

# CHAPTER 1

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## Behind the Eight Ball

Abigail – 1973

Mimouna is the biggest Jewish Moroccan food festival-slash-moveable party of the year. Celebrated on the evening after Passover, it's a tradition for us to go from house to house picking up treats—like Halloween, but better. Because Antonia Symonds, San Jose's Moroccan housewife extraordinaire, is organizing a gathering afterward. This Mimouna is going to blow all others out of the water. Dinner, dancing, music—you name it. Antonia is letting me help, which makes me feel not thirteen.

Stacked on my dresser, in front of the free-with-a-fill-up Dolls of the World set Dad brought me, are four dozen tissue paper roses and a bunch of miniature sheaves of wheat I tied by hand. I made those.

What I don't plan on is being behind the eight ball from Minute One. As soon as I open my eyes, too much light is pouring through the window. It's disorienting—a total trip—so it takes me a minute to realize I've already missed half the morning. With Good Friday and Easter coming up, and our grades already out, we're mostly playing trivia and Scrabble in school now. Still, school is my happy place.

Dad can't handle noise, especially not in the morning. No alarm, no clock radio, no blow dryer—unless we want to start World War III. It's been like this since seventh grade started. Usually, I wake on my own, but Mom makes sure. Except today. Not only is Dad's Rambler not in the driveway, but Mom's nowhere to be found. The story that comes out later is he's taken extra shifts at the gas station, but I wasn't born yesterday.

Mom's Starfire sloppily parked a few houses down doesn't make sense either. Mom might be taking a break from school, but she doesn't like it here any more than I do. Most mornings, she'll pop a convenience-store pancake in the toaster, throw the half-frozen disc in a napkin, and hand it to Nikki. Often, they drive past me on my walk to school. Nikki waves and flashes a toothy grin like she's in a toddler beauty pageant. Crazy.

Mom's been all gung-ho about the gym ever since they started offering free babysitting. If she works out long enough, she gets to add guilt-free carbs to her diet—meaning she won't be living on Tab and carrot sticks, which is exhausting. After that, it's on to one of Mom's Moroccan friends. While they socialize, Nikki will play with the woman's son, who's the same age as her but light years behind in terms of sophistication. When the Tehranipours are traveling, which is often, it's off to Valley Fair to get Nikki a pretzel from Hot Sam's. These days, they don't get home until 9, when Dad's party winds down and only a few stragglers are left. I imagine someone teasing Nikki about the salt crystals on her lips and chin, making some awful comparison. Luckily, I haven't been around for any of this. Let's just say I have my ways.

I better get to school. It won't look good if I skip the day and then show up at people's houses for goodies. I wander past Nikki's room—empty and unmade—to Mom and Dad's. I knock. No answer. I try my fist. Still no response, but when I turn the knob, it's unlocked. And there's Mom, still in her negligee, face-planted on the bed. A few of the pink foam rollers from last night are still in her hair; the others spread out across her pillow.

Seeing her like this doesn't even register on the Richter scale. Nothing fazes me anymore. You'd think the open Librium bottle and the water carafe with lipstick on the rim would stress me out, but I'm numb these days. Mom told me the diet pills make her jangly, and she needed something to take the edge off. Her walrus snore tells me it worked.

In the living room, the Starburst clock above the fireplace says 12:05. Nikki is planted in front of the TV, hand deep in a bag of Cocoa Puffs, cereal stuck to her nightshirt and spilled across the floor. Mom's been out of it—but leaving cereal out during Passover? Really?

I was hoping to make it to school by lunch, then fifth period.

There's no flippin' way.

Next to my sister is my old See and Say toy, which is *kaput* from having its string pulled one too many times. I figure Nikki hasn't been up long because, the minute she gets bored, she goes off the rails. A few times, she's stripped naked and bolted when no one was watching. The ground outside is wet, so maybe that's probably why she hasn't. So far, so cool. She's stuffing Cocoa Puffs in her mouth, singing along with Bert and Ernie in a flat, robotic voice.

Nikki's range of emotions goes from A to B, but I'm not concerned. Unlike me, who's shut down, this kid's sharp. She's crazy smart. She's never been to preschool, but she already knows the alphabet. I feel bad for her. My parents might've gone through the motions with me, but at least there was some semblance of normal. Dad was affectionate, once. He said kind things that softened Mom's rough edges.

My parents have never been easy. I never knew when Mom was going to push me into a room or Dad was going to slap me upside the face. I had to maneuver around landmines, but I never had to duck to avoid hand grenades. Not like Nikki.

Dad's party must've gone longer than usual. Someone emptied the ashtrays and threw the beer cans in the trash, but powdery ash is all over the coffee table. Mom's tried to make this house into a showplace, but Dad's torpedoed that. Last summer, she spent all day pasting floral wallpaper, and now it's peeling like the posters on my wall turning yellow. The gold-and-mushroom drapes she and Grandma made are grimy and stink of smoke.

Moody shades of brown and green dominate, which I guess is "in," but even Nikki's room feels like a dungeon. She once got her head stuck in the crib rails trying to climb out. At her first birthday, she crashed face-first into the cake, chocolate all over her frilly pink dress. Oblivious, she sucked the Betty Crocker Devil's Food frosting off her fingers. It would've been cute if it had stopped there. Since then, she's slammed into plate-glass windows, stolen candy from the grocery store even though God says it's wrong and we make her put it back. Mom can't contain her. Not that I can help. These days, I spend more time than is advisable in a fantasy world.

I might be a space cadet half the time, but I know I'm going to be great someday. The poem I'm writing is light years ahead of the Nancy

Drew rip-off I wrote for Highlights. But let's be real—I'm deluded. It's not the masterpiece I think it is.

To lure Nikki away from the TV—which isn't healthy—I try Pick Up Stix. Not exactly thrilling, but come on. Nothing she's allowed to do besides TV holds her attention.

"Let's play Barbie," I say, handing her a box with two dolls (hair totally jacked) and a pile of tiny dresses and shoes. Within 30 seconds, Nikki drives her knee into one of the Barbies.

"She's dead," she says.

It gives me the heebie-jeebies. Her blank eyes flash black. I want to give her the Hamsa Mrs. Tehranipour gave me for my birthday. Nikki needs it more than I do.

"Nikki," I say, in my best kindergarten-teacher voice. "That's not how you play. How would you feel if someone stomped on you?"

"Lemme go outside," she says.

"It's sprinkling, Nikki. I've got school."

"Outside."

I pick up another Barbie and hand it to her. "Let's try this one. This time, Barbie's going out with Ken. Here. You pick her shoes."

"That's stupid!" she says.

"How 'bout changing the channel? Look. Electric Company's on."

I stand in front of the TV like it's a prize. Keeping her mesmerized is the only thing left in our toolkit when it comes to Nikki. I heard about shrinks who help kids play in the sand. Maybe. For once, Mom and Dad wouldn't have trouble paying. Dad still pumps gas, but there's money.

Cash for Mom's on-again, off-again real estate classes. For the Starfire. For Vegas. Dad buys Mom pearls, diamonds, emeralds—wrapped in Tiffany boxes. Peace offerings, all of them. Mom's awash in jewels. There's even a Doughboy in the backyard. Every room but Nikki's has a waterbed, sloshing around and smelling like mildew, while my clothes—and Nikki's—aren't a priority. My socks are so old the elastic's blown. The hems on my dresses unravel constantly. There's always a string hanging, like if someone pulled it, everything would come undone.

On TV, two puppets from Channel 2 are talking about the March of Dimes carnival contest. I entered last year. And what do you think second place got me? Nada. I didn't need that bike, but I deserved to win. Me and the Heinzzman twins climbed a chain-link fence and dove into a dumpster behind Gemco looking for prizes. We found clackers, black lights, and posters. Scavengers. We made booths out of discarded boxes. Unfair.

While I'm stewing, Nikki gets up and switches the channel to KQED 9. She's immediately hooked by something on PBS—thank goodness. Little Houdini's staying put, giving me a chance to pick up where I left off in my book. This week it's *The Wizard of Oz*. By the light of the TV, I squint, hold the page close to my face, and use a bookmark to track the words.

Why I can stay calm in my real life while freaking out over fictional characters, I'll never know. But when the Wicked Witch sends the winged monkeys, I skip ahead. I can't relax until the Queen of the Field Mice gives Dorothy the golden whistle. L. Frank Baum knows something I don't—about evil-doers and their enablers.

It's a while before I look up. When I do, Mr. Rogers is on the screen, singing about good feelings.

It takes a minute to register: Nikki's gone, but it's way too wet outside for me to worry. What would she be doing anyway? She's here, playing Hide and Seek. I go from room to room.

“Ready or not, here I come!”

Then it dawns on me. How could I expect reruns to keep her entertained? That and my busted old toys didn't stand a chance. The evidence is right there: the captain's chair didn't move itself from the kitchen to the front door. She must've pushed it slowly, pausing now and then to make sure I was still reading, making sure the legs didn't catch in the carpet.

Like I'd believe furniture moves on its own. Like I wouldn't notice the smidge of golden-brown curls poking above the top of the chair.

But it's the sound of her laugh, heard up close and later further in the distance, that alerts me. I open the door and call her name.

What I don't know yet is this won't be the last time Nikki runs. Right now, it's easy—evading one half of Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. Just a

practice run. If you'd told me the cops would be the ones chasing her someday, I would've said you were crazy-loco.

There she is: in her birthday suit, barreling down Fawn Drive on a borrowed Big Wheel.

It's no mystery how she pulled it off. She made it to the foyer, positioned the chair in front of the door, climbed up, and unlatched the chunky gold chain. Once outside, she rolled her clothes into a ball and tossed them into the hydrangeas by the porch.

What Nikki didn't plan for was the drizzle falling from a trio of dark clouds. I imagine her feeling the moisture on her skin, not noticing the dull gray sky above her.

Undeterred, she walked across the lawn and snagged the Big Wheel from the neighbor boy—he always leaves it out. She climbed on, gripped the wet plastic handles, and shook the water from her hair. Water drips from her forehead to the tip of her chin. She's finding it difficult to wipe her eyes, and her naked brown bottom sticks to the wet plastic of the tricycle. Once her grass-stained feet find the pedals, she'll need to pump furiously, but the tiny pedals are not up to the job.

As it turns out, she's as impervious to the rain as she is about everything else. As her feet move the pedals, she lets out a tinkling laugh. It floats through the air and settles nowhere.

I've never heard her sound more human.

She's a genius, but what good is that if you've got zero common sense? All it adds up to is an emergency.

I race to Mom's room. "Nikki's escaped!" I yell, voice sharp and loud.

"What, what?" Mom mumbles, dazed. Like this is new.

I yank open the curtain. "She's circling the block."

"Give me a second, Abi."

But from the way Mom's talking in slo-mo, I'm pretty sure it's going to be longer. I knew Librium relaxed a person, but her words are dragging like she's acquired a southern drawl. When her head starts to bobble, I become alarmed.

"Mom. Get up. Nikki's gone."

“I’m already up,” she slurs.

That’s debatable.

Her eyes are glassy. When she stands, she’s wobbly. I think about warning her it’s raining, but I don’t have time to hunt for an umbrella. Mom’s never prepared. In her head, she’s always in Morocco—where it’s hot or hotter.

She grabs a sleeveless dress from the closet and puts it on backward. An easy mistake—it looks the same both ways.

“My good clothes are at the cleaners,” she offers, like I care.

Mom doesn’t do sneakers. She calls them *déclassé*. She shoves her feet into kitten-heeled slippers—plastic, with feathers.

Walking her to the living room, I shove everything she might trip over out of the way. Meanwhile, I’m filled with dread. By now, Nikki and her Big Wheel are going at maximum speed. She’s buzzed by the monotony of manicured lawns and perfectly trimmed hedges at the end of the street, the rain bringing them into sharp relief.

The only thing Mom has in her favor is Nikki wants attention. Also, she might get bored. I mean, her game can’t be as much fun as it was a week ago when it was sunny, when she was the talk of the neighborhood. Her, riding around in circles, Mom chasing after her as if catch-me-if-you-can was a sport in the 1972 Olympics.

When Nikki spies Mom in the distance, it’s her cue to venture further. From there, the chase is on, the tires of the Big Wheel skidding and sliding across the sidewalk, Mom tripping over her heels. When Nikki manages to turn onto Leigh Avenue, even I stop breathing.

Leigh Avenue’s the worst. It’s like when a street has a stop sign and a yellow line through the middle—all bets are off. Chain-smoking drivers throw still-lit cigarettes out the window. There’s broken glass. People there get their beer by the case, people there park their cars on lawns instead of driveways, leaving them to rust in various stages of disassembly until so much motor oil has absorbed into the grass it reeks, until the adjoining concrete walkways are stained black.

My stomach lurches when I see Clyde Smith peeking out from under his car in time to give Nikki his signature slimy smile. I recognize him from

the Al's Liquors where Dad has me get cigarettes. Geezer makes me want to hurl. He's always offering to buy me a bottle, like I'll owe him something.

He's shirtless today. Saggy chest. Belly over his belt. Can't even zip his pants.

I want to scream. But some otherworldly force must be watching over Nikki. She passes him.

Then her wheels bump over broken glass. When she slides over a trio of banana slugs, they squish under her wheel and cause the tricycle to skid. She's still good enough on three wheels to regain control.

Mom spots her as she's circling back onto the safety of Fawn Drive. At this point, though, all I want to give her credit for is reproducing. Mom's doing her best, but no matter how hard she tries, Nikki's still out of reach. The cat-and-mouse game has Nikki checks over her shoulder to make sure she's still chasing her—grinning like crazy.

"What did I say about running away?" Mom calls, zero authority in her voice.

Nikki twists her neck in a sassy no-no. The distance between them is large now. The sound of Nikki's laugh floating further away.

That's when Bramford, a built-like-a-tree-trunk firefighter, springs into action. If there's anyone who knows how to solve problems, it's him. A regular Mr. Fix-it, his garage is floor-to-ceiling with tools, all organized like a hardware store.

He steps from behind his Ford pickup and gives Nikki one of his don't-mess-with-me looks. Would've turned me to stone. It doesn't faze Nikki. He steps in front of her trike, and with one giant fist, he grabs a hold of the console of the Big Wheel.

Although Nikki looks like she wants to peel out, what Bramford's done has given Mom time to catch up. But when Mom tries to swoop in, one of her heels slips off. She does manage to grab Nikki, tucking her under an arm like a loaf of French bread. When Nikki tries squirming, Mom tightens her hold.

Bramford's eyes dart between my rail-thin mom and my squirming sister. Mom's mortified. She talks in a high, nervous pitch.



“This was Abi’s fault,” she says. “She was supposed to watch her. It won’t happen again. I promise.”

It takes everything in me not to yell. She can’t be serious. She’s too busy cramming her feet into slippers to notice her kid’s gone rogue.

Bramford pats my head. He knows. I should’ve been at school. It’s Mom’s responsibility.

“You need a better lock,” he says. “Tell Hugh Orchard Supply will fix him up.”

Then, like it’s just another Tuesday: “You’d better get going; that child of yours is going to catch cold.”

He gives Nikki one more hard look like it would serve her right—would’ve made me pee my pants.

The walk home is a blur.

The second we’re inside, I let out a warbled sigh. I’m soaked. I’m tired. School’s a lost cause. But somehow, Nikki saved Mimouna. She got Mom out of bed—dynamite-style.

Mom smiles at Nikki like she’s proud of her derring-do.

“Let’s get my Lil’ Pumpkin cleaned up,” she says before turning to me and asking me to draw Nikki a bath.

I don’t decline. Five minutes and half a box of Mr. Bubbles later, Nikki’s in the tub, in pigtails with a froth of foam hanging from her chin, complaining the whole time.

“Mama, Abi made the bath too hot!” she bellows.

“Not true. I tested the water myself,” I say.

“Ow, ow, ow,” she cries. But those are crocodile tears. She’s acting.

“You were filthy. Look—the water’s brown.”

Mud’s still caked on her neck. I think about leaving it, but Mom’s flipped over less.

After scrubbing, I toss her a towel. “You can get out yourself. Any kid big enough to run away ... Also, if I were Mom, I’d make you apologize. Stealing’s wrong.”

From the hallway, Mom calls, “Abigail Jane, don’t be so hard on your sister. You may have the face, but she’s got legs for miles. A future showgirl.”

I swallow a sigh and finger the Hamsa tied to my bracelet.

If Mom’s right about Nikki, what does it mean for me? Mom put me in a Little Duckie’s dance class when I was eight with a bunch of four-year-olds. I still couldn’t keep up. It makes me mad. I want to be measured by my own yardstick. And who the heck wants this for their kid? It scares me imagining Mom and adult Nikki. Mom isn’t exactly a silverware-stealing, murdering Stage Mom like Gypsy Rose Lee’s mother. She’d be swallowed up. When I imagine Nikki in her element, in nothing but a feather boa and fan, surrounded by a band of admirers, flying monkeys all, my mind drifts to the Little Duckie’s dance class. Me, surrounded by toddlers twirling circles around me.

That feeling—like I’ll never measure up—

I hate it.

## CHAPTER 2

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### Cast Away

Yasmina – Fint Oasis, Morocco – 1941

The sun is barely over the ridge, and a faint streak of orange lights the sky. My Hand of Fatima amulet presses against my chest as I stand in the doorway, a bag beside me. Mma—my word for mother in my native Tamazight—fastened it around my neck just before I became a wife two years ago. I thought it would protect me.

Inside our mud hut, my mother-in-law, Adrina Mouloudji—who wants this done before the neighbors can see—is still gathering my things and placing them into bags. The one beside me holds a special occasion dress, sandals, scarves, miswak for my teeth, and a two-sided comb carved from olive wood. The other will contain a tunic and head covering for modesty, lambswool socks, and horse-hide slippers. Everything is expertly packed—but then again, my mother-in-law never does anything halfway.

After setting the last bag on the dirt floor, she pulls me into a hug.

“Allah have mercy,” she says.

That I flinch surprises even me. I abhor false affection. For two years, this woman acted like the picture of kindness and piety, and I believed her. Every word. Every smile. Now, I want to pull away—to say something, anything—but I don’t.

She’s hoping I will. She wants me to break, so she can pretend she’s the one who’s been wronged. But I’ve been taught better. Obedience isn’t a choice; it’s all I’ve ever known. My mother-in-law may have turned out to be a chameleon, but Mma told me, “Always remain quiet.” Where I come from, a girl who shows anger is a girl without dignity.

That doesn't stop my hands from going numb, or keep me from feeling like I've stepped outside my body. I watch her every move—the way she raises her chin, the way she rolls her shoulders back.

"You better take her before she makes a scene," she says to my brother-in-law.

*Oh really?* I want to say but don't. All my life I've been restrained, passive.

Idir, just in from the stable, with straw on his djellaba, looks confused. "I got the ticket like you said. Second class," he says.

"Get her to Marrakech," my mother-in-law replies. "After that, I don't care."

Although my face is puffy from crying all night, I won't give her the satisfaction. I want to press my fingers to my temples—it's too much to process. Last night, at the creek, beneath the date palm, was when I learned the truth. The sun hung low in the sky. Someone appeared on the horizon. I thought it was my husband.

But it was Idir.

"Brahim is divorcing you," he said, eyes dark and soulless in a way I hadn't seen before. "He adores you, Yasmina, but he's found someone else—someone who can give him a child. He hopes you'll understand."

"It's only been two years," I said.

Understand? What was there to understand?

Without the date palm behind me, I might have fallen. His words were such an earthquake to my soul, the ground didn't feel solid. Maybe he was testing me, seeing if I'd cry or beg. I didn't. I couldn't. I must be good. If they cast me off—where would I go? Back to Tacheddirt with nothing? Girls like me don't return home. They get passed around. They end up in unspeakable places.

I remember Idir crossing his arms, sneering. Then, as if reading my thoughts, he continued: "We're not throwing you away. Friends of ours found you a job in Morocco's capital—as a maid. You should be grateful. These positions aren't easy to find."

I pressed my fingers into my forehead. "What about Brahim?"

“You’ll be happy there,” Idir said, locking eyes with me. “We traded a few things with Monsieur Moab, your future employer. He’s good and honest. The mellah—the Jewish section where you’ll live—is safe. Clean.”

I’d never felt more paralyzed. I might have argued my case—I am capable of it—if I weren’t being lied to, if I didn’t have too much pride. I couldn’t go back to Tacheddirt. There was no dowry, no place for me. I’d be soiled.

A wife must keep her husband happy. If she fails and he chooses divorce, it is the woman who has betrayed the man—not the other way around. It is she who must hang her head.

It never even crossed my mind that Brahim, who was fifteen when we married, might be too fickle and immature for such an endeavor. But he wanted what he wanted. If only he hadn’t had that magical way of weaving words—of turning dreams into reality, of persuading even the most die-hard skeptics—I wouldn’t be here now.

That this confident boy was able to convince my parents to let me travel 150 miles away to live with a family they’d never met is beyond comprehension.

It’s true—I was smitten. But had my parents forbidden the marriage, I would have obeyed. Brahim’s charm and good manners won him many admirers, including my parents. It didn’t hurt that he was handsome, though I’m used to it now. His hair, eyes, and skin were the color of cinnamon. His teeth: even and white. His body: lean and tall. And the way he’d sweep his cloud-like hair off his brow—we swooned.

Idir climbs onto the camel and waves a hand in front of my face. “Time to go, stupid,” he says.

“Not yet, Idir,” my mother-in-law interrupts. “Fatima needs to say goodbye.”

I crane my neck for one last look at the place I’ve called home. This modest red-earth dwelling once seemed like a palace. Everything had meaning. The loom had to face backward. The kitchen—always rich with the scent of oil and fried dough—was set at the periphery. This layout, I was told, protected the virtue of the unmarried daughter: ten-year-old Fatima. I heard it often: “Only men can live in the light. It is unsafe for a woman to do the same.”

But to me, that kitchen had gone. I'd never seen anything more beautiful. The giant wood pile, the earthenware jugs on one side of the counter so we didn't have to go for water every day. And there were small clay jugs and grass baskets that stored too many delicacies to count. At any time, we'd have couscous, millet, yams, beans, rice, dates, and dried meat.

And now I'm thinking, *are the Mouloudjis not grateful?* I was thirteen when I arrived, but I'd brought so much. In Tacheddirt, I learned how to treat sick animals with a poultice of turmeric, onion, and oregano oil, sealed with thick bandages. I'd helped cows give birth. I knew how to forage. In Fint Oasis, I did all this and more. When food was scarce, I tracked wild herds, followed bees to hives, and hacked through thickets for wild thyme and dandelion. We gathered so many seeds, fruits, herbs.

When the water ran out, it was me who traveled the winding path and crossed the bridge. Even though they believed only in Allah, it was me who thanked Gaia, goddess of the Earth and patron saint of Tacheddirt. And now this family has taken my trust, and with it, my innocence.

I've always swallowed my emotions, so when anger bubbles to the surface, it registers as irritation. I pull at the camel's mane. It grunts. Fatima wraps a donut in a napkin and hands it to Idir. She says goodbye to him, but not to me. It doesn't matter.

This commune of artisans and farmers has always been kind to me, but I sensed they'd had enough of the Mouloudjis. Not the parents. Not the sister. Especially not the father, who spends his days hoeing rocky soil and planting millet. It's the sons they mistrust.

It's whispered that while the Mouloudji boys lack skill with clay or paint, they make up for it in hustle. They're negotiators. Maybe even cheaters. But the villagers rely on them to sell. So they go back and forth—from Ouarzazate to Marrakech, sometimes farther, especially since the war began.

"Stop thinking so much," Idir says. "I need you to pay attention."

By now, we're at the creek. While Idir squats to fill the canteens, I absentmindedly pick fleas from the camel's mane.

Idir is right. But can you blame me?

Until last night, I believed every act—good or bad—was proof the gods were smiling down on me. This oasis was what connected me to them. It made life's slings and arrows bearable.

The realization that I'll never again dip my feet in this water, never wiggle my toes in the warm sand, makes me want to cry. But as I watch Idir—smelling of hashish and sweat—fasten the canteens to the camel's side, the tears won't come.

"Times are hard, Yasmina," he says. "Cigarettes, chocolate, nylons—that's what people are buying. For days, Brahim and I tried. Finally, we left the donkeys with a friend, took a few smaller items, and hitched a ride in a cargo truck. Next thing you know, we're in Spain."

I want to ask him something, but maybe it's better to stay quiet. Either he's lying, or he's confessing.

"They caught us—Germans. But you should've seen Brahim skip that chain-link fence. I can run marathon distances, but I can't jump and sprint like him. So what happened is, he got away."

"So now you're admitting it?"

"Brahim deserves a shot at prosperity."

"So he's throwing me away?"

Whatever Idir says next, I don't hear it. If he could lie last night, he can lie again. Even if some of what he says is true, how would I know?

I've heard of women being discarded. I never thought it would happen to me. I never thought my fate would depend more on the character of others than on my own.

The gods are fickle, and so is life. If I'm going to survive, I'll have to depend on myself.

This time, when I reach for my Hamsa, it isn't for comfort.