



THE PALACE OF SINNERS AND SAINTS

A Novel

AMMAR MERCHANT

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PROLOGUE

AHMAD HAIKAL WAS AFRAID of wolves. He'd never seen one in person. They weren't native to the island of Borneo, and he had never left the Sabah region of Malaysia or wandered far from his small town of Beaufort.

When he'd been a boy, however, he had seen a horror movie that featured the beasts. It left him scarred. His mother comforted him by promising that because of where they lived, he'd never actually come across the fearsome creatures.

For over thirty years, her words had been true.

Then the stranger walked into Ahmad's tiny, failing roadside restaurant.

He was tall and had shoulder-length, unkempt black hair with hints of gray. His eyes, under thick, sweeping brows, were dark. A shaggy beard covered a face that was . . . well, Ahmad was not one to be unkind, but this man was not pretty. His features, like the rest of him, seemed to be carved out of stone, which was a great thing for muscles but not so great a thing for a nose.

He wasn't Malay, likely hailing from India or Pakistan or Bangladesh, which wasn't unusual in this part of the world. What was unusual was his height, his bulk, and the menace he radiated.

Ahmad stepped back, moving away from the massive wok in which

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he was deep-frying bananas. A moment passed before he realized what he'd done, after which he shook his head. There was no reason to be afraid of the man.

At least that's what he tried to tell himself, but the primal part of his brain, which recognized a predator when it saw one, would not stop crying wolf.

Reminding himself that he had recently gotten used to being around dangerous men, Ahmad called out a greeting. Not knowing whether his new customer spoke Bahasa Malaysia, he used some of the little English he had.

"Hello, sir."

The stranger didn't respond. Instead, he stood by the entrance and surveyed the place, taking in the cheap, plastic furniture, the rickety oscillating pedestal fans in every corner, and the white concrete walls with their peeling paint. Eventually, his gaze found the other seven men present.

They were former members of the Abu Sayyaf group—part terrorists, part pirates. They were also the reason Ahmad's business had cratered. They'd fled to Beaufort from the Philippines and had taken an unfortunate liking to his food. A few of them seemed to always be around, and as a result other locals now avoided his establishment.

Driving them off was out of the question. Attempting to do so would mean his life. Since their arrival four months ago, several tourists had been held for ransom, there had been shootings and robberies and a few murders. Killing was their work, and they seemed to like their jobs.

They were there that afternoon, hunched over their usual table, cackling over crass jokes while waiting for their food. They paused to study the stranger when he strode in, like hyenas hungry for a bite. Instead of harassing him, like they did everyone else, they looked away quickly and went back to their conversation, speaking now in more subdued tones.

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Smiling a little at their reaction, Ahmad called out again. “Order here, sir.”

The stranger ambled up to the counter and, with bandage-wrapped hands, reached into the back pocket of his worn jeans. He pulled out a folded article cut from a newspaper. It was in some language Ahmad didn’t know, but there was a picture of a smiling young woman on it he recognized.

Cilek Osman was one of the first foreigners who’d disappeared after the “retired” Abu Sayyaf men had set up in Beaufort. She had been a nineteen-year-old with dreams of becoming a travel vlogger. She’d come to nearby Kota Kinabalu to snorkel.

Her body had been found floating through town on the Padas River. There had been no ransom demand in her case. Ahmad had heard the Abu Sayyaf men laughing as they talked about what they’d done to her.

When he saw her face now, Ahmad couldn’t help but look in their direction.

The stranger noticed, nodded, and said, “The furniture here looks cheap.”

Ahmad, who had been expecting him to ask about the girl, started. “Yes, cheap food. You eat?”

“I was talking about your stuff. You didn’t spend a lot of money on it. It won’t be a big loss if it gets broken.”

Ahmad shrugged.

“Just start a tab.”

“What is ‘tab’?”

“Keep a record of your damages.”

“No order?”

The stranger sighed and started undoing the bandage on his right hand. His knuckles were skinned raw and bruised purple. “What’s good?”

“Nasi lemak ayam with sambal very good. Spicy okay?”

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“Sure. You work on that.” The stranger gestured toward the former Abu Sayyaf men with his head. “I’m going to talk to them.”

“Sir,” the restaurateur leaned forward and whispered urgently, “they dangerous, yeah?”

“I’m dangerous too.”

That was easy to believe. Still, Ahmad wanted him to understand what he was about to start. “They hurt people.”

“So do I.”

“You came for . . .” Ahmad fumbled around for the word “revenge,” couldn’t find it, and decided to do without. He gestured toward the picture of Cilek Osman. “Your daughter?”

The stranger’s expression darkened and for a moment it seemed like the guess was accurate, but he eventually shook his head. “Her father hired me. These guys are the ones who took her, right?”

Ahmad swallowed, licked his lips, then told him the truth: “Yes.”

“Good.” The stranger pointed at the bananas Ahmad had been frying, which he’d forgotten about, and which were now starting to burn. “I’ll take those too.”

“I make new. How many—”

The stranger’s left hand darted out and grabbed the huge wok by one of its handles. Lifting it effortlessly, he marched to the Abu Sayyaf table. All seven men there looked up at his approach. He swung the wok, spraying them with boiling oil. They screamed as it hit their faces, sizzling as it burned their skin and seared their eyes. Howling and clutching their heads, they rolled out of their seats.

The stranger grabbed the pirate closest to him by the hair, held him in place, and slammed the hot cast-iron wok on the man’s nose with staggering force. Blood sprayed everywhere. The stranger did this again and again and again, until the criminal dangled in place limp and lifeless, like a puppet without strings.

He turned his attention to one of the men rolling on the floor next

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to him. He pinned his quarry in place by putting a heavy boot on his chest, then dropped the wok on top the man's face, so that it muffled his screams. Then the stranger stomped on the wok viciously, repeatedly, until there was a crack and his target's cervical spine snapped.

A terrorist who'd been spared the brunt of the initial assault came at the stranger with a knife. The stranger stepped aside and tossed him toward Ahmad, who shrieked and ducked behind a counter.

From where he was hiding, Ahmad saw the stranger hold the terrorist's face above his stove. The sick smell of burning hair and flesh filled the air, joined by cries straight out of hell.

Ahmad closed his eyes, cowered in a corner, and listened to punishment being meted out. Minutes later, there was silence, followed by the sound of running water.

Ahmad slowly got to his feet and saw that the stranger had taken the bandage off his left hand too and was washing blood off of himself.

Seven bodies lay on the floor of Ahmad's restaurant. A crowd had gathered outside and was looking on in silence. In the distance, the call for the Asr prayer started.

The stranger looked around for a towel, found none, considered his own gore-covered clothes, then walked over to Ahmad, grabbed the restaurant owner's shirt, and used it to dry his hands.

When he was done, the stranger took out his wallet, counted out a thousand ringgit, and dropped them on the counter. "To fix up your place," he explained. "And for the meal. I think I should take it to go."

"To go?" Ahmad echoed dully.

"It's time for Asr and then I have a plane to catch."

"You kill, then you pray?"

The stranger shrugged. "It's when I need forgiveness most."

Ahmad stared at him.

The stranger tapped at his left wrist, at an imaginary watch that wasn't there.

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“Okay. Nasi lemak ayam with sambal. You said spicy, yeah?”

“Yes.”

Still trying to process what had happened, Ahmad drifted back into his kitchen. “Can I get a name for your order?”

“Mirza,” the stranger said.

Part One

THE COST OF CONSCIENCE

ONE

PRINCE MAHMUD IBN HABIB fidgeted in his seat, staring at every passenger who boarded their small Air Asia flight, trying to determine if they were a threat.

His fiancée, Renata Bardales, knew it was a useless exercise. Mahmud wouldn't be able to pick an assassin out of a church choir. She suspected that in his imagination they looked like bad guys out of movies—dressed in black, dripping with malice, the evil in their hearts writ large on their faces.

That just wasn't true. Professional killers—the good ones, at least—often weren't easy to spot. A smiling waitress or air hostess could hand you a poisoned drink. Your life might end in a fatal car accident caused by an innocuous, exhausted-looking man in a wrinkled suit. Just about anyone you came across could be a merchant of death.

Ren didn't point that out to Mahmud, of course. He was more than anxious enough already. There was no reason to take him further out of his depth.

He was royalty after all, and had been raised like all Aldatani princes were, flying around in private jets, attending prestigious schools, ensconced in a cocoon of privilege and safety alien to most of the planet. He didn't know how murderous the world could be.

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Ren, who had grown up in an “orphanage” where she’d been trained to fight and kill, was much better equipped to deal with being prey than he was.

So, even though being patient took some effort, she decided not to be irritated by his wide-eyed antics. Instead, she reached over, took his hand in hers, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Relax. It’ll be fine, habibi.”

Renata’s use of the Arabic endearment, which had stopped feeling foreign on her tongue, made him smile a little. It wasn’t a sight she saw very often these days.

“Inshallah,” he said. “I am just worried we stayed in Chiang Mai too long. We should have moved right after my last piece went to print. What if my cousin has found us? I’m sure he’s looking for me more intently than ever before.”

“Well, kings don’t usually appreciate attempted coups. Quien siembra vientos, cosecha tempestades.”

Mahmud raised his eyebrows. “What does that mean?”

Ren didn’t translate the proverb for him. She didn’t tell him it meant that “whoever sows the wind, reaps the storm,” because even though he’d never said it, she knew Mahmud felt terrible that his decision to oppose the tyranny of the Aldatani throne had completely altered the kind of life they’d expected to have together.

A year ago, when his father had called for massive democratic reforms in Aldatan, including the provision of rights like free speech and fair elections, Mahmud could have disavowed him.

Mahmud wouldn’t have been a hunted man then. He would’ve been a hero to his government, but he wouldn’t have been someone she could love.

As it was, Mahmud—though abroad—had joined his father’s cause and launched a social media campaign against the oppressive regime of his paternal cousin, King Nimir. He’d also published several exposés in Western newspapers detailing exactly how Aldatan surveilled and blackmailed its citizens, forcing them into either silence or submission.

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His last article had been particularly incendiary, as it revealed the hypocrisy of his cousin, who pretended to be a pious Muslim because Aldatan used religion to control its people. The truth, however, was that the king was fond of succumbing to his baser instincts.

It was sure to have earned Mahmud his monarch's renewed wrath, which was no trivial thing. Many who supported Mahmud's father, Habib, had been jailed, killed, or disappeared. Habib himself hadn't been seen or heard from in ten months. The Aldatani journalists with whom Mahmud had worked in the past were all corpses now. Mahmud himself had almost been kidnapped twice in Cairo.

He and Renata had been on the run since then, moving from city to city, country to country, trying to escape the reach of the Aldatani sovereign.

As she saw him scan the onboarding passengers with terrified eyes, Renata could see that the strain of it all was getting to him.

"Remember there's help waiting for us in Bangkok," she assured him.

"Your brother might try to help us, but he's just one guy. What can one man do against the might of an army and the weight of a crown?"

Renata shrugged. "That depends on the man, don't you think?"

Renata didn't know much about Bangkok, but the drive from Suvarnabhumi Airport to the hotel where her "brother" was staying was enough to make her understand just how crowded a place it was.

They arrived late at night, but the city was still congested. She'd been to Los Angeles and Paris and London, and none of those cities could compete with the rush on the roads of Thailand's biggest metropolis, where bikes wove through traffic and cars seemed to get impossibly close to each other as they attempted to inch toward their destinations.

As their luxury cab neared the Al Meroz Hotel, however, it began to

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pick up a little speed, and Renata realized they were heading away from the city center and the kind of glitzy places at which her fiancé liked to stay. Irfan Mirza seemed to have picked an establishment a little removed from the action that attracted so many to Bangkok. She wondered what that said about the kind of man he'd become.

She had seen him three years ago, at a “family” reunion, but they hadn't spoken much. Mirza's body language had made it clear that he did not want to be there. She figured he had only attended because the gregarious Finn Thompson, another “brother” of hers, had insisted.

Ren had never understood how the taciturn, dour Mirza and the cheerful, extroverted Finn had become close. It was like midnight befriending noon. It shouldn't have worked, but it did.

She didn't know Mirza well—few people did—but when she found herself in trouble she couldn't get out of, his was the first name that came to mind.

This wasn't entirely rational. Some part of her, she knew, was still the weak little girl who had been kidnapped, trafficked, and purchased by the General. When she had arrived at his “orphanage,” where she'd be forced to train to become a soldier, she'd been beaten and bullied. Other, stronger kids had taken her food and forced her to do their chores. It was the survival of the fittest.

She had soon noticed that other children like her, those in need of protection, found it in Mirza's shadow. She was safe when he was around, as was everyone else who needed help.

It was strange, in that he wasn't their friend, he wasn't sweet or warm or thoughtful. He was just . . . there, an iron shield when needed, completely indifferent otherwise.

Now, decades later, in flying herself and Mahmud to Bangkok to meet him, she knew she was engaging in a ritual she had learned when she'd been young. Like an atheist turning to prayer when faced with a calamity, she was seeking Mirza out because she didn't know what else to do.

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“You’re very quiet, *habibti*,” Mahmud noted beside her.

“I’m just thinking.”

“About?”

“My first trip to Aldatan.”

“When we met,” he remembered with a smile. “That was a good day.”

“The best,” she agreed. “I wouldn’t have been there if it weren’t for Finn and his obsessive need to keep everyone from our orphanage connected.”

“You don’t talk about it much. The orphanage, I mean.”

“No. I don’t.”

Mahmud started to say something or ask something maybe, but then reconsidered. He knew she didn’t like talking about her past, and he was too kind to insist.

She smiled. After a lifetime spent among hard, rough men, she had chosen this slender, gentle, cultured bookworm with whom to spend her life. Presented with a world full of killers, she’d picked someone who would struggle to hurt a fly.

Sometimes—usually after a close brush with the Aldatanis hunting them—she couldn’t help but think about how reassuring having a partner who could hold his own in a fight would be. In those moments, she wondered if she’d made the right decision.

But she knew that they would have demanded answers from her in a way that Mahmud didn’t. He didn’t demand anything from her really. He was happy to just exist where she existed and this, she figured, was love or at least something close to it.

“What is it?” Mahmud asked when she continued to study him with her light-brown eyes.

“You’re good company.”

That earned her a broad grin. “An actual compliment? Are you feeling all right, *señorita*?”

Renata nodded as the car began to slow down. From her window,

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she could see that they'd arrived at a hotel with an array of flags flying outside it. She recognized the ones belonging to Kazakhstan, Algeria, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco.

"It's like the UN," she joked.

"More like the OIC," Mahmud corrected, and at her confused look added, "the Organization of Islamic Countries."

He got out and held the door open for her before the taxi driver could.

Renata followed and looked around at their surroundings as Mahmud reached for his wallet. Her wandering gaze picked up the bright headlights of a van heading in their direction.

She instinctively knew something was wrong. It took her a moment to realize what. The large vehicle wasn't slowing down as it got closer to them. It was, in fact, gaining speed.

Then its driver-side door flew open and a man jumped out, while the van kept barreling toward them.

Renata screamed and launched herself at her fiancé, pushing him out of the way. As they tumbled to the ground, Renata heard the van smash into their cab in a violent collision that shattered glass and crushed steel.

TWO

IN HIS ROOM AT the Al Meroz in Bangkok, Irfan Mirza pulled his rough, bruised hands out of a bucket of ice and stared at them. The swelling and discoloration around his knuckles, which had been getting better before his recent encounter with the Abu Sayyaf men, was worse. The skin there, often abused, had torn again. His joints popped as he made a fist, his fingers stiff because of the cold he'd drenched them in. He wasn't able to entirely stifle a grunt of pain.

On the laptop screen in front of him, Omen Ferris winced on his behalf.

Mirza had no definition for their relationship.

They could be called business partners, except they weren't really. There were times when his work as a mercenary and her work as an "acquisitions expert"—that was to say, a professional thief—overlapped. It made sense for them to cooperate in those circumstances, but they didn't usually split profits or make a habit of collaborating.

He could fairly introduce Omen as his newest friend. They had met a year ago and had gotten so close that they'd started having weekly video calls, like the one they were on now. Mirza wasn't sure exactly how this routine had formed, but he was not at all inclined to break it.

But that was a platonic label. Using it despite his desire for her was

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a bit like calling a wild, desperate, ravenous timber wolf pacing in a cage just a dog.

The fact that he was still married to someone else—even if they had been separated for a decade and their divorce was pending—made being more accurate about his feelings, however, entirely impossible.

Without acknowledging Omen's sympathy, he asked, "Are you still in Hanoi?"

"Yeah. I already have what I came for though. I'm going to head to Da Nang soon. You should meet me there if you can."

"What's in Da Nang? A new gig?"

"No. A beach. Come on. Look at you. You obviously need a vacation."

Mirza grunted and began wrapping fresh cotton bandages tight around his bruises, hoping that the compression would help him heal faster. Even though he took meticulous care of it, his body no longer recovered from the punishment he routinely put it through as quickly as it once had. It'd been the primary tool of his trade all his life. It was the sledgehammer with which he broke people for money. Sometimes—almost always, in fact—their bones tried to break him back.

No one had managed it yet, but it seemed less impossible than it once had.

"At least think about it," Omen urged.

He met her bright-green eyes and smiled without meaning to. "I will."

"I guarantee you'll have a good time."

"We have very different ideas of what that is."

"Yeah, yeah." The redhead rolled her eyes. "Big, bad Irfan isn't happy unless he's bashing someone's skull in. I know. From the look of your hands, you had a blast in Kuala Lumpur."

"I wasn't in KL."

"You said you flew in from Malaysia."

"They have other cities."

"I'm American," she joked. "I can't be expected to know these things."

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When that didn't draw a reaction from him, she added, "Was it at least a well-paying job?"

"No."

"When I tell my friends about you—"

"Why would you—"

"—they assume," Omen pressed on, "you make bank. Apparently, mercenaries can get a small fortune if they're with the right PMC."

Mirza nodded. That was true for private military companies based in the West, especially the United States. He, however, lacked the necessary security clearances to work for the best of those.

The PMCs he had been employed by in the past had been less than reputable, and they'd been contracted by governments with standards that weren't as exacting as those in the more developed parts of the world. Their pay, by extension, wasn't as good either, though it was still more than he earned solo.

Even so, Mirza preferred the freedom he had now, the freedom to choose his own clients, even if it meant leaving money on the table.

"I'm just saying," Omen added, "your life could be easier."

Mirza grunted. "I'm not interested in that."

"What are you interested in?"

There was something about her tone when she asked that question that made him pause before answering. Turning his full attention to her, it struck him, as it often did, how stunning she was, with her silky, copper-red hair and delicate features. It was enough to make him wish he were a different man—handsome, gentler, more romantic.

But he was who he was—the human version of a baseball bat wrapped with barbed wire—and there was no help for it. So, instead of giving her the first answer that popped into his mind, he said, "I'm trying to do some good in the world."

"By beating people up?"

"That's the only way it's fun."

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Omen shook her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

That wasn’t entirely untrue, so he just shrugged.

“Anyway, let me know if you can make it. Though I guess that’ll depend on what your sister wants. Have you met up with her yet?”

Mirza thought about correcting her but didn’t. As far as he was concerned, the children he had grown up with weren’t his family. Saying they were felt like hiding from the truth that he simply hadn’t had one of those when he was young.

Well, that wasn’t exactly true. He’d had parents once. That was unavoidable, but his mother had died when he was six, and his father had disappeared shortly thereafter. He’d spent his early childhood as an urchin in Karachi, begging, stealing, fighting, and hustling to survive.

That had changed when he’d caught the attention of the General, a retired Turkish military officer who had the grand dream of assembling a specialized, private army of operatives whose skills he could put up for sale.

Mirza had been taken to Turkey, where he grew up training with other lost, forsaken, or vanished children from all over the globe.

It had been a mad, imperfect plan that had ultimately failed. Telling them they were siblings, that he was their father, hadn’t made the children under the General’s control love him. They weren’t loyal to him and slowly, over time, they stopped returning from the missions they were sent out on.

Some had gone on to try to build regular, mundane lives for themselves and had cut themselves off from their “family.” Others—mostly those who were still soldiers of fortune—stayed in touch with each other. Finn Thompson, Mirza’s closest friend, kept them all connected as best he could. He’d even gone so far as to arrange a reunion once and had gotten Mirza to attend only after a great deal of cajoling.

Finn was the one who’d connected Mirza to Renata Bardales, who needed help keeping her fiancé safe. Mirza didn’t know what the details

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were, exactly, but he wasn't looking forward to the assignment. He'd considered turning it down and would have done so, in fact, if Finn hadn't insisted he take it on.

"I haven't seen her," he told Omen. "They're flying in from Chiang Mai. I'm meeting them for breakfast tomorrow."

"You could sound more enthusiastic about it."

"I can't. It's a protection detail."

Omen chuckled. "And you hate those."

"I'm wasted on defense."

"That's not it. You like having the initiative. When you're guarding someone, you're forced to be reactive. You don't enjoy it because you love being in control."

"Who doesn't?" he asked.

"You'd be surprised. People have all kinds of kinks."

Mirza was still trying to figure out how to respond to that when he heard a faint scream followed by a loud crash.

THREE

RENATA'S SKULL SLAMMED AGAINST the edge of a sidewalk as she fell. Something in her vision shifted, like the world had gone out of focus for a moment. She clutched her head. It felt wet. When she pulled her hands back, they had red on them.

Mahmud peered over at her, concern etched on his face. He didn't seem afraid. It hadn't registered with him that someone had just tried to injure or kill them. He seemed to have assumed it was an accident. She had to warn him of the danger they were in.

Ren forced herself to sit up and groaned.

"Stay still," Mahmud insisted. "I will ask them to get you a doc—"

Squealing tires cut his words off. A second van came up to the Al Meroz and five men wearing balaclavas poured out. Renata could tell from the way they carried themselves, by how imposing they were, that they weren't civilians or even simple thugs or amateurish mercenaries. They moved like professionals.

Her suspicions were confirmed when she saw that one of them had pulled up the sleeves on his shirt. On his forearm, she saw the tattoo of a roaring predatory cat, its ears up and eyes wide.

Her heart seemed to falter, like it would stop beating at any moment. Leopards.

King Nimir had sent his legendary death squad for them.

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“Fuck,” she whispered.

At least they weren’t carrying guns. They had likely followed them to Bangkok from Chiang Mai and hadn’t had time to obtain weapons. Thailand had strict laws regarding firearms. It wasn’t easy for foreigners to procure them quickly.

Not that it mattered. These men were more than lethal enough unarmed. Even at the peak of her fighting ability, Renata knew she would’ve struggled to match even one. Now, after a decade of rust, five . . . no, six—the driver of the first van had run over to join them—Leopards posed impossible odds.

Mahmud, still focused solely on her, protested as she struggled to her feet. He remained oblivious to any danger until two of the men jogged up to each side of him, grabbed him by his arms, and yanked him away from Renata. His expression shifted from confusion to annoyance to outrage to panic as he realized what was happening.

“Let him go!” Renata shrieked. The words wouldn’t have any effect on their assailants, but a crowd had started to gather outside the Al Meroz as employees and guests were drawn out by the commotion. She hoped some of them would intervene. With the force of numbers, perhaps even the deadly Leopards could be subdued.

No one moved to help.

Mahmud was dragged closer to the waiting van, its engine still running.

Left without a choice, Ren launched herself at the closest Leopard.

She aimed a blow at his neck. He ducked out of the way and delivered a swift counterpunch to her chest. It sent her stumbling back. There was a gasp from the onlookers.

She recovered as best she could and tried a kick at his abdomen. He caught her leg and brought a heavy chop down on her shin, causing Renata to cry out and limp back as he released her.

One of the men dragging Mahmud away called out, “Bring the bitch. Just for fun.”

Laughing, the Leopard grabbed at her. Renata shoved his hand away

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and managed to strike his right cheek. He seemed shocked for a second, then growled and reached for her again. She wasn't able to stop him in time, and he got ahold of her hair. Renata cried out and he . . . released her.

A titan had planted himself between the Leopard and the van into which Mahmud was being loaded. Despite the fact that she hadn't seen him in years, despite the long hair and beard he now sported, Renata instantly recognized the intense dark eyes and mighty frame of Irfan Mirza.

He stood before the Leopard, fists clenched, so obviously a threat it was no wonder the soldier had felt compelled to let Renata go.

"Who—"

The Leopard never got to finish his sentence. Mirza's left fist collided with the man's solar plexus faster than Renata would have imagined he could move.

Mirza followed up with a headbutt, then a swinging elbow to the side of the staggering Leopard's face.

The Aldatani soldier retaliated, catching Mirza with a kick to his right thigh, then one to his left shoulder. That seemed only to drive Mirza to move faster, to hit harder, with more brutality. As the two men fought, Renata saw her brother for what he was. A berserker who happily took damage to inflict damage, using his pain to spur his body to its limits.

It wasn't smart, but it seemed to work.

It was over in less than a minute, with a member of one of the world's premier assassination squads lying unconscious on the ground. A grinning Mirza, bleeding from the side of his mouth and from a cut above one of his eyebrows, turned to face the other five Leopards. He extended an arm and gestured for the men to come at him.

"You're insane," one of them said.

Renata had to agree. What did he think this was? A kung fu movie?

"I am."

"You'll die here," another Leopard warned.

Mirza cranked his neck, then shook his arms, as if trying to shed

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the hurt he was experiencing, like a great hound trying to dry itself, and promised, “Not alone.”

The Aldatanis glanced at each other as if not quite sure what to make of the response. Then two of them stepped forward to fight.

Renata looked back at the bystanders, who were watching in hushed silence. No one seemed any more willing to get involved now than they'd been before. She couldn't blame them.

She couldn't let Mirza fight alone though. So she stepped forward, leg still aching, and stood next to her fellow janissary.

He glanced over at her and grunted, either in disapproval or appreciation, she couldn't tell.

Then, without warning, Mirza charged the Leopards.

It caught her by surprise.

It caught them by surprise too. Mirza speared the chest of one of the men with his shoulder, sending the Leopard flying back like he'd been gored by a bull.

This left Mirza's flank exposed, and the second soldier caught him with a palm strike to the side of his face.

Mirza fell back a little, snarled, and turned toward the attacker.

They were polar opposites in terms of build. The soldier was wiry and toned. Mirza was all bulk and sinew. He was quick for someone his size. That was how he'd caught his first opponent off guard, but he wouldn't have that advantage this time, and there was no way he was going to be agile enough to match this man.

They circled each other for a while, Mirza falling back toward the wrecked cab as the Leopard feinted and advanced.

Police sirens began blaring in the distance.

“Stop playing,” one of the other Aldatani operatives called out. “Finish him and let's go.”

Even though two of them had gone down, Renata could hear the complete confidence in the man's voice. They thought they were toying

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with Mirza. They knew that given enough time, they would win. Their skill and their numbers ensured it.

The Leopard complied, coming at Mirza with a flurry of blows that fell like lightning, zipping past Mirza's defenses, connecting with his jaw, his sternum, his gut and driving him back and then down to his knees, bruised and wounded.

Chuckling, the Leopard stepped back, looking down at the mercenary he'd felled.

Renata started to move forward, but Mirza held a hand out, commanding her to stay where she was.

His other fist closed at his side.

She could see it was bleeding but couldn't figure out why.

Then Mirza lunged to his feet, opening his hand as it neared the Leopard's face. Shards of broken glass from the car accident flew forward. Some got into the eyes of the Leopard, who screamed, his hands darting up belatedly to protect his face. Mirza drove a vicious boot into the man's right knee, then his left, leaving him broken on the ground.

Renata shook her head.

Mirza had planned that. He'd moved himself closer to the ruined cars intentionally, absorbed the punishment necessary to make his quarry believe he really had fallen. Then he'd played the ace up his sleeve. It was—

Her thoughts were cut off at the same time as her breath.

She kicked helplessly against the sudden, relentless pressure that was being applied to her windpipe.

The world was already fading to black in the few seconds it took for her thoughts to catch up with what was happening. While she had been distracted by Mirza's display, a Leopard had slipped behind her. His arm was now wrapped around her neck in a perfectly executed chokehold.

She croaked, trying to call out to Mirza for help, but words seemed impossible to form, and she wasn't sure she would be able to make a sound before the world plunged into darkness.

FOUR

ANOTHER LEOPARD CHARGED AT Mirza. This one had armed himself with a lug wrench.

As Mirza squared up to face the attacker, the gathered crowd, which had been mostly silent so far, began to scream and point. They wanted him to turn around, to look behind him, but there wasn't time for that.

Mirza swayed out of the way of an overhead swing, grabbed the Leopard's hair, and yanked his head back hard. Then Mirza struck the soldier's throat, once and again and again and again, in succession, until his trachea fractured under the barrage.

All fight left the man. He staggered back, wheezing, his eyes frantic as he struggled to breathe. Mirza shoved him to the ground, where he lay writhing and gasping.

By the time Mirza saw what had excited the crowd, the van holding Mahmud was peeling away. He looked for Renata and didn't see her. A few people around him called out that she'd been taken too.

Cursing under his breath, Mirza scanned his surroundings for cars or motorcycles he could give chase in. There were no viable options in sight, just the two wrecked vehicles that had been part of the crash that had drawn him out.

The driveway at the front of the hotel did lead to an underground

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parking structure, but by the time he got to it, commandeered something, and got back, his quarry would be long gone.

He clenched and unclenched his fists, taking deep, calming breaths.

Despite the fact that there was no immediate danger left, no one approached him. In fact, the crowd shrank from his dark gaze. A few brought their phones up in front of themselves, as if they were priests wielding holy crosses and he a fearsome demon who needed warding off.

Ignoring them and the fact that they were recording him, Mirza strode over to the luggage lying by the taxi that had been rammed. He figured it had been hired by Renata and her fiancé.

There were two suitcases beside it, along with a fancy burgundy leather briefcase. Picking up the latter, he carried it to the hood of the cab and—making sure it was pointed away from the witnesses—popped it open.

There was a large tablet inside, but it was secured via a passcode, along with a laptop. There were a few pens, a couple of books, and a USB stick.

He pocketed the drive as surreptitiously as he could.

He would've liked to take the other devices too, but the cops would quickly find out if he did. Anything he was seen removing from the scene they'd want returned as evidence.

With an exaggerated grimace, he shut the case, trying to make it look like he'd found nothing in it all.

An intrepid manager broke away from the pack, wringing her hands as she made her way over. "Are you okay, sir? You're hurt, no? You need a doctor?"

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure? You don't look good."

"That's a preexisting condition," Mirza said. Making his way over to the last attacker who'd come at him, he began a thorough search.

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Like all the others, this man was dressed entirely in black, which Mirza thought was cliché.

There was no identification of any kind, no money, no clues at all. Not that Mirza had expected any. Whatever else these people were, they weren't amateurs.

"They're not Thai," the manager observed from over his shoulder.

That was obvious, so Mirza didn't reward her with anything more than a grunt of acknowledgment.

He spotted the tattoo of a roaring predatory cat on the man's arm and frowned. The symbol was vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it, not without context. Pulling out his cell, he photographed it.

"You don't have to do that, sir."

"No?"

"The authorities will take care of it. The kidnapping of farang, that's the kind of thing they investigate seriously." The manager said this in a tone that was meant to be comforting and would have been if she weren't shaken and harried. "You don't have to worry. I'm sure they'll find your . . . I'm sorry, were those two people your friends?"

"Not really." Mirza rose to his feet. "But they were my responsibility."

"I don't understand."

"Don't worry about it."

"What I'm saying is that in this kind of situation, there's not a lot ordinary people can do."

"True," Mirza replied. "But I'm not ordinary people."

FIVE

MIRZA WAS QUESTIONED AT length by the Royal Thai Police's tourist bureau, which had been designed to deal specifically with foreigners. It was a special division that existed because the rank and file of the force was so corrupt that the government feared exposure to them would sour visitors on their country. Thailand couldn't afford that.

So the locals lived with the moral rot of the authorities placed over them, while foreigners were given a cleaner, more bearable experience.

They made sure Mirza was given medical attention, most of which was focused on extracting a few small shards of glass still embedded in his left hand and stitching up the cuts there. Then he was interrogated. It took an hour and a half. It was wasted time in his opinion.

There were plenty of witnesses to corroborate his story that he'd stepped in to prevent a kidnapping in progress. It was indisputable he'd acted in defense of a third party. Video footage, which was already getting traction online and in the news, backed him up as well. There was no case to build against him.

Even so, they seemed hesitant to just let him walk. He had, after all, wounded four men, two of them seriously. The cops seemed to think that ought to have consequences.

By the time he was back in his hotel room, he had several texts from

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Omen, who was wondering what had happened after he'd run off. He messaged her back, saying there was no reason to worry, and then dialed Finn Thompson.

His childhood friend from the "orphanage" listened in silence as he was brought up to speed, then said, "That's a sudden, heavy rain you're dealing with. Sorry, mate. I convinced you to walk out into this storm and now you're stuck out in the cold on your own. These are dangerous people."

"I figured."

"Have you managed to identify them?"

"Not yet," Mirza admitted.

"Mahmud is—What's that sound?"

"My phone's buzzing. Omen's calling me."

"Conference her in," Finn suggested.

"Why?"

"This is an investigation now. It's brain work and . . . well, hers is bigger than yours. She might be able to help us."

Mirza scowled but did as he was told. As Finn caught Omen up, Mirza went to the worn duffel bag he traveled with, pulled out a couple of pain pills, and chucked them.

"As I was about to tell Irfan," Finn said, "Renata is engaged to Prince Mahmud ibn Habib of Aldatan, cousin to King Nimir, who got the throne around five years ago."

The tattoo he hadn't been able to identify earlier flashed in Mirza's mind.

"Leopards," he said.

"Right," Finn confirmed.

"What're you guys talking about?" Omen demanded.

Mirza walked over to the complimentary bottles of water the staff had left in his room and popped one open. "King Nimir has a unit of commandos he uses for wet work. They're the ones I fought tonight."

"Think assassins," Finn put in. "Excellent ones. Trained by American

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Special Forces, in fact. They're used to silencing any dissenting voices in Aldatan. Rumor has it that they're behind the death or disappearance of many prominent critics of the throne. It's said they recently murdered a journalist in Azerbaijan."

"That's what I love about my country," she said. "Always making the world a better place."

"What does Nimir want with Renata and Mahmud?" Mirza asked.

"With Ren? Nothing. Her boy, though, the king has been hunting for a while. Mahmud is a dissident. His father, Habib, called for a revolution here, for democracy, elections, all of that. Almost had enough military support to topple Nimir. Aldatan would've become a republic."

"Wait," Omen said. "What do you mean 'here'? Where are you?"

"Finn has led the security detail for Aldatan's Culture Minister for . . . how long has it been? Five years?"

"Just about. So, obviously, when Ren came to me and said her fiancé was in trouble, I agreed she needed Irfan. I pushed him to help her because I couldn't. Not only do I already have a job, but I also work for the very government her fiancé wants to overthrow. I didn't know the king had let his Leopards loose, though. If I had, I would've—"

"What could've been doesn't matter," Mirza cut in. "All that matters is what is. My protectees are missing. I'm going to get them back."

"They are more than just clients," Finn protested. "Ren is family."

"Doesn't change the mission. What I need now is a location. We have to figure out where the Leopards are keeping them."

"If they're alive at all," Omen interjected. When silence met her statement, she muttered, "Sorry."

"No. That's fair play," Finn told her. "It's a possibility we have to consider."

"If the Leopards wanted Mahmud dead, they could have killed him right here." Mirza shifted his cell to his left ear. "I wouldn't have been able to stop them. Taking him means they want him alive."

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“Makes sense,” Finn conceded. “Those bastards like to play with their food, though. Could be they took him somewhere to chop him up. That’s what they did to the reporter I told you they killed. They cut him into little bits. Used a dull ax.”

“That’s just a scare tactic. They want people to fear them.”

“You should,” Finn advised. “They’re the best.”

“I took four down.”

“There are fifty of them, Irfan.”

“Forty-six.”

Finn sighed.

“Okay,” Omen broke in. “All this machismo is super sexy and all, but it’s not an actual plan. Do either of you have one of those?”

No one said anything for a few seconds.

Eventually, Finn spoke. “Bangkok has CCTVs, right? The local shades should be able to track the vehicle the Leopards used, at least.”

“I don’t think the Thai police are going to share that footage with me.”

“Not voluntarily anyway,” Omen said. “I could call Bey.”

“You have a bae? I thought you and Irfan were—”

“She’s talking about a hacker we know,” Mirza cut in.

“I think she could help,” Omen explained. “We could try to get access to the cops’ computers. See if they’ve gathered any clues. They’re going to interrogate the soldiers Irfan took down and write reports. Those might have useful information too.”

“Do it,” Mirza said.

“Please,” Finn added wryly. “Any other ideas?”

“Do you have pictures of Ren? Or Mahmud? I could put them on social, ask if anyone has seen them. I’m guessing Irfan is already trending locally for the fight. I could piggyback on that.”

Mirza grumbled, but it was unintelligible.

“I’ll see what I can find and send them to you,” Finn decided. “Thank you, Omen.”