

THE CROWN OF HAWA

By Mundocaso

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Author's note

This story began with a spark—an idea that lit up my mind like a shooting star. It came to me while reading *The 48 Laws of Power*, which might sound strange. How did a book like that inspire a made-up tale? Well, that's the magic of imagination! Ideas can come from anywhere—a song, a story, even a simple moment.

When I was younger, I often left ideas behind. If I got stuck, too busy, or just a little bored, I'd walk away. But this time, I made a promise. I told myself, "No matter what, I will finish this story." Not just to show the world I could do it, but to prove to myself that I could. Because deep inside, I knew—I was meant to create something great.

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PART ONE: THREE LITTLE PIGS

Chapter 1

In the heart of the desert lay Maladh Jadid, a city divided between sky and dust.

Above, the upper neighbourhoods gleamed, where the gates stood high and the wealthy walked, their world untouched.

The upper levels, guarded constantly, serves as the exclusive entry and exit point and is only visitable by people from the lower levels by show of a (work) visa.

Below, the city stretched out—eighty percent of its life clung to the ground, where crime, poverty and pollution shadowed every corner, and the air itself was thick with sorrow.

The people below knew their place—servants in the world above, cleaning homes they could never live in.

And from the streets of the lower city, Azzam emerged.

With tanned skin, dark curly hair, big brown eyes, and a distinctive purple birthmark stretching from his left eyebrow to his nose, he stands out.

Clad in a rust-coloured robe suitable for the desert heat, worn-out black joggers, and sandals, he navigates the complexities of the divided city.

Azzam, having acquired a fake work visa, frequently infiltrates the upper levels to wander and express himself through graffiti.

After tagging the local fruit store, he stepped inside.

Rows of fruits, nuts, and vegetables filled the store, their bright colours mesmerising. Some of them he had never seen before.

The store owner, a heavysset man with a perpetual frown, is mid-conversation with a customer, whose neatly ironed outfit marks him as a resident of the upper deck.

Both the owner and the customer eye Azzam with disdain, annoyed by his presence.

As Azzam browses the exotic fruits, some of which he's never seen, the owner's irritation grows.

The large man steps away from his conversation and barks, "Hurry up, kid! You've been browsing for a few minutes now. This isn't a museum. I'm trying to run a business here."

Azzam giggles, his back turned to the owner. "Almost done, sir."

The owner grunts and mutters, "filthy slum rat."

Returning to the counter, he gives Azzam a final warning: "Stop touching the produce. Either buy something or leave."

Unbothered, Azzam strolled up to the register, holding a large, blue, pinecone-shaped fruit

known as pine custard—a regional delicacy celebrated for its sweet, sour taste and creamy texture.

The well-dressed customer continues to eye Azzam with judgment.

Unfazed, Azzam adopts a posh accent, saying, "Forgive my rags, sir. My butler forgot to wash my suit and tie, so I must dress like this today."

Sensing the sarcasm, the customer rolls his eyes and turns away.

Still, Azzam stood tall in front of the heavysset shopkeeper, hunger glowing in his eyes.

He held out the fruit and tried to bargain.

"This pine custard looks pretty good," he said, "but I think I've seen better at the market. I'm willing to give you two copper coins for it."

"No charity here," the shopkeeper growled, eyes narrowing. "If you like the other ones so much, go buy them there."

Azzam's pride tangled with his hunger.

For a moment, he hesitated.

Then, he gave a small nod.

"I understand, sir," he murmured, his voice heavy with disappointment as he turned to leave.

Behind him, the owner grunted, resuming his conversation as if Azzam had never been there.

But fate was mischievous that day.

Just as Azzam reached the door, a desert rat scurried past, and in his startled stumble, the boy tumbled to the ground.

Nuts and fruits, stolen while browsing, spilled from his pockets like secrets laid bare.

He scrambled to gather them, stuffing them back into his robe, but it was too late.

The owner's rough hand clamped down on his shoulder, his face flushed with rage.

"You thought you could steal from me and walk away, boy?" he hissed, cracking his knuckles with menace. "It's time I teach one of you slum rats a lesson."

The air seemed to thicken as the man's fist curled, ready to strike.

But Azzam, quick as a desert wind, tugged the shopkeeper's pants down in a swift motion and dashed for the exit.

His feet flew across the floor, the sound of shattered glass and cursing echoing behind him.

Jars thrown by the owner exploded against the walls like thunder, but Azzam dodged each shard, his heart pounding louder than the commotion.

The shopkeeper, in his fury, gave chase, but with his pants tangled around his ankles, he tripped and fell, landing face-first on the ground.

The marketplace erupted in laughter, their voices rising like a wave that crashed against Azzam's ears, drawing him to a halt.

He turned, eyes gleaming with mischief, and joined in the laughter as the man struggled to pull his pants up, humiliated and enraged.

With a face as red as the desert sun, the shopkeeper spotted Azzam and roared, "Stop the thief!"

His cry reached the ears of three nearby police officers.

They glanced at one another, their expressions tired, and muttered, "Another slum rat causing trouble."

Together with the humiliated owner, they began their chase, running through the bustling market after the boy.

Azzam, weaving through the crowd like a needle through thread, zigzagged between alleyways, his short stature making him elusive.

Grinning from ear to ear, he enjoyed the excitement, the profanities and shouts of his pursuers fading into the background.

The heavysset owner struggled to keep up, gasping for breath.

He resorted to drinking water from a nearby dog bowl.

"Go on ahead, I'll catch up," he gasped to the officers between sips, leaving them bewildered.

The officers continued the chase, and Azzam heard their faint voices behind him.

His smile widened.

Remembering his emergency exit plan, he pulled out firecrackers he kept on him in case of an event like this.

"They'll never see this coming," smirked Azzam as he talked to himself, intending to drop them behind him to scare off the pursuing men, envisioning his successful escape.

Yet, looking up, he spotted a shadowy figure atop a building, an ominous presence.

Distracted, he collided with a cart of chickpeas.

"My chickpeas!" the cart owner screamed as Azzam and the cart landed in a dirty gutter.

Laughter erupted from every bystander around, even from the police who caught up.

Completely embarrassed, Azzam yelled at everyone to stop, but his pleas went unheard.

The heavysset owner, now having caught his breath, arrived.

His face turned red again.

The police suggested that the embarrassment was punishment enough, but the owner insisted on a suitable punishment.

Dragging Azzam from the gutter, the officers chuckled and left him to fulfil his duties—

sweeping around the shop and removing graffiti from the store building as a form of community service.

In the dim light of the shop, Azzam swept the shards of glass from the jars the owner had thrown at him.

With a hint of defiance, he challenged,

“Shouldn’t you be the one cleaning up the mess since you threw these at me?”

The shopkeeper’s grunt was heavy with disdain.

“You should be grateful, boy, begging for mercy. I could have let the police lock you up, but instead, I chose chores as your punishment. You cost me a loyal customer after all, so I won’t listen to any of your complaints.”

“You want me to fix what should’ve been done long ago, so you don’t have to hire anyone else. I’m basically your servant now,” Azzam retorted, tossing the broom aside in frustration.

The shopkeeper grumbled,

“People like you are used to servitude. If you’re not, consider this your first lesson.”

“What do you mean, ‘people like me’?” Azzam shot back.

The shopkeeper, looming over him, unleashed a roar so thunderous that Azzam’s hair fluttered like leaves in a storm.

“You know exactly what I mean—slum rats like you, sneaking and conniving, wasting all the good air left in this wretched world.”

The shopkeeper frowned as he looked out the window and sighed,

“This city was once a shimmering oasis, a paradise beloved by tourists. Now it’s a filthy gutter, home to rats and a few decent souls.”

Azzam’s scoff cut through the air.

“It’s not the people’s fault the city lost its charm. The government squandered our money favouring the rich while leaving the rest to struggle.”

The shopkeeper’s face turned crimson red as a chilli pepper, his anger boiling over.

“What do you know of politics? You’re just a child—one who should speak a whole lot less and sweep more. Get back to work!”

With a sigh that echoed the depths of the sea, Azzam resumed his sweeping, his movements so swift that a cloud of dust enveloped the owner.

“My bad, just following your orders,” he said with a chuckle.

The shopkeeper, cloaked in dust, roared in fury, his clenched fist trembling with the urge to strike.

Yet, blinded by the dust, he retreated to the back of the store to clean himself off. Minutes passed before the store's door whispered open. Azzam, lost in the rhythm of his sweeping, only heard a soft "Pssst" from behind. Startled, he turned around to find a familiar figure—his friend Rayan, a few centimetres taller, sharing Azzam's complexion. Dressed in a teal, buttoned-open sleeveless shirt paired with orange silk pants, the boy had striking features: red hair, a scar on his lip, and two tattoos—a sphinx on his right shoulder and the word "numb" beneath his left eye. The boy plucked a piece of fruit from a basket and began relishing it. "You know, you'll get me in trouble if you don't pay for that, Rayan," Azzam chided with a brotherly hint of annoyance. Rayan chuckled, "Seems you're in enough trouble already, little Azzam." Azzam paused, his gaze sinking to the floor. Rayan's hand on his shoulder was a silent promise. "Don't worry; I saw the whole thing unfold from the rooftops." "So, you were the shadow on the rooftops? Why didn't you help me out?" Azzam's voice carrying confusion. "And risk the same punishment, or worse, for not having a visa? I think not," Rayan replied, strolling with casual grace, savouring the fruit. "You see, people like us—slum rats, as they like to call us—we always draw the short end of the stick," Rayan explained. "They need someone to look down on, a scapegoat for when things go wrong. I plan on changing all of that, though," he declared, slamming his fist on the counter. "Yeah, life for us can be pretty tough," Azzam conceded, while resuming his sweeping. Rayan's grab on Azzam's shoulders was firm, his gaze fierce as he declared that they were seen as less than human by the people from the upper neighbourhoods. The intensity of his words drew the shopkeeper out, his face a fiery red. "Who in the bloody hell are you?" he barked. Rayan, fruit hidden in his pocket, started to reply, but the shopkeeper cut him off. "Doesn't matter who you are. Judging from your rags I can tell you're another slum rat. Unless you're here to buy, leave. This boy must complete his punishment without distractions from his little friends." The shopkeeper's disdain was palpable as he retreated, muttering curses. Rayan's mockery—a gesture of eating with an imaginary spoon—was a common sign of

disrespect in Maladh Jadid, meaning someone was better off swallowing their words as they were viewed as nonsense.

The boys shared a chuckle as Rayan reclaimed his fruit, continued to munch, and prepared to leave.

"Guess I should go before that madman decides I'm his next servant," he said.

"Before I leave, I wanted to ask a favour, little brother," Rayan said.

Although not bound by blood, the boys often referred to each other as "brother" to signify their strong bond.

"If it's another job you need my help for, Rayan, I got to say I'm not interested," replied Azzam.

He was well aware that Rayan's "jobs" usually involved heavy risks, including jail time, a severe beating from the police, or both.

"Last time we almost got caught and sent to jail. I think it would be smart if we laid low for a while," Azzam advised the boy with the tattoos.

Rayan chuckled and said,

"But we didn't get caught. And one of the big reasons why is because of your wit and expertise, little brother. That's why we need you."

"We?" questioned Azzam, blushing from the compliment.

"Yes, me and the gang, of course," affirmed Rayan.

"Look, I know you've had your differences with some of them in the past, but at the end of the day, they would risk their lives for me, and if I told them to, they would do the same for you.

I'll make sure to keep them in line, and if we do make this score, we'll be set for years."

"Years!" exclaimed Azzam in bewilderment.

"Nothing in Maladh Jadid is worth so much that we would be set for years. You're crazy!"

He shook his head and turned around to resume sweeping.

"Look," said Rayan, his face and expression turning more stern and serious.

"I can't give you all the details quite yet because there are eyes and ears everywhere, but I guarantee that you, your sister, and your mother can live a carefree life after we're done with this job.

Hell, you guys could even afford a ticket to take one of the trains at the station and catch a ride to get out of this hellhole.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

With your and our skillsets combined, there is no way we can't pull this job off," Rayan persuaded.

Azzam halted his sweeping, momentarily lost in thought as he envisioned all the ways he could support his mother and sister if he were rich.

"All right. I'll do it under two conditions," he said after returning to reality.

"First, I get a bigger cut of the loot because I've got more mouths to feed, and second, you have to promise me no one gets hurt this time."

Rayan agreed to Azzam's terms by doing their signature fist bump.

Rayan then shared the time and location for their meeting.

"Be there around midnight at this exact time and not a moment later," Rayan said with the same stern look.

"I'll make sure of it," Azzam replied with a similarly serious expression.

Just as they were about to exchange another fist bump, the shop owner burst out of the back room, yelling,

"Are you still in my bloody store, you filthy slum rat? I told you to leave!"

The owner threw a piece of fruit at Rayan, who ran out laughing.

"And you," the owner pointed at Azzam, his face as red as a tomato.

"Get back to sweeping already."

Chuckling, Azzam resumed sweeping, a big smile on his face, thinking once again about all the things he was going to buy with the money from the upcoming job.

Chapter 2

Around midnight, Azzam was attempting to leave his house as stealthily as a mouse, so as not to wake his sleeping mother and sister.

Azzam's mother had been bedridden for the past two months.

What had initially started as a simple cough had unfortunately transformed into severe symptoms of an unknown disease that was ravaging many poverty-stricken parts of the world.

Azzam's sister, Yasmin, who was a couple years older than him, often stayed home to care for their mother and prepare dinner with whatever meagre scraps she could find.

The three of them shared the same room, each sleeping on a different mattress.

Their house was also home to Azzam's pet sand cat, Nesur.

Nesur had been rescued by Azzam a while ago when he spotted the cat fleeing an angry shopkeeper after snatching a fish from the market stands.

Nesur had barely managed to escape by hiding behind a dumpster, and it was there that Azzam found the dehydrated cat with only three of his original four legs and its yellow, almost gold-coated fur covered in dirt.

Azzam instantly felt a connection to the animal.

Having grown up in the slums himself, he decided to bring the cat home and nurse it back to health.

But Azzam's mom didn't like pets, so she said the cat could only stay until it got better.

Azzam said okay, but he was just pretending.

He kept sneaking Nesur inside to feed or pet him when his mom was asleep or not home.

The sand cat was a familiar sight, often lounging just outside their house, its melodious meows filling the air or its curious gaze searching for a treat.

Sometimes, Nesur got too comfortable and tried to sneak inside.

This led to Azzam's mother shooing him away or even tossing a sandal.

Because Nesur kept coming back, she started to suspect that Azzam was still secretly keeping the street cat, though she never caught them red-handed.

Despite having spent its entire life in the slums, the cat often displayed a rather bougie personality—avoiding attention when it didn't desire it, and making its food preferences known by pushing away anything it didn't like.

Azzam had already dressed in his street clothes before going to bed and had packed some

essentials in a pouch to carry with him.

He had even preemptively silenced Nesur's meowing with a delicious treat of lizard hidden in a container just outside the house.

Just as Azzam was about to climb out the window and jump to the next roof, he noticed his sister staring directly at him.

He was so startled that he almost tumbled out of the window but managed to hold on at the last second.

"How long have you been awake?" whispered Azzam, his face a mix of horror and confusion.

"I thought you were acting kind of suspicious at dinner tonight, and I had a sneaky suspicion you were up to something, so I stayed awake.

It seems I wasn't the only one who noticed," his sister replied, gently looking at Nesur, who had sneakily climbed up and was joyfully eating his lizard.

Azzam let out a deep sigh but quickly covered his mouth, remembering the need for silence so as not to awaken their still-sleeping mother.

"Look, sis, me and some friends were just going to check out—"

Before Azzam could finish his sentence, he saw his sister raise her finger and angrily whisper,

"I don't want to hear it, Azzam. I don't know what you're up to, but I do know you and your 'friends' are never up to any good.

You're staying home, little brother."

Azzam glanced at the clock on the wall and realised he didn't have much time to lose.

"Look, Yas, I don't have much time to explain, but you're right.

I'm doing another job tonight. I know I told you I was done for good, and I was, but I got an offer I couldn't resist.

With this job, we should be set for a long time—and I'm done, I swear.

Please let me go and don't tell Mom, I beg of you."

Yasmin tried to gauge if Azzam's body language matched his words.

She then glanced at the small clock on the wall and sighed deeply.

"You've got three hours.

If you're not back by then, I'm telling Mom, and you'll be sharing scraps with Nesur for the next few weeks. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," said a relieved Azzam, one leg already out the window, ready to go.

"Good," whispered his sister, throwing a cautious glance at their mother to check if she was still asleep.

"Before you head out, we're going to pray together, though."

His sister got out of her bed and tiptoed over to Azzam.

She took his hand, and they began to pray together.

“In the name of the almighty, the bountiful, and most gracious.

All praise is due to the almighty one, Lord of the universe, the creator and destroyer of worlds, the most gracious.

You alone we worship. Guide us along the illuminated path.”

Azzam, who wasn’t much of a believer in prayers, still appreciated his sister and thanked her for her blessings.

Azzam then swiftly jumped out of the window into the shadow of the night.

The boy leaped from rooftop to rooftop, rushing to meet up with Rayan.

While the average person would undoubtedly struggle with navigating the unconventional rooftops—especially in the darkness of the night—Azzam had been traversing them for most of his life.

Many times, he had found himself in trouble and needed a quick escape.

These rooftops had always served as his emergency exit, and he knew most of the buildings like the back of his hand.

Even though it was late at night, the lower levels were never really quiet.

The marketplace wasn’t as busy as it was in the afternoon, but at night, the troublemakers who hid during the light of day came out and took over the streets.

Some beggars huddled in small corridors and beneath market tables to endure the desert's cold night, while anyone else still out at this time usually had less-than-honourable intentions.

"I wonder what Rayan has in mind for this one. He usually isn't much of a planner and lives more in the moment," Azzam thought.

Their shared spontaneity and often 'in-your-face' personalities were the main reasons the boys had gotten along so well and started hanging out in the first place.

Azzam tried to maintain his focus while jumping from rooftop to rooftop but couldn't help but drift into his thoughts.

"Maybe the darkness of night and the lack of sleep are messing with my brain," he thought as he began reminiscing about the first time he had met Rayan.

Four years ago, Azzam and his sister Yasmin went to a busy market in the slums to run errands for their mom.

While Yasmin stopped to chat with some old friends, she told Azzam to stay close and not get lost in the crowd.

Azzam promised he wouldn't wander off, but when he saw fresh fruits and vegetables being delivered to a shop, he couldn't resist.

He stood there staring, his mouth watering.

But the shopkeeper didn't like it.

Scowling, the man grew angry, thinking Azzam was just in the way—blocking real customers who could actually pay.

Even when Azzam tried to be polite, the shopkeeper's voice only grew sharper.

"Listen, you little slum rat," he snapped. "Your drooling over my precious produce is scaring off my customers. Buzz off!"

Then, without warning, the shopkeeper struck Azzam's cheek with the back of his hand, leaving a stinging red mark.

A crowd gathered, whispering about what was happening.

Some thought Azzam was a thief, while others said he was just a street kid who deserved punishment.

Meanwhile, Yasmin noticed her brother was missing.

She pushed through the crowd, her heart pounding.

When she finally spotted Azzam, he was in the middle of the brewing storm.

Just as her voice was about to burst into a scream, help arrived in the most unexpected way—a boy no one had noticed before.

With a swift motion, he tossed a tiny explosive under the cruel merchant's feet.

BOOM!

A cloud of dirt and smoke swallowed the man, making him cough and stumble.

The boy, now standing beside Azzam, raised his voice against the injustice.

"I saw everything from across the street! You had no right to hit him!"

His eyes were fierce, his stance unshaken.

He placed a firm hand on Azzam's shoulder, standing by his side.

Laughter rippled through the street as the merchant, sputtering and furious, wiped dirt from his face.

But the more he wiped, the clearer his rage became.

"You're gonna regret that, you filthy slum rat!" he bellowed, stomping forward, his fist clenched, ready to strike.

But before he could land a single blow, his wrist was caught—held tight by a force stronger than his own.

It was Yasmin.

Though she was slender, her grip was like iron, keeping the man's hand frozen in place.

Then, with a sharp crack, she slapped him across the face!

The crowd gasped.

"Apologize!" she commanded, her voice steady, her grip tightening. "To my brother and to the boy who stood up for him!"

The merchant, stunned and powerless, had no choice but to mumble a reluctant apology.

Yasmin, with an air of authority, led the boys away, leaving the merchant nursing his swollen hand.

In a final act of defiance, Azzam and the mysterious boy cheekily stuck their tongues out at the defeated bully.

"Hey, appreciate you stepping in back there, bro," expressed Azzam to the mysterious boy.

"No problem. I saw everyone else just standing around like a bunch of frozen sand crabs, so I had to do something. Plus, us filthy slum rats gotta stick together, right?" the boy gleefully responded.

"How did you figure out we're from the slums too?" inquired Azzam.

Rayan replied, "Come on, man. No offense, but looking at your clothes, it was either that... or you just escaped a really bad accident!"

Yasmin laughed. "Well, I have to thank you too. My little brother has a habit of getting into trouble." She smiled warmly. "By the way, what can we call you, hero?"

"You can call me Rayan. What about you guys?" asked Rayan.

"I'm Yasmin, and this is my little brother, Azzam. Where do you live, Rayan? I'd like to make sure you get home safely and thank your parents for raising such a wonderful young man, if you don't mind."

Rayan's smile faded. He kicked a small rock on the ground before speaking. "I don't have parents... and I don't really have a home either," he said softly. "My father passed away when I was really young, and my mother was in and out of my life until a year or two ago when she left for good. She would always leave me with friends, family, or at the orphanage and be out late at night. Until this one time when she left me with another friend of hers, and we never heard back from her again. The friend didn't have enough to take care of me longer, and so I've been pretty much on my own since then," explained Rayan.

"Oh... I'm so incredibly sorry to hear that," said Yasmin, almost shedding a tear.

"Don't be. It's made me into the man I am today. Besides, I can take care of myself," said the red-haired boy.

Azzam, who had been embarrassed that his big sister had saved the day and did most of the talking, managed to find his tongue. "I want to thank you too, Rayan. Normally, I would've taken that guy down myself," he said, flexing his arms. "But hey, no need for a fight this

time!"

The group shared one final laugh before Azzam and his sister headed back home.

As the sun dipped lower, Yasmin turned to Rayan. "We don't have much, but if you ever need anything, our home is always open to you."

For the first time, Rayan looked a little shy. His cheeks turned red as he nodded. "That... that really means a lot. Thank you."

Before they left, Azzam and Rayan exchanged contact information.

"Let's hang out soon," Azzam said.

"Definitely!" Rayan grinned.

As Azzam and Yasmin walked home, Yasmin nudged her little brother playfully. "Looks like you made a new friend, Azzy!"

Azzam huffed and rolled his eyes, his face turning pink. But deep down, he was happy. He had made a real friend.

Azzam was lost in his thoughts, tangled in a web of memories, when—whoosh!—his foot slipped! He tumbled forward, landing face-first onto the ground. Thump! Luckily, instead of cold stone, he fell into a soft stack of hay. But the noise was loud enough to stir the people inside the nearby house.

Azzam's heart pounded. What if they come outside?

Without wasting a second, he scrambled to his feet and bolted away. He darted around a corner and hurried down a narrow corridor. But halfway through, he froze.

A masked man stood ahead, looming over someone on the ground. The mask had a small desert lily symbol on one side.

Azzam's stomach twisted. The desert lily... He knew that mark. It belonged to the Poppy Gang—one of the most feared groups in all of Maladh Jadid.

The man on the ground looked badly hurt. His face was bruised, his body barely moving.

Azzam's breath caught in his throat. His muscles locked up, fear holding him still like chains of ice.

Then, the masked man turned.

Azzam snapped around, ready to run—but stopped cold.

A woman had stepped into the corridor behind him, her face hidden beneath a scarf. She stood tall, blocking his only escape.

Fear coiled around Azzam's body like a snake tightening its grip.

The woman took a slow step forward. Her voice was smooth, yet sharp like a blade. "Well, well, well... what do we have here?"

She tilted her head, eyes glinting. "Looks like we've got ourselves a stray slum rat," she said, her voice curling with amusement as she moved closer.

Azzam swallowed hard. He was trapped. "I... I didn't see nothing. Just let me go," he stammered.

The woman in the scarf chuckled, shaking her head. "Oh, we can't do that. You've seen too much." Then she smirked. "But... maybe we could forget about it—for a price. How about you hand over that shiny little dagger of yours?"

Azzam's fingers tightened around the hilt of his dagger. He never went anywhere without it. "You're gonna have to kill me for it," he said, forcing the fear from his body. His feet planted firmly. His hands curled into fists.

The woman sighed dramatically. "I guess that's what we'll have to do then." She pulled out her own dagger, its blade catching the dim light. "Grab him!" she told her masked companion.

Azzam's mind raced. If this is the end, I better make it count.

The masked man lunged—but suddenly froze. His eyes widened. His knees buckled. Then—THUD!—he collapsed, groaning in pain.

From the shadows, Rayan stepped forward, grinning. "Looks like I showed up just in time," he said, shaking his head. "You know, Azzam, this is the second time I've saved your life."

The woman spun to face Rayan, completely forgetting about Azzam. "Big mistake!" Azzam shouted as he sprinted forward, fast as a desert fox.

Before she could react, he struck like lightning, taking her down just as Rayan had done to her partner.

Now both thieves knelt on the ground, groaning.

Rayan crossed his arms. "I suggest you two scram."

The woman glared, but neither she nor her masked friend had the strength to fight.

With weak, stumbling steps, they disappeared into the night.

Azzam and Rayan stood in silence—then burst into laughter.

"I had it under control, you know," Azzam insisted.

Rayan raised an eyebrow. "Oh, sure! You looked very in control when that crazy lady almost sliced your little butt up."

Azzam huffed, but Rayan continued, his voice dropping to a whisper. "You're lucky they weren't really out for blood."

Azzam frowned. "How do you know that?"

Rayan smirked. "Masked up, they're coming for your ice. Bare faced, they're coming for your life."