learned to aim before I learned to read. I lined up in the sand next to a man who looked like he was mostly bones under his grubby factory uniform. Another man came to stand on my other

side with a twenty-eight around his thick neck.

All around us the stands filled. The bet wranglers shouted out odds and numbers. If I were betting, I'd wager I didn't have any odds. No one in their right mind would put money on some skinny boy without the guts to even lower his sheema and show his face. Maybe I could win some crazy drunk a poor man's fortune by proving the right-minded ones wrong.

"Good evening, gents!" Hasan's voice carried over the crowd, quieting them down. Dozens of kids ran among us handing out the pistols. A girl with braids and bare feet passed me mine. The weight was instantly comforting in my palm. I quickly flicked open the chamber; there were six bullets neatly lined up. "Everyone knows the rules. So you'd better play by them or, God help me, I'll break your cheating faces myself." A laugh erupted from the stands, and a few whoops. Bottles were being passed around already and men were pointing at us in that way I knew from watching my uncle trade horses. "Round one: you got six bullets, six bottles. If you've got any bottles left at the end, you're out. First ten line up."

The rest of us stayed still as numbers one to ten shuffled into place, their toes on a painted white line in the dirt. I judged it about twelve feet between them and the bottles.

A kid could make that.

Two men still managed to miss with their very first bullets. In the end only half the men hit all their marks.

One of them was twice the size of any other competitor. He was wearing what might once have been an army uniform, though it was too worn to tell for sure whether it used to be gleaming army gold or if it was just dirty with desert dust. He wore the number one painted in a bold slash across the piece of wood on his chest. He got the biggest cheer of all. There were cries of "Dahmad! Dahmad! Champion!" as he turned away, grabbing one of the kids scurrying around to collect broken glass. Dahmad spoke too low for me to hear, then shoved the child off. The kid came back with a bottle of brown liquor. Dahmad started chugging, lounging against the bars that separated the pit from the stands. He wouldn't stay champion long if he was going to wind up sloshed.

The next round was even more dismal. Just one of the shooters hit all his targets. As the losers shuffled off, I got a clear view of the winner's face. Whatever I'd been expecting, this boy wasn't it. He wasn't from around here, no doubt about it; that was the first thing I noticed. Everybody around here was from around here. Nobody in their right mind would chose to be in the Last County otherwise.

He was young, maybe a few years older than I was, and dressed like one of us, wearing a green sheema carelessly round his neck and desert clothes loose enough that it was hard to tell if he was really as broad as he seemed. His hair was as black as any Mirajin boy's; even his skin was dark enough that he might've passed for one of us. But he just wasn't. He had strange sharp features I'd never seen before, with high-angled cheekbones, a straight square jaw, and eyebrows that made dark slashes above the uncanniest eyes I'd ever seen. He wasn't bad-looking either, at that. A few of the men he'd beat spat at his feet. The young foreigner's mouth pulled up in one corner like he was trying to keep from laughing. Then, as if sensing my eyes on him, he glanced at me. I looked away fast.

There were eleven of us left and we were jostling for space along the line with the extra body, even with me being half the size of every man here.

"Move, twenty-seven!" An elbow jammed into my side. My head shot up with a retort on my tongue. The

retort died there as I recognized Fazim Al'Motem sidling up next to me.

I fought the urge to curse. Fazim had taught me every curse word I knew, back when he was eight and I was six. When we were caught using them, I got my mouth scrubbed out with sand and he blamed it all on me. Dustwalk was a small town. I'd known Fazim my whole life, hated him since I grew into some sense. These days he spent most of his time in my uncle's house, where I was stuck living, too, trying to get his hands under my cousin Shira's clothes. Every so often he'd make a grab at a piece of me, too, when Shira wasn't looking.

What the hell was he doing here? Actually, with the gun in his hand, I could sort of figure.

Damn him.

It was one thing if I got myself spotted as a girl. It was a whole other thing if Fazim recognized me. I'd been in trouble plenty since I was caught cursing, but I'd only been beaten within an inch of my life once. It'd been right after my mother died, when I'd tried to borrow one of my uncle's horses all the way out of Dustwalk. I made it halfway to Juniper City before they caught me. I couldn't sit on a horse for a month when Aunt Farrah and her switch were done with me. If Aunt Farrah found out I was in Deadshot gambling stolen money, she'd beat me until that inch felt like it had been a mile.

The smart thing would be to turn around and get out of here. Except that would mean I'd be fifty fouza poorer. And money was in shorter supply than smarts.

I realized I was standing like a girl and straightened up before facing the targets. The kids were still racing around, lining up the bottles. Fazim tracked their movements with the barrel of his gun, calling out, "Bang, bang, bang!" and laughing as they flinched. I wished his gun would backfire on him and shoot that smile off his face.

The kids cleared out fast, and it was just us shooters and our bottles. We were the last group before the end of the first round. Guns were already going off all around me. I focused on my six bottles straight ahead. I could make a shot like this blindfolded. But I was being careful. I checked my distance, lined up the barrel, checked my sight. When I was satisfied, I pulled the trigger. The bottle farthest to the right exploded and my shoulders eased a little. The next three bottles went down in quick succession.

My finger pressed down on the trigger for the fifth time. A shout punctured my focus. I had no other warning before a body rammed into me.

My shot went wide.

Fazim had been shoved sideways by another shooter, ramming into me on his way to the ground, another one of the shooters on top of him. A boo went up from the crowd as Fazim scuffled in the sand with the other man. The big man from the door was already breaking up the fight. Fazim was dragged to the side by the scruff of his neck. Hasan watched them go, looking bored, then turned back to the crowd. "Winners from this round—"

"Hey!" I shouted without thinking. "I want another bullet."

A laugh went up around me. So much for not drawing attention to myself. My neck was burning with all the eyes on me. But this was too important. Too important not to ask. Scorn was written all over Hasan's face,

and I felt the mix of humiliation and anger rise up in my throat in answer. “That’s not how it works, twenty-seven. Six bullets, six bottles. No second chances.”

“But that’s not fair! He pushed me.” I gestured at Fazim, who was nursing his jaw up against the wall.

“And this isn’t a school yard, little boy. We don’t need to be fair. Now you can use your last bullet and lose or get out of line and forfeit.”

I was the only one with any bullets left. The crowd started jeering at me to get out of the way, and an angry flush rose in my hidden face.

Standing alone on the line, I raised my gun. I could feel the weight of the single bullet in the chamber. I let out one long breath that moved my sheema from where it was sticking to my lips.

One bullet. Two bottles.

I took two steps to my right and then half a step back. I twisted my body and tried to see it all in my mind. Dead center and I’d never hit the second one. Clip it too far off and neither would break.

Fifty fouza.

I shut out the shouting and taunts around me. I ignored the fact that every eye in here was on me and that I’d blown all chances of being inconspicuous. Fear crept in in its place. The same fear that had crouched in my stomach for the past three days. Since the night I’d been crawling around my uncle’s house after dark, on my way to Tamid’s, and overheard Aunt Farrah say my name.

“—Amani?”

I hadn’t caught whatever had come before my name, but it was enough to make me stop.

“She’s needing of a husband.” My uncle Asid’s voice carried more than his first wife’s. “A man could finally beat some sense into her. In less than a month, Zahia will have been dead a year, and Amani will be clean and allowed to wed.” Since my mother was hanged, folks had slowly stopped saying her name like a curse. Now my uncle mentioned her death more like a matter of business.

“It’s hard enough to find a husband for your daughters.” Aunt Farrah sounded irritated. “Now you want me to find one for my sister’s brat, too?” Aunt Farrah never said my mother’s name. Not since she’d been hanged.

“I’ll take her as a wife, then.” Uncle Asid said it like he was talking about trading a horse. My arms nearly buckled into the sand.

Aunt Farrah made a disdainful hissing noise at the back of her throat. “She’s too young.” There was an impatient tone in her voice that normally ended a conversation.

“No younger than Nida was. She is living in my house anyway. Eating my food.” Aunt Farrah normally ruled the house as first wife, but every so often her husband would root his feet, and just now Uncle Asid was warming to this idea unnervingly fast. “She can either stay here as my wife or leave as someone else’s. I choose her to stay.”

I didn’t choose to stay.

I chose to get out or die trying.

And just like that, everything came into focus. Me and my target. Nothing mattered but the aim. I pulled the trigger.

The first bottle broke instantly. The second teetered for a moment on the edge of the wooden bar. I could see the chip in the thick glass where I'd hit it. I held my breath as the bottle rocked back and forth.

Fifty fouza I might never see again.

Fifty fouza to lose and my only way out.

The bottle hit the ground and shattered.

The crowd roared. I let out a long breath.

When I turned around Hasan was looking like I was a snake who'd dodged a snare. Behind him the foreigner was watching me, eyebrows up. I couldn't stop grinning behind my sheema. "How'd I do?"

Hasan's lip curled. "Line up for round two."

TWO

I didn't know how long we'd been shooting.

Long enough for sweat to start pooling in the small of my back. Long enough for Dahmad the Champion to slosh down three whole bottles of booze between rounds. And long enough for one man after another to get knocked out of the game. But I still had a gun.

The target faced me at the end of the room, bottles moving on a slow rotating board some kid was turning with a crank. I slammed my finger down six times. I didn't hear the glass shatter over the roar of the crowd.

A hand dropped onto my shoulder. "Your final competitors tonight!" Hasan shouted near my ear. "Our own champion, Dahmad!" The man stumbled from the drink and raised his arms high. "Our returning challenger, the Eastern Snake." The foreigner barely acknowledged the taunts and hoots; his mouth just pulled up at one side and he didn't look up. "And a newcomer on this fine evening." He yanked my arm up hard and the crowd went wild, hollering and stomping their feet until the barn shook. "The Blue-Eyed Bandit."

The nickname killed my excitement in one panicked jolt. I searched the pistol pit for Fazim. No matter if I could pass for a boy, my eyes weren't something I could hide. Everything else about me was as dark as any desert girl was supposed to be, but my pale eyes made me stick out. Stupid as he was, if Fazim was still here he might just be smart enough to put two and two together and not come out with three. But I grinned behind my sheema all the same and let the cheers wash over me. Hasan dropped my arm. "Ten minutes to get your last bets in, folks. Our final round is coming up."

There was a rush for the bet wranglers. With nothing else to do, I sank down in the sand in an empty corner of the pit, leaning against the railings. My legs still felt a little unsteady from leftover nerves, my shirt was sticking to my stomach with sweat, and my face felt flushed behind the cloth of my sheema.

But I was winning.

I closed my eyes. I might actually leave with the cash pot.

I worked it out quick in my head. The prize money came to over a thousand fouza. I'd have to scrimp till I was dead to steal and save a thousand fouza. Especially with the mines in Sazi collapsing a few weeks back. An accident. Badly placed explosives. That was the official story. It'd happened before, though maybe not so bad. Only I'd heard whispers of sabotage, too. That someone had planted a bomb. Or the wilder rumors claimed it was a First Being. A Djinni striking Sazi down for its sins.

But no matter what happened, no metal coming down from the mines meant no guns, which meant no money. Everyone was tightening belts lately. And I didn't even have enough to buy a belt.

But with a thousand fouza I could do a hell of a lot more than that. Get out of this dead-end desert that ran on factory smoke. I could run straight for Izman. All I'd have to do was get to Juniper City on the next caravan. Then there'd be trains from there to Izman.

Izman.

I couldn't think of the city without hearing it whispered like a hopeful prayer in my mother's voice. A promise of a bigger world. A better life. One that didn't end in a short drop and a sudden stop.

"So, 'Blue-Eyed Bandit.'" I opened my eyes as the foreigner sank down next to me, propping his arms on his knees. He didn't look at me when he spoke. "It's better than 'Eastern Snake,' at least." He was holding a skin of water. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was until that moment, and my eyes tracked it as he took a long drink. "Still, it has a certain dishonest bent to it." He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. There was a skew to his words that would make even the most trusting fool think he was trouble. "You got a real name?"

"Sure. But you can call me Oman if you've got to call me something." My eyes might betray me to some, but telling him my name was Amani Al'Hiza would betray a lot more.

The foreigner snorted. "Funny, Oman's my name, too."

"Funny," I agreed drily, a smile pulling at my mouth all the same. I reckoned half the men born in Miraji were called Oman, after our exalted Sultan. I didn't know if their parents figured it would win them favor with our ruler—not that they'd ever get so much as spitting distance from him—or if they thought God might give them favor by mistake. But I did know that the stranger wasn't named Oman any more than I was. Everything about him was foreign, from his eyes to the angles in his face and the way he wore his desert clothes like they didn't belong against his skin. Even his words were tinged with an accent, though he spoke cleaner Mirajin than most folks around here.

"Where you from, anyhow?" I asked before I could stop myself. Every time I opened my mouth it was another chance to get found out for a girl. But I couldn't help myself.

The foreigner took a swig of water. "Nowhere in particular. You?"

"Nowhere interesting." I could play that game, too.

"Thirsty?" He offered me the skin, his attention a little too sharp. I was parched, but I didn't dare lift my

sheema, not even a little. Besides, this was the desert. You got used to being thirsty.

"I'll live," I said, trying not to run my tongue over my dried lips.

"Suit yourself." He took a long drink. I watched his throat rise and fall greedily. "Our friend certainly seems to be. Thirsty, that is."

I followed his gaze to Dahmad. He was draining another bottle, his face red.

"So much the better for you." I shrugged. "I was going to beat you both anyhow. At least you're bound to come in second now."

The foreigner broke into easy laughter. I felt stupidly pleased with myself for being the one to drag it out of him. One of the men pushing to the front of the bet wranglers looked over at us, frowning. Like we might be conspiring. "I like you, kid," the foreigner said. "And you're talented, so I'm going to give you some advice. Throw the game."

"You really suppose that's going to work on me?" I tried for bravado, straightening up as much as I could.

"You see our friend over there?" He nodded to Dahmad. "He plays for the house. Hasan gets rich off Dahmad's winning. They don't like it when strangers beat him."

"And how do you know so much? Not being from around these parts."

The foreigner leaned over conspiratorially. "Because I beat him last week." We both watched Dahmad sway on his feet, grabbing the wall for support.

"Doesn't seem all that hard."

"It's not. The two men Hasan sent to corner me in an alley and get the money back were more of a challenge, though." He opened and closed his hand, and I saw healing bruises on his knuckles. He caught me looking. "Don't worry." He winked at me. "You ought to see the other guys."

I wiped away whatever he'd seen in my face that he thought was worry. "And here you are, back to give them a second chance at you."

He turned his full attention on me, all joking gone. "How old are you? Thirteen?" Sixteen, near seventeen, as a girl, but as a boy I looked young. "Someone who can shoot like you, you'll go far in a few more years if you don't get killed tonight. There'd be no shame in quitting. We all know you can shoot. Don't need to die proving it."

I eyed him. "Why are you back if it's so dangerous, then?"

"Because I need the money." He took a swig from the waterskin before getting to his feet. "And I always make it out of trouble alive." I felt a twinge at that. I knew what it was like to be desperate. He offered me a hand up. I didn't take it.

"You can't have more need than I do," I said quietly. And for a moment I felt like we understood each other. We were on the same side. But we were still against each other.

The foreigner dropped his hand. "Suit yourself, Bandit." He walked off. I sat there a moment longer, convincing myself that he was just trying to intimidate me into quitting. I knew we could both beat Dahmad. But the foreigner was a decent shot.

I was better. I had to be better.

The bet wranglers were fending off the last of their customers as the three of us stepped back up to the line. This time when the little barefoot girl ran up, she only brought one bullet with her. In her other hand was a strip of black cloth.

"Our final round tonight!" Hasan declared. "Blind man's bluff."

I reached for the blindfold, but the sound of gunshots stopped me.

I ducked before I realized the sound was coming from outside. Someone screamed. Half our audience were on their feet, craning over one another to get a look outside at this new entertainment. I couldn't see, but I heard the shout clear enough.

"In the name of the Rebel Prince Ahmed! A new dawn, a new desert!"

Pinpricks raced to every bit of skin I had.

"Damn." The foreigner rubbed his knuckles across his chin. "That wasn't smart."

A new dawn. A new desert. Everybody had heard the rallying cry of the Rebel Prince, but only in whispers. You'd have to be an idiot to shout your support of the Sultan's rogue son. There were too many men with old ideas and new guns to say a word against the Sultan in the Last County.

Snatches of voices rose from the babble. "The Rebel Prince was killed in Simar weeks ago." "I heard he's hiding in the Derva's caves with his demon sister." "—should be hanged straightaway."

"He's marching on Izman as we speak!"

I'd heard half those stories, too. And a half dozen more. Ever since the day of the Sultim trials, when Prince Ahmed reappeared after disappearing fifteen years earlier, to compete for his father's throne, the stories about him walked the line between news and myth. They said that he'd won the Sultim trials outright and the Sultan tried to have him killed instead of naming him heir. That he'd cheated using magic and lost all the same. The only part that stayed the same in every version was that after failing to win the throne at the trials, he'd disappeared into the desert to start a rebellion to win the country back.

A new dawn. A new desert.

A spark of excitement struck inside me. Most stories I knew were about things that happened long ago to people long dead. The Rebel Prince was a story we were all still living. Even if he was likely to get killed any day now.

The scuffle outside was short, and then the lug from the door was dragging in a kid by the collar. He was probably as young as I looked in my disguise. Drunken boos went through the crowd as he passed.

"Well, well!" Hasan's voice carried over the din as he tried to get the crowd's attention back. The boy stumbled to stay on his feet, blood pouring from his face. He looked like he'd taken some bad hits to the face

but nothing worse. No bullet holes or stab wounds yet. “It looks like we have a volunteer!”

The lug dragged the boy forward and shoved him against the target. He put the bottle on top of the kid’s head. My heart went down like a stone into my stomach.

“We have a new game, then! Traitor’s bluff,” Hasan crowed, his arms wide. The crowd answered in a roar.

I could make that shot without hurting the kid. The foreigner could, too. But the champion was swaying on his feet and downing another drink. I wasn’t sure he could hit the ground if he tripped, never mind anything else.

The kid swayed on his feet, and the bottle clunked dully into the sand. The crowd answered with heckles. He looked like he might cry as Hasan’s lug rammed his shoulder back until he stood straight, putting the bottle back on his head.

“The kid is too hurt to stand up straight, let alone keep the bottle steady.” I caught the foreigner’s words. He was talking to Hasan. “You can’t shoot a target that won’t stay put.”

“Then don’t shoot.” Hasan waved a hand. “If you and the Bandit are too cowardly, then you can just walk away. Let my man win.” So that’s what Hasan was counting on. That the foreigner and I would go yellow-bellied and let Dahmad win. Just to keep some kid alive.

Just some kid who was younger than I was and already had arms marked with scars from factory work.

No.

It was him or me.

This kid wasn’t going to survive long in the desert with rebellion on his tongue anyway. Not when half the Last County would rip him to shreds for treason. What would it matter if I took the shot and someone else killed him? Wouldn’t make it my fault if he died.

“Or shoot him in the head and we’ll call it close enough,” Hasan joked. My hand tightened. “I don’t care.” Of course he did. He was counting on us walking away. We both knew it.

“You don’t think it will look a little bit suspicious if we both drop out and let your man win?” I asked, cutting off whatever the foreigner had been about to say.

Hasan spun a bullet between his fingers. “I think that my pockets will be heavy with gold and yours won’t.”

“Sure,” I flung over my shoulder without taking my eyes off the pathetic young rebel standing with his back against the target. He didn’t deserve to be a victim of the desert any more than I did. “And you’ll have more trouble than gold when your customers figure they’ve been duped.” Hasan’s face changed. He hadn’t thought of that. I scanned the crowd, trying to look bored, like I didn’t need this. Like I wasn’t trying to play him just like he was trying to play us. “You’ve got a room full of drunks here who’ve put up some hard-earned money on this. And times are tight lately, what with no raw metals coming in from Sazi. It’s making everyone mighty irritable, I’ve noticed. Don’t you feel it in your bones?”

I didn’t need to check if Hasan was following my gaze; a blind man could see the mass of broke factory

workers and underfed boys and men with already-raw knuckles aching for a release. Even the kid with his split lip lined up as a target was one of the restless. Only he was drunk on the prince's rebellion instead of two-louzi liquor. Hell, I knew the feeling. I was counting on it to carry me all the way to Izman.

"Living under our sun doesn't exactly give men a cool head. Especially, say, if an Eastern Snake and a Blue-Eyed Bandit were to start talking out there." I looked at Hasan out of the corner of my eye, praying that he wasn't about to have me shot. "I'll tell you what, though. I can help you out."

"Can you, now?" Hasan scoffed, but he was still listening.

"Sure. I'll forfeit and take the kid's place. For a thousand fouza."

The foreigner rounded on me, saying something in a language I didn't know but that sounded like cursing. "Are you crazy, kid?" He switched back to Mirajin. "You want to get shot instead of him?"

"If I'm lucky, he'll miss me." I felt my chest rising and falling with each shallow breath. The kid was rocking back and forth on the sand that I was sure was filled with glass. He had bare feet, but he didn't whimper.

"Are we shooting or what?" Dahmad bellowed, chucking his empty bottle at the kid, missing him by a foot.

I was still watching Hasan; the sale wasn't made yet.

"If I'm not lucky, you don't have to pay me a thing and your crowd gets blood."

Hasan's lip curled up nasty-like. "And everybody goes home happy."

"Except the dead Bandit," the foreigner said, low enough that I was the only one who heard. He raised his voice. "We'll throw the game." The foreigner's eyes hadn't left me, though he was talking to Hasan. I opened my mouth to argue, but something in his gaze made me stop. We were on the same side now. "If the Blue-Eyed Bandit here is so determined to get up there as a target, I'll shoot first. I'll miss the bottle without shooting him in the head. Then you let the Bandit shoot. With me as the target. He'll miss, too." My shoulders felt tight, like my arms knew I couldn't bear to miss a shot. But he was trusting me. So I nodded ever so slightly. "Your champion wins by default. We all get out of here without a bullet hole in us."

"And with the money," I piped up before the foreigner could make us both honorable and poor.

"We leave with a thousand from the house winnings. Each."

"I'll give you a hundred each," Hasan said.

"Eight," I retorted.

"Five and you're grateful I don't send someone after you to break your fingers and bring me my money back."

"Done." Five hundred wasn't a thousand, but it was better than nothing. And I might still be able to get to Izman on that.

The crowd was beginning to get rowdy. A cry went up from the stands. "Are you yellow-bellied fools going

to shoot? The kid's about to piss himself!"

Hasan tore away from us. "Gents! Who really wants to see this rebel brat get shot at? He's too short by half anyway." Hasan snatched the bottle off the kid's head. "Scram!" The kid stared at him like he was the hangman who'd just cut the noose. Go, I urged silently. Then he was stumbling away.

The pressure on my chest eased even as a murmur of discontent rose. Hasan silenced them with a raised hand. "Wouldn't you rather see these three men with a score to settle take aim at each other?" The uproar from the stands was deafening, feet stamping so hard the whole building shook, down to the nails. "Step up, Bandit!"

I took one long, shuddering breath. Maybe I ought to have thought this through. Or at least held firmer at a thousand. "Come on, kid," a voice by my ear said. "You trust me, don't you?"

I eyed the foreigner's cocksure grin. "I don't even know you."

He reached out and pulled my hat off my head. I was glad I'd thought to shove my hair back under the sheema that was pulled low as my eyebrows, but still I felt bare without the hat. "All the more reason to trust me."

The walk across the barn seemed too long.

Hasan grinned as he balanced the bottle on top of my head. "Better earn your money and not shake, kid. Or everyone'll see the bottle trembling like a girl on her wedding night."

My anger rooted me; the bottle didn't move. Not when the foreigner stepped to the line. Not when he slotted his single bullet into the chamber. Not even when he raised the gun and pointed it straight at my head. Except I couldn't breathe. He took careful aim, adjusting the shot. He was taking his time, and my nerves were fraying by the second.

"Just fire, you coward!" The shout burst from my lips the same second the gun went off. I didn't have time to flinch.

A boo went up from the crowd. And I was still alive to hear it.

I tipped my head and the bottle tumbled unbroken into my hands. I looked, and a bullet was embedded in the wall a hair to the left of my skull. Only then did I start to shake. I wasn't sure if it was from nerves or from excitement. I wrapped my hands around the bottle to hide it either way.

In a blur of boos I walked back to the line. The foreigner passed me halfway across the pit as he walked out to the target. He paused for a second, placing my hat back on my head. "You all right?" he asked.

"Cut it a little fine there." I tugged my hat back down.

"What's the matter, Bandit?" Like he thought something was too damn funny. "Feeling a little less immortal?"

I shoved the bottle at him. "I wouldn't taunt someone who's about to aim a gun at your head." He laughed and kept walking.

And then I was the one standing behind the white painted line and he was the target. I could hit the bottle no problem if I wanted to. What were the chances Dahmad would actually hit the foreigner anywhere fatal? And even if he did, what was the foreigner to me? Not a thousand fouza in prize money.

I fired. The bottle stayed in one piece.

“The game is over!” Hasan cried over the shouts. “Dahmad reclaims his spot as your champion!” Some cheered, likely those holding slips with his number on them.

And slowly a new chant started to go up from the crowd. “Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!”

The champion was weaving unsteadily. “Yeah! I want a shot at the Snake, too.”

The foreigner had pulled the bottle off his head, but now the champion was swaggering over to the line, taking aim and gesturing at him to step back into place.

“They’re right!” Hasan crowed. “We can’t have a winner if Dahmad doesn’t shoot.” He cut his gaze toward me. I understood what he meant clear enough. No winner meant no winnings for the house. And that meant no money for us. “What do you say, Eastern Snake?”

My eyes met the foreigner’s and I shook my head. He held my stare for a long moment, all hints of joking gone. Then he stepped back and set the bottle on his head.

The champion stumbled up to the line. He could barely stand. He squinted at the foreigner, as if trying to make out where he was exactly. My father had been this drunk most days when he came home from factory work. He got his hands on a gun one of those times. My mother and I would’ve both been dead if he’d been able to shoot straight.

Dahmad raised the gun. From where I was standing I could see he was aiming straight at the foreigner’s chest.

The foreigner had beaten the champion last time. Dahmad was drunk enough to think revenge was a better idea than winning. And a man was a big enough target for even a drunk to hit.

As the champion’s hand squeezed down on the trigger, Hasan’s earlier words crashed down around me. There were no second shots in this game. I flung my body sideways without thinking and crashed into Dahmad.

The shove sent the bullet three feet to the left. The liquor sent Dahmad down into the sand while I staggered to find my footing, clutching my arm.

The crowd went up like a powder keg that had been waiting for the right spark.

They knew they’d been tricked, but no one seemed to know how. Some were screaming that the foreigner and I were in it together; others were shouting that Hasan had scammed them. In an instant they were rushing the bet wranglers.

“Son of a whore!” A pair of hands grabbed me by the front of my shirt. Dahmad was back on his feet and he had me clear off the ground, my toes dragging in the sand. I started to thrash, but he shoved me back against

the wall of the pistol pit, knocking the air out of my lungs. And then there was a knife in his hand. Dahmad's face was close to mine, his teeth bared, his breath reeking of spirits hot against my cheek. "I'm going to gut you from navel to nose and leave you here picking your insides up off the ground, boy."

The foreigner's hand clamped over the champion's wrist, moving too fast for me to see. But I heard the sickening snap. I dropped to the sand in a heap as the champion fell onto his side roaring in pain, the knife clattering away. I saw bone sticking out of his arm. The foreigner swiped the knife from the ground. "Run," he ordered.

The whole place had gone to hell.

A drunk smashed into a lantern as he careened; it dropped into the stands, shattering in oil and flames.

I turned to make for the entrance, but the brawl was too far gone already. There was no escape that way. The foreigner and I stood, backs against the wall. We were forgotten—the chaos wasn't even about us anymore. The whole barn was filling with smoke. We were going to be choking in seconds.

"I don't suppose you can fly?" he shouted over the noise, pointing his chin straight above us. A window just out of reach, above the stands.

I grinned at him even though he couldn't see it. "I can't fly, but I don't weigh so much."

He understood me perfectly. Linking his fingers together, he created a foothold. I shoved the pistol I was still carrying into my belt. Damned if I'd leave a decent weapon here.

I took a few short steps back and ran. My third step landed my right boot in the foreigner's interlaced fingers and he launched me upward. My arms banged into the ledge with a jolt that was going to leave bruises. His hands were there under me, holding me steady as I dragged myself up the windowsill. The prayer house's roof was an easy drop below, and in a few seconds I was out in the night air. I was dying to make a run for it.

Instead I turned back, bracing my feet against the roof as I pulled him up, until he was out of the window and on the roof beside me.

We jumped down from the old prayer house, rolling as we hit the sand below. A bullet bounced off the wood near my head. "All right, Bandit," he gasped. "Where to?"

Where to? he asked me, in the town with the sky smelling of smoke and fiery chaos blooming in the dark.

I had to get back to my uncle's house. I had to lose him. My little cousin Nasima once got slapped silly for bringing home a mouse she found under the schoolhouse. I could only guess what'd happen to me if I brought a stray foreigner anywhere near home. And that wasn't even banking on what the foreigner would do if he found out I was a girl. "Nah, I'll be all right."

He looked over his shoulder. "Got somewhere to be?"

I was already backing away, eyeing the bar where I'd left Blue, hoping to God the horse was still there. "Thanks for everything." I forced a grin at him even though he couldn't see it. "But I've got to go see a bar about a horse."

And before he could say another word, I bolted.

THREE

“Get your useless self up and to the store, or don’t expect to eat today.” My blanket came off me with a violent rip. I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut against the sunlight and my aunt’s face. “And don’t expect to eat tomorrow either.”

I counted her footsteps as she stomped away. Ten steps and she was clear to the kitchen. I cracked an eyelid. How much sleep had I had? A few hours, maybe. I wanted sleep more than I did food. But burnt dawn light was leaking in and calls to prayer were starting.

I rolled from the mat to the wooden floor, pulling my blanket over my head as I dug around for some clothes. Around me, the six cousins I shared the cramped room with were stirring. Little Nasima sat bolt upright before flopping back down and stuffing the corner of her blanket into her mouth.

You could barely see the floorboards between our mats. Our room looked like a battlefield, clothes strewn everywhere like fallen bodies, schoolwork, mending needles, and the odd book scattered throughout like shrapnel. Only Olia’s corner had a clear floor. She’d even tried to hang a horse blanket from the ceiling to separate herself from her sisters. It took some getting used to, this room.

There’d been only two rooms in my father’s house. The one he and my mother slept in and the big room where we ate and where I slept for almost sixteen years. That room was gone now, with the rest of the house I grew up in.

It took some searching, but I found my good blue khalat shoved in a ball under my mat. It was wrinkled, so I did my best to smooth out the creases with my hands before tugging it quickly on over the plain brown shalvar I wore on the bottom.

Shira sighed into her pillow. “Can you stop crashing around like a dying goat? Some of us are trying to sleep.” In her corner, Olia pulled her blanket back over her head.

I found a boot and dropped it from as high as I could so it hit the floor with a loud thud. Shira flinched. She was the only one of my female cousins I shared blood with. The others belonged to my uncle’s other wives. Aunt Farrah had given her husband three boys, then Shira.

She simpered at me through heavy-lidded eyes. “You look terrible, cousin. Didn’t sleep well?” My fingers faltered on the sash I was knotting around my waist. Shira smirked pointedly. “Looks like you must’ve been tossing and turning, too.” I resisted the impulse to tug my sleeve down over my bruised elbow. Of course Shira knew I’d snuck out. She slept two feet away.

Not that she could’ve guessed where I’d gone. But that wouldn’t stop her from telling if she thought it’d get her something, even if it was just the satisfaction of seeing me get a beating.

“How could I sleep?” I went back to tying my sash with sluggish fingers. “Did you know that you snore?”

Olia snorted under her covers. “See, I told you,” she shot at her half sister. Sometimes I almost liked my next youngest cousin. We used to get along just fine back before I lived under my uncle’s roof and hating me became one of Aunt Farrah’s household rules.

“Though maybe that wasn’t you last night,” I jabbed at Shira. “Hard for a pile of blankets to snore.”

Shira’s bed had been as empty as mine when I’d clambered back through the window after using some of our precious water to scrub the smell of smoke and gunpowder from myself. Judging by the sickly sweet smell of oils on her, she’d been out to see Fazim. He’d probably told her he was going to the pistol pit and coming back rich.

I tried not to smile at the memory of him getting pitched from the competition. I wasn’t even sure Fazim had made it out alive.

We were at a stalemate. I wouldn’t tell so long as she didn’t. After a moment, Shira flopped back onto her bed and started pulling a comb through her hair, ignoring me.

I was running my fingers through my own mess of black hair as I made my way into the kitchen. The boy cousins were already starting to mill around on their way to work, shouting to one another over the prayer bells. No one who worked in the factory had time for prayers except on the holy days. I snaked around my cousin Jiraz, whose uniform was half on, half knotted around his waist as he scratched at a healing burn across his chest. He’d gotten it from one of the machines a few months ago when it belched fire at him unexpectedly. He was lucky he’d lost only a month of work instead of his life.

I grabbed the tin of coffee off the top shelf. It was mighty light. There was sawdust mixed in to thin it out, too. My stomach tightened. Things always got bad when food was low. Actually, things were always bad. They just got worse.

“Farrah.” Uncle Asid walked into the kitchen, rubbing his hand across his face. Nida, his youngest wife, trailed behind, eyes on the ground, hands over her pregnant belly. I turned my attention away just in time to pretend I didn’t notice my uncle’s eyes drag along me. “Is there coffee yet?” Desperate restlessness filled me. I wasn’t staying here. No matter how light the coin purse I wore tied against my middle felt after last night.

“Give me that.” Aunt Farrah snatched the tin with one hand, the other smacking me sharply across the back of the head. I winced. “I told you to go open the store, you hear me?”

“I couldn’t not hear you.” I stepped out of her reach, not that it’d save me from a beating later. I was glad to get the hell out of this house and out of my uncle’s sights, but I couldn’t stop my smart mouth. “Any louder and the whole town could hear you screeching.” I let the door clatter shut behind me as I dashed down the steps and into the street, Aunt Farrah’s threats of a switch to my back fading with every step.

My uncle’s shop and his house were at opposite ends of Dustwalk, which was a whole two hundred and fifty paces to walk. Dustwalk’s single street was as crowded as it ever got, what with the men trudging to the factory and women and old folks rushing to the prayer house before the sun burned away the last of the cooler night air. The familiarity weighed on me. Lately I’d been thinking someone just ought to kill this town out of mercy. No steel was coming down from the mountains. It’d been years since the last Buraqi was spotted. There were a few regular horses left to sell, but they weren’t worth a whole lot.

There was only one thing I’d ever liked about Dustwalk, and that was all the space outside of it. Beyond the flat-faced, dead-eyed wooden houses, you could run for hours and still find nothing but scrub and sand. I resented it now, how far it was from everywhere else. But when I was younger it’d been enough just to get away. Far enough that I couldn’t hear my father slurring that my mother was nothing but a used-up

foreigner's whore who couldn't give him a son. Far enough that no one could see me, a girl with a stolen gun, shooting until my fingers were sore and my aim was good enough that I could've knocked a shot glass out of a drunk's shaky fingers.

The furthest away I could ever get was when my mother used to tell me bedtime stories of Izman. Only when my father couldn't hear. The city of a thousand golden domes, with towers that'd scratch the blue off the sky, and as many stories as there were people. Where a girl could belong to herself and the whole city was so rich with possibilities that you almost tripped over adventures in the street. She read me the stories of Princess Hawa, who sang the dawn into the sky early when Izman was attacked by Nightmares in the night. Of the nameless merchant's daughter who tricked the Sultan out of his jewels when her father lost his fortune. And she read me the letters from her sister Safiyah.

Safiyah was the only person I'd ever heard of who'd gotten out of Dustwalk. She ran away the night before she was meant to be married and made it all the way to Izman. Letters came from her in the capital to my mother with a caravan every once in a blue moon. They talked about the wonders of the city, a bigger world and a better life. Those were the times my mother would talk most about Izman. How we were going to leave and go and join Safiyah someday.

She stopped talking about it on the hottest desert day anyone remembered in a long time. Or maybe just one of those days that folks remembered so well after because of what happened. I was as far into the desert as I could get without losing sight of the house. The sun was glaring so hard off the six empty glass bottles I had lined up that it was making me squint, even with my sheema pulled up to my nose and my hat low over my eyes as I took aim. I remembered swatting at a fly on my neck as I heard three gunshots. I stopped. But I didn't wonder much. This was the Last County. Then the smoke started to come up.

That was when I ran back into town.

My father's house was on fire. Later, I'd find out my mother shot my father in the stomach three times and then dropped a match to the house. But all I remembered understanding then was relief when they dragged my father's body out of the house. He wasn't even my real father. I remembered my mother trying to run to me before they dragged her off. And my throat going raw from screaming when they put the noose around her neck.

Dreaming about the places my mother talked about stopped being enough when the trapdoor dropped open below her feet.

I was just about halfway across town when I noticed the crowd forming in the big gap next to the prayer house, where the house I grew up in used to be. I spotted Tamid's too-neatly parted dark hair through the crowd. I shoved through bodies until I was next to him. People tended to stand clear of Tamid. Like they thought they might catch a limp from him. It left that much more room for me.

"What are we staring at?" I moved to take the place of the wooden crutch under his left arm. It worked fine and all, but the stupid boy kept getting taller, and every time somebody bothered to build him a new crutch, he'd go and grow again. He flashed me a smile that I returned with a stuck-out tongue.

"What's it look like?" He passed the crutch back to Hayfa. She was the only servant in town, on account of Tamid's family being the only one that could afford both to buy food and to pay someone to cook it. He rested his weight against me. Tamid was pale as sin for desert folk. But at least his tall, skinny frame looked

less hunched today.

At first, in the glare of sunrise, all I saw was the familiar blackened brick of the Sultan's weapons factory on the edge of town. The only reason the hellholes around here were allowed to exist was to serve the factory. Then I caught the glint of the sun on polished metal.

The Sultan's army was coming.

They marched in lines of three abreast, down from the hills. Their gold sheemas covered them from the sun, and their sabers hung from one hip, guns from the other, white zouave tucked neatly into their boots, and gold shirts cinched at their hips. Their march was slow but inevitable. It was always inevitable.

At least there were no blue uniforms dotted among the white and gold. Blue uniforms meant the Gallan army. The Sultan's army might not make life easy, but they were still Mirajin, and we were their people.

The Gallan were foreigners. Occupiers. They were dangerous.

Politics and history weren't exactly what folks talked about in our end of the world, but the way I heard it, our most exalted Sultan Oman had figured two decades back that he was better suited to rule Miraji than his father. So he made an alliance with the Gallan army. The foreigners killed his father and anybody else who refused to bow to him as Sultan. And in return he let the Gallan army set up camp in Miraji and take the guns we made, to go off and win their wars on far-off shores.

"Aren't they back from Sazi a bit soon?" I squinted into the dawn, trying to count them. Seemed like there weren't as many as usual.

"You didn't hear? The pistol pit in Deadshot burned to the ground last night." I stiffened, hoping Tamid didn't notice. "There was some riot. My father heard this morning; something to do with the Rebel Prince. He says the army's coming down from the mountains to sort it out."

"To hang drunks and gamblers, you mean." The Sultan's army had passed through on their way to Sazi only a few days ago. They'd gone to see the mines, probably to find out if they were worth salvaging. It was unsettling to have them back so soon. Normally the Mirajin Fifteenth Command came through every three months to collect the weapons the factory churned out and take them for the Gallan.

"Deadshot was always a bed of sin; they had it coming. I was meditating this morning on the golden city of Habadden." Tamid's voice took on a righteous tone. He had a tendency to read the Holy Books until the spines were worn, and I swore he'd started preaching at me more than the Holy Father did lately. "Their people were so corrupted by wealth, they turned their backs on God. So God sent the warrior Djinn to cleanse it with their smokeless fire."

Sure, then there were the less holy stories of Djinn seducing women, stealing them from fathers and husbands, and carrying them off to hidden towers.

Those were the good old days. Nobody had seen a Djinni in decades. Now all it took to burn down a den of sin was a girl, a foreigner, and a whole mess of drunks.

"See," Tamid went on, sounding more like my chiding friend again. "I bet you're glad you listened to me about going to the pistol pit." I screwed up my face. It was as good as admitting guilt. His expression

dropped. “You didn’t.”

“Shut up, will you?” I looked at Hayfa, who seemed a little too interested in staring at Tamid’s crutch while pretending not to listen. “You want to get me hanged?”

When he sighed, I felt his disappointment. “So that’s why you look like an exhausted wreck this morning.”

“And folks say you’re not much of a charmer.” But I scrubbed a hand over my face all the same, like I might be able to rub away evidence of last night. “I could’ve won.” I leaned in close to Tamid so nobody would overhear. “If they’d played halfway fair.”

“Didn’t say you couldn’t, Amani.” He didn’t share my excitement. “I said you shouldn’t.”

It was an old argument. We used to have it back when my mother was still alive. When she used to talk about Izman. We stopped having it after she died. I didn’t bother telling Tamid I was still planning on going. Not until the night I overheard my uncle.

After scrambling away from where I had been crouched below the window, I headed straight for Tamid’s house. I’d climbed through his window like I’d done since I was old enough to be able to jump to the windowsill. And just like always Tamid greeted me, trying to look exasperated and failing. I told Tamid I was running out of time, that I needed to get out now or never. While I talked his expression turned less joking.

Tamid had never really understood my need to get out of Dustwalk. Of all folks in this godforsaken town, he should have.

That night he said the same thing he always did. No matter where we went, nothing could change what we were: a cripple and a girl. If we were worthless here, why would it be different anywhere else? I’d tried to tell him different. About the letters from Aunt Safiyah. About a better life. About bigger things than living and dying in this dead-end desert town. But for someone so filled with holy zeal, Tamid wasn’t really the blind faith sort. So I let him figure he’d converted me and didn’t tell him I was planning on strapping my chest down and making a run for it, one way or another. I wasn’t like him; I had to believe Izman was better than here, or there wasn’t much point living anywhere at all.

Now Hayfa cleared her throat. “It’s not my place and all, but you’re about to be late for prayers, sir.”

Tamid and I traded a look, both of us stifling our laughs like we were kids in a classroom again. “Lateness is a sin, you know,” Tamid said with mock sternness.

In school, Tamid and I were late all the time. We used to try to blame his leg, and our schoolteacher used to scold us that lateness was a sin. We might’ve been frightened, except he told us everything was a sin. Tamid had read the Holy Books three times over, and as far as he could find, neither lateness nor talking in lessons nor falling asleep in school was a sin.

Still, Tamid took the crutch back from Hayfa as she tried to usher him toward the prayer house and away from me.

“We’re not done talking about this,” Tamid called as I turned to walk in the opposite direction. I spun long enough to give him a mocking salute before I dashed across the scorching sand toward the shop.

I tossed open the iron grates on the storefront before kicking the door open to get as much sunlight inside as I could before going in. I checked around the bags of salt and shelves stacked with tinned things swimming in thick juices that made them last unnaturally long, watching for any shadow that might move. The doors and windows of the store were edged in iron, just like every house in the Last County, but that didn't always stop things from crawling through in the dead of night. In the desert you learned to look out for ghouls in the shadows. Ghouls came in a thousand different forms. Tall faceless Skinwalkers, who'd eat a man's flesh and take his shape so they could feast on his family, too. Small leathery Nightmares, who sunk their teeth into sleeping men's chests and fed off their fear until the soul was sucked out.

Iron was the only thing that'd keep them out. It was the only thing that'd kill them, too. They hid from the sunlight, but the only thing that would really do the trick was a bullet to the skull or an iron knife through the ribs. Iron turned all immortal things mortal. Powerless. That was how the Destroyer of Worlds killed the first First Beings. And that was how humans, in turn, killed the Destroyer of Worlds' ghouls.

There weren't so many ghouls as there used to be. The last person to get killed by one round these parts was a decade ago. But every once in a while, one would crawl over some break in the iron and into the corner shadows of a house and get a bullet to the head for its troubles.

Once I was satisfied that the shop was as empty as a drunk's bottle, I propped open the door to get whatever breeze there was before dumping out what was left of my money on the counter. It came to six fouza and three louzi, no matter how many times I counted it. That wasn't enough to make it out of sight of Dustwalk, let alone to Izman. Even if I emptied the shop till and didn't get caught I wouldn't make it that far.

I needed a new plan. And I needed one soon.

The iron bell on the door rattled, giving me just enough warning to swipe up my pathetic collection of coins before Pama Al'Yamin came in, herding her three boys.

The day wore on with painful slowness while I tried to think my way out of Dustwalk. By late afternoon my chin was dipping to my chest as the heat tried to drag me down into sleep.

The sound of hoofbeats made me look up just in time to see a handful of soldiers clatter past. I scrambled up, my mouth dry. Tamid said the army was coming to deal with Deadshot. So what were they doing here? Had somebody told them about the Blue-Eyed Bandit and pointed them the way of the only girl in the desert who could've played the part?

A shape dove into the shop as fast as a shadow, plastering itself in the blind spot between the door and the window. I felt for the rifle Aunt Farrah kept below the counter. The man didn't come for me, though. He stayed so still, I thought he might have stopped breathing. Another horse rode past without looking in the direction of the shop.

I waited until it was clear before speaking. "Fine day for hiding."

He spun around. His badly wrapped sheema fell away from his face and I saw him clearly in the late afternoon light that leaked through the window. My heart did a strange little jump. The foreigner.

I schooled my face to look impassive. He gave me a smile that didn't match the tension in his shoulders. "Just needed to get out of the sun on a day like this." His voice was sure and smooth, like I remembered from last night. There was no hint of recognition there, and I felt a flicker of disappointment.

“It’s not a big town, you know. They’re bound to look here sooner or later. I’d guess sooner.” Another horse clattered past, then slowed, looping around. It came to a halt outside the shop, and the mounted soldier called something out. Two more horses came into view. A muscle in the foreigner’s jaw twitched. The knife at his side was the same one he’d taken off Dahmad last night. When he’d saved me, and I’d left him to fend for himself. “You might want to find a better hiding place.”

His hand was still playing with the hilt of the knife when he looked up, questioningly.

I stepped back, nodding to the gap below the counter. The soldier was dismounting now. In the second that his back was turned, the foreigner dashed across the short space between the door and the counter.

He vaulted over the counter and landed so close to me, I felt his shoulder brush mine before he ducked down below. I quickly adjusted myself so I was standing square in front of him a second before the soldiers entered. The first one stood in the doorway for a long moment, looking in every corner of the tiny place, the other two flanking him. Finally his scrutiny landed on me.

He was young. His hair was combed back more carefully than most soldiers, and he had a round face that made him look soft. But the gold sash across his uniform told me he was in command.

“Afternoon, sir,” I said in my best shopgirl voice. I was keenly aware of the foreigner below the counter, trying to quiet his breathing.

“Commander to you.” His hand twitched, and he turned the gesture into a straightening of his cuffs.

“Can I help you, Commander?” I’d learned young to give the army false respect.

The two soldiers who’d followed their commander took up position by the door. Like I might make a run for it. One of them was older and looked every inch a career soldier: stiff back, dark eyes straight ahead. The second one was younger than his commander, maybe even younger than me. He slumped in a uniform that didn’t quite fit, with a glazed look on his face. I’d bet that he wasn’t going to live long enough to ever look like a soldier.

“I’m looking for a man.” The commander’s accent was sharp and northern and expensive. I felt the foreigner’s arm brush my leg as he tensed. I didn’t know if it was the soldier’s voice or because he thought I was about to sell him out.

I gave the commander my best guileless blink. “Funny, most men round here are looking for a woman.” The words were out of my mouth before I remembered that he could shoot me in the head and call it justice. The older of the two soldiers coughed, covering a laugh.

The commander just frowned, like he thought I didn’t understand him. “A criminal. Have you seen him?”

I shrugged. “Seen a few people today. Fat Pama and her sons were in a few hours ago, and the Holy Father, too.”

“This man’s not from around here.” His head twitched from side to side, peering around the small store. He started pacing evenly. His steps made the glass bottles of liquor on the shelf behind me clink together.

“Is that right?” My eyes tracked him as he walked to the door of the storeroom and squinted through into the dwindling stacks of tinned food. Our supplies were too sparse to hide anyone there.

As the commander turned back toward me, I noticed a fresh speck of red on the counter. Like a drop of blood. I laid my hand across the stain as casual as I could.

“You’d know if you’d seen him,” the young commander was saying in his tightly coiled accent.

I smiled like my heart wasn’t racing in my chest, telling me to run for the hills. “Like I said, not many folks round here today. Not many foreigners, neither.”

“You sure about that?”

“Well, I’ve been here all day. It’s quiet on account of the heat and all.”

“You’d be clever not to lie to me, girl.”

I bit my tongue. He was barely older than I was. Eighteen. Nineteen at most. Probably the same age as the foreigner.

I crossed my arms, careful to hide the bloodstain, and leaned over the counter with a smile. “Oh, I don’t lie, Commander. Lying is a sin after all, isn’t it?” Where was Tamid when I needed him to share a joke?

But to my surprise the younger of the two soldiers spoke up. “This desert is full of sin.”

The commander looked toward his soldier in the same moment I did. I expected him to get a sharp reprimand for speaking out of turn. But the commander didn’t say a word. No wonder the older soldier didn’t work too hard to hide his laugh. No commander who wanted respect would let a soldier talk out of line like that.

The young soldier met my gaze and I realized with a start that his eyes were as blue as mine. I’d never met another Mirajin with light eyes. Desert dwellers had dark hair, dark skin, and dark eyes. It was the Gallan who had pale features.

Just because they were entitled to our weapons, the Gallan army seemed to think they were entitled to everything else in the desert. A couple of years back the men of Dustwalk hanged pretty young Dalala Al’Yimin after a Gallan soldier took a bit too much of a shine to her. All the women in town comforted Dalala’s mother by saying how it was the best thing to do, considering she wasn’t any good to anyone now he was done with her. That night I’d looked at my own blue eyes and thought of the Gallan with their pale eyes and light hair. For years I hadn’t really understood what my father meant when he’d get into one of his drunken rages and call my mother a foreigner’s whore. But I was fourteen then, old enough to understand that folks didn’t actually believe the dark-eyed desert man my dark-eyed mother was married to was really my father. I figured my mother had just been smarter than Dalala. She’d gotten herself married to Hiza in time to pretend the reason she was swelling up with child was him, and not some foreign soldier who’d caught her alone and against her will on some dark desert night. And by the time I came along with my contrary eyes, there was no admitting I was anything but Hiza’s daughter, not in this town.

Seemed the scrawny soldier had a smart mama like mine. Just not smart enough to keep him out of the army. His mother’s husband would’ve wanted to get rid of him, I reckoned. That’s why he was in uniform too young and too underfed and too smart-mouthed to last all that long.

As his blue gaze met mine, the desert heat suddenly seemed to become stifling. The shop closing in around us, the air getting thick with nervous heat. I felt a bead of sweat roll down the back of my neck.

“Quite so, Noorsham.” The commander’s voice pulled my attention back to him abruptly, as he gave another nervous tug at his sleeves. He gestured to his two soldiers, a sign. The older soldier leaned toward the younger soldier and said something to him before leading him outside, gripping him tightly by the elbow. It struck me as a strange gesture from one soldier to the other.

I didn’t have any time to consider it though. Because just like that I was alone with the commander. And the foreigner I was hiding. And it occurred to me, he might’ve just been getting rid of anyone who might interfere. I touched my hand to the rifle under the counter.

The commander planted his arms on either side of me so he could stare straight down at me.

“This man, he’s dangerous. He’s a mercenary, and his ilk turn on a coin. There is a war going on.” Like he thought I could have lived sixteen years without noticing the Gallan soldiers in our desert. “Miraji has more enemies than you can understand. And any one of them could be paying him. If it suited his purposes, he’d slit a girl’s throat wide open. Except he’d do other things to her first, if you catch my meaning.” My mind went back to last night, to the stranger who’d stepped in front of a gun to save a kid. “If you do see him, you’d better tell your husband.”

I frowned, faking confusion. “I don’t have a husband.”

“Your father, then.” He pulled away from me, straightening his cuffs with a twitch.

“Don’t have one of them around, neither.” I kept playing dumb. “I could tell my uncle, though, if that’d do?”

The commander nodded, seeming satisfied that I was just duller than a bag of rocks instead of a liar. I watched him all the way to the door.

But I was never good at keeping my mouth shut. “Sir—Commander!” I called out, keeping my eyes down, like a good respectful girl in the presence of an officer. With my head down, I was staring straight into the foreigner’s eyes. Something darted across his face, and for a moment I wondered if he recognized me from last night after all. “This mercenary. What’s he wanted for, anyhow?”

The commander paused on the porch. “Treason.”

I raised my eyebrows at the foreigner, a question. Below the counter, he winked at me and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling back. “Well, then, I’ll keep an eye out for him, sir.”

I waited until I couldn’t hear the commander’s horse anymore before reaching down to pull the foreigner to his feet. “Treason?”

“You’re a good liar.” A small smile still played over his face. “For someone who doesn’t lie.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice.” His hand was lingering on mine, fingers against my pulse. I dropped my arm and looked up. That was when I noticed the red staining his white shirt, same as the blood on the counter.

“Turn around.” I sucked air through my teeth. The whole back of his shirt was a mess of red. “I don’t mean to worry you and all,” I said, trying to keep my voice calm, “but have you noticed that you’ve been shot?”

“Ah.” Looking at him closer now, I could see he was clutching the counter to stay upright. “I’d almost forgotten about that.”

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