

PROLOGUE

“The Light Beyond the Veil”

Zayn ibn Idris al-Zaryan opened his eyes. His body lay on a soft cot inside a large, shadowy tent. The air was warm and dry, with a faint scent of spices. Simple household items, typical of a nomadic dwelling from his homeworld, surrounded him. But this wasn't Andar. It was Qamaruun, a desert moon with rust-colored skies, where he'd been taken in by scattered tribes of star nomads.

The floor was covered with layers of solar-heated carpets inscribed with curling Zaryan calligraphy. Beneath them, an ion-mesh mat generated steady electric currents that repelled scorpionic life forms skittering under the sands. Soft thermal-reactive quilts and cushions, dyed in desert ochre and star violet, were digitally embroidered with scenes from ancient Zaryan myths: phoenixes, constellations, and floating cities.

Along the tent walls, light-drape panels projected shifting Sadu patterns that changed with the mood, prayer times, or the presence of guests. Wall scrolls featured holographic quotes from the Book of Dawns as well as digital poetry weavings. In one corner, old camel bags and saddle packs were stacked neatly, stitched with reverence to Earth and a vanished age.

To his left stood a foldable camelback leather lounger, its frame compact and precise. A small tray beside it held a polished vacuum-glass flask wrapped in a camel-hair cover, nestled in a carved animal-bone holder. Above, a portable coffee brazier with an optical flame control dial, still glowing from recent use, held a gravity-suspended cezve. Tiny spoons carved from pale bone sat beside magnetic spice jars filled with cardamom, sugar, and cloves.

Above him, the synth-wool canopy of the tent rustled in the wind, its black threads glimmering like stardust.

The scorching sunrise of Qamaruun crept across the tent wall, casting pale golden light. Grains of sand tapped against the magnetic pegs that held the tent in place. From the brazier, the faint scent of roasted spices filled the air: cardamom, ashroot, and something that reminded him of home.

He sat up, his body wrapped in a silk quilt embroidered with dawnbirds. The floor beneath him responded to his movement with gentle warmth, a subtle welcome. His throat stung like parchment. He reached for a water jug and drank straight from it, ignoring formalities. The cool liquid flooded his chest. He downed half the jug before lowering it, breathless but satisfied.

A slight pain bloomed when he stood, radiating from his neck and shoulder. His hand reached instinctively toward the source, finding the sliced, seared edges of a

sword strike at the left shoulder of his obsidian-black tunic. The fabric, Nightweave, a masterwork of Zaryan elegance woven from rare silk that shimmered faintly like silver filigree in motion, was torn, but it had held enough to save his life. Beneath it, the bandages pressed tight against the scar still healing, trailing down his collarbone.

He knew where the wound came from. He pushed the memory aside. The memory hurt more than the wound ever could.

That was when he noticed his LuminBlade. It stood upright in its sheath, propped neatly against the side of the foldable camelback leather lounger. Even in the modest surroundings of the tent, it drew the eye immediately, an object of impossible beauty amid simplicity. The handle, carved from Isern Pine, shimmered faintly like gold dust. The scabbard was a masterpiece, forged from plasma-cured synth-hide and platinum silver, etched with delicate calligraphy and geometric motifs. If one looked closely, the name "Zayn" was barely visible beneath the patterns.

He was still wearing the damaged battle tunic; his armor was gone. The weight of its former glory, and all that had brought him to Qamaruun, pressed down on him. His body ached, his spirit frayed, broken not only in flesh but also in mind and heart.

Zayn was tall and graceful, a figure both soft and striking. At twenty-five, he looked younger, his features poetic, angular, and sculpted like the marble portraits of saints. His eyes were a warm, luminous brown, the kind that always seemed on the verge of wonder or sorrow. A full, neatly kept beard, worn in the Zaryan tradition, framed his face, adding to his beauty. His olive-toned skin, golden under light, bore the regal softness of nobility, now dulled by fatigue. His once-glossy black hair, shoulder-length and wavy, was tangled and matted with dust and sweat.

The darkness urged him to yield. He forced his breath steady, gathering what strength he could. He would not let the hurt master him. He would rise.

He looked around the tent, searching for a sign, a direction. Though Qamaruun wasn't Andar, the Star Nomads still followed the faith with unwavering devotion. And there it was, hanging from a central pole: the Qiblatun. A circular ornament of black obsidian and gold-threaded alloy, the Qiblatun was etched with moving star lines and silver glyphs that shimmered faintly. It rotated slowly, aligning with celestial coordinates, always pointing toward Nur-Shahar, the floating capital city of Zarya. No matter how far from Andar a Zaryan wandered, the Qiblatun always pointed them home.

Gritting through the pain, he made his way to that side of the tent, moving carefully. A large basin of water had been placed nearby for ablutions. He knelt, his movements careful, and performed the ritual: washing his face, arms, head, and feet three times each. The water stung faintly where it touched his wound, but he welcomed the pain. It reminded him he was still alive. He turned to face the Qiblatun. A prayer rug was already laid before it, soft, warm, and perfectly aligned. He knelt, placed his hands on the fabric, bowed his head, and spoke the ancient words:

“O Eternal Light, awaken my eyes. Let my hands do no harm today. Let my tongue carry no poison. Let my shadow grow short, and my soul grow vast.”

Zayn rested his head against the prayer rug. His eyes were closed. His mind wandered. Memories unfurled: the events that had brought him here, the faces he had lost, his family. His friends. His love.

He shook his head and rose. This wasn't the time. He needed clarity, focus, and a measure of stillness. Some of that coffee would help. He moved toward the cezve, the gravity-suspended pot still warm, and poured himself a small cup. A pinch of sugar. A touch of spice. He returned to the lounge and settled into its camelback-leather embrace. The coffee was strong, just the way he liked it. The spice mélange bloomed across his tongue, a mix of floral and bitter notes. There was something familiar and melancholic in its layered notes—a reminder of his father, of Malik, before ambition turned him cruel. Of early morning prayers and conversations on the expansive stone balconies of home, the wind stirring the citrus trees, the city of Nur-Shahar suspended below them.

He stared into the dark, rich liquid, its surface rippling faintly with heat and memory.

Breaking his reverie, the tent parted. A soft rustle. A silhouette framed by morning dust.

Rafiq al-Mahru appeared. Zayn recognized him instantly. He was one of the desert's veiled men, more ancient and subtle than a leader, mufti, or warrior. His skin was deeply tanned and sun-scorched, resembling old stone polished by time and dust. He wore a long drape of gray-beige cloth, faded with time and stitched with rough glyphs that may have once held meaning. His eyes were pale, like washed-out topaz, distant, like looking through a lens worn thin by memory. He moved with measured grace, as if he had nothing left to prove.

Around his shoulder hung a bandolier of dried herbs, prayer shells, and micro-spice vials. From his belt clinked tools both ancient and alien: a glass-edged blade, a weather harmonizer, and a bone-carved flask. His feet were cracked, his hands gnarled.

“Blessings on you, Zayn. You wake at last,” he spoke in the cracked, wind-worn dialect of the Nomads.

“Blessings, yes, Rafiq. Praise the Light. Thank you. For your hospitality; For taking me into your home.”

The old man smiled, his many wrinkles folding in harmony. “By the Light,” he replied. “Our way, boy. Never turn away a soul in need.”

He lowered himself beside Zayn with quiet effort, his joints sighing. A few days prior, a solitary Nomad vessel had descended in the pale morning light. They brought Zayn to Rafiq's tent. Wounded. Unconscious. Non-responsive. They told him the young man's name, nothing more.

Rafiq's eyes flicked to the bandages on Zayn's shoulder, dark from the various balms applied beneath. He jerked his chin toward it. "Scar sittin' well now, boy? Still burnin' you, or eased some?"

Zayn shifted, rolling his shoulder carefully. "Much better. The ache is fading."

"Good," Rafiq replied, nodding once. "Did what I could. Ain't no physician, never claimed it. But I remember the old ways. Bitter leaf ash pulls fever clean out the blood. Dustroot balm keeps the flesh from rot. Wrapped it myself, muttered the prayers like my father taught me. Desert doesn't give much, but what it does, it saves lives."

Zayn bowed his head, a quiet gratitude in his eyes. "Thank you. You've done more than I could ask."

Rafiq grunted, looking away, swatting the thanks aside. "Bah. Wounds heal, boy. That's easy. Keepin' your spirit straight, that's the harder cut."

They had carried him in on a stretcher, but even in that broken state, Rafiq had sensed something rare. This was no lost desert runt, no ordinary soul plucked from battle's edge. There was a stillness to him, a gravity. And there was his tunic. Zayn's garments, his battle tunic, were made of a cloth Rafiq had only heard of in stories. Nightweave. His mother had spoken of it when he was young, tales of a valley called Nahya, hidden deep within Andar. Of shimmering leaves that bled black silk at dusk. Of a people so skilled in weaving that their fabric could sing with the stars. But to Rafiq, those were fairy tales, like the myths of floating cities or of Nur-Shahar itself. He had never seen valleys. Only sand, stone, and sky. Paradise was something you dreamed of, not something you lived.

Zayn took him by surprise when he first awoke and spoke to him. The boy talked like a philosopher, with an intelligence that shimmered behind his eyes. They exchanged names before Zayn slipped back into unconsciousness. Rafiq made sure he was comfortable, then left him to rest. He hand-fed him soup made with leaves and herbs to help him recover when he woke, leaving him to fall asleep again. This went on for four days.

Rafiq's eyes lit up as he saw him sitting upright. Life in the desert was quiet and monotonous; it was unusual to meet someone interesting or unique. He became curious. So, who was this boy? Why did he come here? What stories did his silence convey?

But first, sustenance!

Zayn hadn't eaten a full meal in days. He must be famished. Rafiq clapped his hands and called out, "Ayman! Food, quick." A moment later, a young boy entered the tent, no more than twelve or thirteen. He carried a large carbon-ceramic tray, its base etched with faded solar patterns and stabilized by a humming repulsor ring, hovering just above the woven rug. He set it down carefully, paused, eyes wide. He had never seen anyone like Zayn before. So radiant. So otherworldly. He stared, unable to hide his awe.

Zayn smiled. "Blessings."

The boy's face became flushed. His reply came in the same cracked, wind-worn dialect. "Blessings," he uttered before swiftly vanishing through the folds of the tent.

The scents rose all at once, earthy, rich, and infused with memory. Spread before Zayn was a true Star Nomad feast. Several small platters surrounded one large, central dish: Maqlurat al-Sahra, or the Inverted Dish of the Desert. A tower of slow-charred goat meat, ember-roasted root vegetables, and a grain-rice blend grown in shallow hydro fields beneath Qamaruun's subterranean caves. Cooked in a sealed heat capsule and inverted onto a solarstone platter, the layers fell in perfect spirals, glistening with spice oils and steam. It smelled like cumin, saffron, and a faint hint of mineral smoke. On the side, thin slices of fowl and antelope marinated in fermented spice paste and slow-baked in an underground thermal oven lined with volcanic clay. The meat was fork-tender, with a flavor reminiscent of heated stone, a technique passed down from Rafiq's ancestors, who used to cook over Andar's salt-fire pits.

There was fresh flatbread, blistered and golden brown from an iron-stone griddle, still warm and wrapped in woven palm-frond wrappers, ideal for scooping. Cooling accompaniments include a dish of thick labaneh foam cultured from goat's milk and chilled with mint vapor, a spiced tahini gel drizzled with date syrup and crushed seeds, a bowl of cucumbers, fermented greens, and purple root pickles from the oasis farms, and a sharp dipping oil made from compressed olives and pepper root, heat-treated until it tingled on the tongue.

The entire tray shimmered in the golden light. It was a banquet made not from abundance, but from exile and ingenuity. Rafiq without a word handed Zayn a carved spoon and a folded cloth, then sat beside him. Here, in this tent suspended between stars and memory, a warm meal was the oldest form of trust. Zayn hadn't realized how hungry he was. When the first bite touched his tongue, his body reminded him. He was starving. He ate rapidly but gratefully, each bite bringing warmth back into his limbs. As he ate, Rafiq began to speak.

He was born beneath a cracked sky, on the moon-world of Qamaruun, a place of red horizons and whispering stone. The air tasted of salt and copper. Storms brewed not from clouds but from magnetic shifts, flaring silently across the sky like fire caught in glass.

Beneath its bright sun, the surface baked to a brittle crust by day and froze to bone-deep cold at night. Its ground was carved by ancient winds into fossil dunes and jagged salt chasms. Yet even in this place, beauty endured.

Threaded through the desert were subterranean oases caverns, warmed by thermal vents and lit by glowing algae that bloomed in watering pools. There, pockets of life pulsed in defiance: gardens of thicketleaf grain, lantern fruits, and violet reed flowers that would sing in wind tunnels.

The people built stone domes and mirror-spined tents atop rocky plateaus, their homes shaped to follow the arc of the moons. At night, they lit starlight lanterns that swayed like fireflies. Music rose from quartz flutes and drums carved from the bones of dead beasts.

They buried their dead facing Nur-Shahar, even though they had never seen it, only dreamed of it, and tasted its memory in the tears of their elders.

Rafiq's childhood passed in those dunes.

Between the howl of dust serpents and the hush of drifting sand.

He watched solar storms bloom like ghost flowers across the horizon.

Rafiq chuckled as he tapped the slender device hanging from his belt, a weather harmonizer, polished smooth from decades of use. "When I was no older than you," he told Zayn, "I carried one of these on the high plains. Looks like a flute, eh? But no tune for men, only wind. Fast wind, sharp note. Heavy sand, low and mournful. By its song, I knew: storms or dust waiting past the horizon." His eyes glimmered, lost briefly in the memory. "That wind-song saved more of ours than any blade I ever swung."

Now, in his seventh or eighth decade, Rafiq had outlived lovers, friends, and language itself. He moved with economy. Spoke with measured weight. And listened with terrible precision.

Rafiq's gaze drifted toward the doorway, where Ayman's shadow had passed earlier in the evening. His voice softened, a rough whisper wrapped in warmth. "Only Ayman stays by me now," he declared. "A boy from Qamaruun. The desert took his mother and father, took near everything from him. He knows no kin but me and the Light. Yet, hear me, Zayn, the desert did not harden that child's heart. No. He's gentle still, eager, kind. A flame that refuses to die, even when the wind tries to snuff it. I love him as my blood. I'll teach him all I know, every scrap of wisdom these old bones carry. I'll prepare him for the years to come."

Rafiq paused, his eyes glinting. "That is all we can do, boy—shape those who come after us so the Light does not fade." The day would come when Rafiq would pass into the next life, and Ayman would remain behind, a flicker of warmth on a sandy moon far from home.

Zayn placed the carved spoon on the hovering tray's edge. The food still beckoned to him warmly, but his appetite had diminished. With his hands resting lightly on his lap, he leaned back and looked at the folds of the tent canopy, where the light from the desert danced across the weave like candle smoke. He didn't say anything. He was not pressed by Rafiq. It was peaceful and quiet in the tent.

Finally, Zayn spoke, his voice quiet and fragile at first. His voice sounded fractured, akin to something that had once been whole, now struggling to reassemble under the burden of memory. He closed his eyes. He began to remember.

Not the war.

Not the fire.

Not the fall.

But before.

A palace of marble and mirrored light.

Laughter echoing down endless corridors.

The sound of two boys, brothers, racing across floating bridges beneath a city that kissed the clouds.

Before destiny became a burden.

Before love became a battlefield.

Before names like 'traitor' and 'exile' had ever been spoken.

In the shadow of the Zaryan throne, under the gaze of the Eternal Light.

Zayn al-Zaryan was just a boy.