



PROLOGUE



There is the tale that is told: A desert queen journeyed north with a caravan of riches to pay tribute to a king and his One God. The story of a queen conquered by a king before she returned to her own land laden with gifts.

That is the tale you are meant to believe.

Which means most of it is a lie.

The truth is far more than even the storytellers could conjure. The riches more priceless. The secrets more corrosive. The love and betrayal more passionate and devastating, both.

Love . . . The very word is a husk shriveled beneath the sun of the desert waste, its essence long lost to the sands. So will my tale be to those who traveled her barren routes, my footprints as though they never were. Nor will the mountains remember me or the waters of the Wadi Dhana speak of me as they swell the fertile floodplain. Far from the desert, the inexorable silt has its way in the end. It is a mercy.

Across the narrow sea, the pillars of the great temple once bore my name: Bilqis, Daughter of the Moon. Here, to the west, the palace columns bear another: Makeda, Woman of Fire. To those I served as priestess and unifier, I wore the name of my kingdom:

Saba. To the Israelites, I was queen of the spice lands they called Sheba.

They also called me whore.

The history keepers will no doubt tell their own tale, and the priests another. It is the men's accounts that seem to survive a world obsessed with conquest, our actions beyond bedchamber and hearth remembered only when we leave their obscurity. And so we become infamous because we were not invisible, the truth of our lives ephemeral as incense.

It is harder for queens, who have no luxury of meekness. History does not know how to reconcile our ambition or our power when we are strong enough to survive it. The priests have no tolerance for those of us driven by the divine madness of questions. And so our stories are blackened from the fire of righteous indignation by those who envy our imagined fornications. We become temptresses, harlots, and heretics.

I have been all and none of these, depending who tells the tale.

Across the sea in Saba, the mountain rains have ceased by now, the waters of the mighty Dhana turned to steam on the fields at dawn. In a few months the northern traders will sail in the quest for incense and gold . . . bringing with them news of the king who sends them.

I have not spoken his name in years.

Yes, there is indeed a tale. But if you would have the truth from me, it begins with this:

I never meant to become queen.



ONE



My mother, Ismeni, was born under the glimmer of the Dog Star, when men become disoriented by its light. They said she enchanted my father, that he made her his consort with a clouded mind. No king would choose a wife from his own tribe when he could strengthen alliance with another.

But I saw the way their gazes followed her whenever she appeared in the palace porticoes, their conversations drifting to suspended silence until she passed from sight. On the rare occasion that she took her seat beside Father's in the Hall of Judgment, the chamber swelled like a tide drawn by the darkened moon. Bronze-skinned with brows like dove's wings and lips for whispering prayers, my mother was the most exquisite thing in all of Saba. The trickle of rain over the highland terraces couldn't match the music of her beaded hems nor the best frankincense of Hadramawt compete with her perfume.

Drowsing on her sofa in the hot afternoon, I would twine my fingers with hers and admire the turquoise of her rings. I hoped my hands and feet would be as slender as hers. It was all I hoped; it never occurred to me that any other aspect of her beauty might be granted a mortal twice on this earth.

Many days we received gifts from my father: rare citrus imported from the north, sweet within their bitter rinds. Songbirds and ivory combs from across the narrow sea. Bolts of fine Egyptian linen, which my mother had made into gowns for me to match her own.

But my greatest treasures were the songs she sang like lullabies murmured against my ear. The ritual prayers she taught me as we knelt before her idols, the sweet waft of incense perfuming her hair. Never once did she chide me for clinging to her when she donned the robes of the thing called “queen.” Never once when she went to my father at night was she not curled around me again by morning. Beyond the palace, Saba sprawled from the sheer edge of the coastal range to the foot of the desert waste. But I was content that my world stretched no farther than my mother’s chamber.

In the evenings I sat before her jewelry chest and adorned my ears with lapis, my shoulders weighed down with necklaces as she reclined by her table. It was covered in gold, a glowing thing in the low light of the lamp that seemed to gild anything near it—the side of my mother’s face, the silver cup in her hand.

And then I would dance as she clapped her hands, bracelets chiming on my ankles—the dance of the monsoon rain running through the wadi ravines, and the gentle sprinkles of summer coaxing millet from the winter-brown earth. Of the highland ibex, my arms curved over my head like great crescent horns, and the lions that stalked them, which always made her laugh. And then she would leap to her feet and join me, the tiers of carnelian beads at her neck jingling with every stamp of her heels.

“You will be more beautiful than I,” she said one night after we had fallen onto the cushions.

“Never, Mamma!” The thought was impossible.

She held out her hand and I lay down against her.

“I was never so fair at your age,” she said, kissing the top of my

head. “But beware, little Bilqis. Beauty is a weapon you can only wield once.”

Before I could ask what she meant she slid a heavy bangle off her wrist. It was as wide as my hand and crusted with rubies. “Do you see these stones? They are harder than quartz or emeralds. They do not break under pressure, or soften with age. Let this remind you, my dove, that wisdom is lasting and therefore more precious.” She slid the bracelet onto my arm.

“But—”

“Hush now. The Sister Stars are rising—a time for new things.” She touched the amulet at my throat, a bronze sun-face inscribed on the back for my protection. “How do you like the idea of a young prince brother?”

I nestled against her, toying with the bangle. My nurse made me burn incense before the alabaster idol of Shams, the sun goddess, every month since I could remember in prayer for this very thing.

“I would like that.”

I said it because I knew it would please her. What I did not say was that I would like it far better than a sister, who would vie with me for my mother’s attention. That I could share her with a boy knowing he would eventually leave us for my father’s side—and the throne.

I vowed to pray daily that my mother’s baby would indeed be a boy.

Ten days later my mother suffered a seizure and hit her head on the marble bench inside her bath. That night I was told she had abandoned me for the afterlife, taking my unborn brother with her.

I screamed until I collapsed against the edge of her table. I called them liars and begged to see her, flailing against anyone who tried to touch me. My mother would never leave me! When they took me to her at last, I threw myself over her, clutching her cold

neck until they pried me away, strands of her long hair still tangled in my fingers.

After they closed up the royal mausoleum at the temple of the moon god, Almaqah, her face was before me constantly. Sometimes I could smell her, feel the softness of her cheek against mine as I slept. She had not deserted me. I stopped speaking for nearly a year after her death. Everyone thought I had gone mute with grief. But the truth is that I would speak only to her.

I whispered to her as I lay in bed every night until her voice faded the following summer, taking some vital part of me with it. I was six years old.

Hagarlat, my father's second wife, was neither young nor beautiful. But her presence in the palace renewed ties with the tribes of Nashshan to the north, and control of the trade route through the immense Jawf valley. If the dams and canals that channeled the summer monsoons were the lifeblood of Saba, the incense route was her breath, every exhale of her roads profitably laden with frankincense, bdellium, balsam, and myrrh.

I was eight when my half-brother broke the peace of the women's quarter with his angry wail just before the first rains of spring. Father offered gold figurines of Hagarlat and my brother at the temple feast that year, inscribed with the appropriate curses should anyone remove them. I felt betrayed by this blasphemy; my mother was interred on that sacred soil.

But even the appearance of an heir could not appease his council, for whom my father would never compare to his militant sire. My grandfather Agabos had been a killer of men. Thousands fell to the machine of his ambition as he campaigned to unite the four great kingdoms: Awsan, Qataban, Hadramawt, and Saba to rule them all.

It was Agabos who had married the princess from across the narrow sea through whom his children received the royal darkness of their skin.

But my father, the only one of Agabos' sons to survive his campaigns, was more interested in advancing the worship of the moon god Almaqah throughout the federated kingdom than the boundaries of Saba itself. That year, he appointed himself high priest and presided over temple banquets and ritual hunts until even my young ears could not help but hear the murmured discontent sweeping through the palace halls like a furtive swarm of bees.

I distrusted Hagarlat. Not because she encouraged his zeal, or because she had the face of a mottled camel—or even because she had brought the squalling thing that was my brother into the world—but because she had usurped my mother's chamber along with her jewels and made the name Ismeni seem a distant thing in the minds of everyone but me.

The palace had become foreign to me with my stepmother's servants and uncanny priests filling its halls with their rough tribal tongue. My new relatives and even their slaves looked through me when they weren't ordering me about, and the children I had grown up with had long distanced themselves from me during my year of silence. "Stay away from me!" one of them, a boy named Luban, said when I tried to get him to sneak out to the stables. We had spent hours feeding the camels and hiding from my nurse the year before my mother's death. He was by now several inches taller than I and the laughter in his eyes for me was gone. "Your mother is dead and Hagarlat is queen. You're just a bastard now."

I blinked in astonishment at the scorn on his round face.

And then I blackened his eye.

"I am the daughter of the king!" I shouted, standing over him until someone pulled me away.

I went that evening without supper, but I had no appetite. I had seen young friends of dead unions become the servants of the offspring who replaced them, before. I never thought it would happen to me.

“You are a princess. Do not forget who you are,” my nurse said to me that night. But I did not know who I was. Only that she and her daughter, Shara, were all that remained to me now.

Though no one else called me “bastard”—at least to my face—I did not miss the eyes that turned away, the dwindling choice of fabric for my gowns, the gifts from my father that grew more intermittent before they ceased altogether.

One day I strode boldly into Hagarlat’s chamber, where she was dictating the celebration to take place for my brother’s first birthday, bolts of dyed cloth and rare silk laid out across the settee. “Where are the things my father sends for me?” I demanded. I heard the intake of breath around me, saw from the corner of my eye the horrified expression of my nurse.

Hagarlat turned, astonishment scrawled as clearly across her face as the henna on her forehead. Green jasper dripped from her ears. A thick, gold girdle hung from her burgeoning waist. I thought she looked like a decorated donkey.

“Why, child, has he forgotten you? And he sends so many gifts here. Ah, what a mess your face is.” She reached toward my cheek. Just as my lower lip threatened to quiver, I saw it: the ruby bangle that once belonged to my mother—the same one given to me before her death.

“Where did you get that?” I said. My nurse pulled me away, hissing at me to shush. “That is mine!”

“What, this?” Hagarlat said. “Why, if it means so much to you, have it.” She took it off and tossed it at me. It fell on the floor at my feet.

“Forgive me, my queen!” my nurse said. I ducked the circle of her arms and snatched the bracelet from the floor. One of the rubies



was missing, and I frantically began to search for it until my nurse hauled me from the chamber.

I avoided the palace as much as I could after that. I escaped to the gardens and lost myself by the pools, where I hummed my mother's songs. Lost myself, too, in study with the tutor my father assigned to me, ostensibly to keep me out of trouble.

Within three years I had devoured the poetry of Sumer, the wisdom writings of Egypt, and the creation stories of Babylonia. I called on the palace scribes and read court documents over their shoulders when they would humor me, my father's chief scribe allowing me to admire the proud lines of his script and even producing the battle accounts of my grandfather when I plied him with a jug of wine pilfered from the cellar. I waited anxiously for the traders to return with new treasures of parchment scrolls, tablets, and vellum—even palm stalks etched with their commercial receipts.

For the first time since my mother's passing to the shadow world, I found joy. My toddling brother, Dhamar, would become king. And I would slip past the palace halls with their political squabbles and private intrigues to the stories of others come alive from far-flung places. To escape all . . .

But the gaze of Hagarlat's brother.

Sadiq was a serpent—a fat man with a languid gaze that missed nothing and a knack for convincing my father's advisors of his usefulness. The maidservants and slaves gossiped often about him, saying he had been born under a strong omen—which really meant he had come into considerable wealth with his sister's marriage to my father. It seemed half the palace was taken with him, though I couldn't fathom why.

But Sadiq was taken with only one person: me.

His eyes followed me through the porticoes. I felt the slither of

them on my back and shoulders, felt them bore into me anytime I appeared in the alabaster hall.

I wasn't the only one to notice.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Hagarlat asked your father to give you to Sadiq," my nurse said one evening after tut-tutting over my unkempt hair. Shara, the closest thing I ever had to a sister, stared at her mother and then at me. She had grown to resent Hagarlat's family since their arrival in the palace, if only out of loyalty to me.

"He wouldn't," I said.

"And why not?"

"He already has Sadiq's loyalty."

Even then I held no illusions about my future. I would be married to some noble or another in a matter of years.

But not Sadiq.

"Hagarlat's love of her brother is no secret," she said, fiercely combing my hair. "And neither is her ability to secure favors from your father."

"He's not even a tribal chief!"

"He's the queen's brother. He'll be master of waters by year's end, mark me."

I looked at her, incredulous. The master of waters oversaw the distribution of flow from the great wadi dam, the sluices of which irrigated the oases on either side of Marib. It was a position of power over the capital's most influential tribes. Only a fair and respected man could arbitrate the inevitable conflicts over the allocation of waters.

Sadiq was neither.

"He'll do nothing but collect bribes."

"Bilqis!"

"It's true. Sadiq is a worm sucking the tit of his sister!"

My nurse drew a sharp breath and was, I knew, on the verge

of warning me to prudence. But before she got a word out, Shara dropped the bronze mirror that she had been polishing. It fell with a thud to the carpet.

“Clumsy girl!” her mother snapped. Shara didn’t seem to hear; her wide eyes were fastened on the floor.

My nurse hesitated and then gasped and dropped the handful of my hair she had begun to plait. She swept aside, her head bowed so low that I thought her neck would break.

I slowly turned on my stool.

There, in the arched doorway of our shared chamber, stood Hagarlat. The hem of her veil was pinned back from her face, a rainfall of gold fell from each ear. Two of her women stood in the antechamber beyond. I rose to my feet.

For a moment, neither of us moved. Nor did I move even to bow when she walked quietly toward me. She stopped just before the mirror and bent to retrieve it as though it were a wayward toy. Appraising it once, she took the cloth from Shara’s startled hand, passed it over the surface, and then handed the mirror to me.

“So you may see more clearly,” she said. And then she walked out, dropping the cloth behind her.

The instant she was gone, my nurse and Shara turned toward me as one, their faces pale, nostrils flared with fear. I didn’t ask how the door to the outer chamber had come open. It didn’t matter.

I was betrothed to Sadiq within a week.

I threw myself at my father’s feet in the audience room of his private chamber—the place where he might be not a king but a man.

“I beg you, do not give me to him,” I cried. I clasped the fine leather of his sandals, pushed up the hem of his robe to touch my forehead to the top of them.

“Bilqis,” he said with a sigh. I raised my head even as he looked away. The lines around his eyes seemed more pronounced in the low

lamplight of the chamber, the characteristic kohl missing from the rim of his lower lashes. “Can you not do this thing? For Saba—for Almaqah, over all?”

“What do I care for any god?” I said. “The gods do what they will!”

“Are you a goddess, that you, too, should do what you will?” he said softly.

“She did this because she heard me speak ill of Sadiq. I repent of it!” I dropped my head, clutched at his feet. “I will apologize. I will serve in her chamber. But please do not do this!”

He reached for me, to draw me up. “Hagarlat would see our tribal bonds strengthened. And why not? Your brother will be king. Do you really think the queen so petty?”

I jerked away from him. “Do you not see that she hates me?” I stumbled back, away from the low dais and into the pool of lantern light before the throne. I opened my mouth to renew my appeal but stopped when I saw how he stared at me.

For a moment his mouth worked, though no words came out. There was a pallor to his skin that hadn’t been there before.

“Ismeni . . . ?” he said faintly. His hand lifted, fingers trembling in the air.

“Father?”

I went to him again but when I tried to clasp his knees, he flinched away.

“Father, it is I, Bilqis!”

“It is late,” he said, eyes turned toward the latticed window. Torchlight glowed up from the royal gardens below.

“Please, my king. I was your daughter once. If you have any love for me—”

“It is settled.” His voice was strained. The lamp flickered and I saw it then on his face: the grimace of the years since my mother’s death. Love eclipsed by the dark moon of pain.

Sadiq seemed to be everywhere after that. He stood in the porticoes when I went out to the gardens. He loitered near the fountains as I went about my lessons. And though he did not approach me beneath the gaze of the ubiquitous guards, his eyes were as ever-present as the scorching sun.

I quit attending meals in the hall. I began to avoid my lessons. The sight of him, from the way he wore his ornamental dagger high up in his belt as though it were his very manhood to the number of rings on his fingers, repulsed me. I would feel different in time, my nurse assured me. But my only comfort was that I would never be alone with him until we married in three years.

Sadiq, however, was not a man of honor.

I was twelve the first time he laid hands on me.

The soft scrape of the door woke me. I was alone and at first glance by light of the waning lamp, I thought it was Baram, the eunuch. He, too, was paunched around the middle and soft-chinned, and the only man allowed in the women's quarter.

And then I saw the gleam of the dagger's hilt.

He crossed the room in three strides and I bolted up, screaming for Baram. Sadiq struck me hard across the face.

I fought him as his weight fell on me, the scabbard of his dagger digging into my ribs, but he was twice my size. "Baram and the women are attending my sister, who is even now miscarrying your new brother," he said hotly against my ear. He was putrid with perfume and wine. "And none of them will stand against the new master of waters."

His hand closed around my throat. His other tugged up my gown. I clawed at him until I nearly lost consciousness and then squeezed shut my eyes.

I lay in bed the next three days.

My nurse called for the physician, who could find no fever in me. Only the stupefied torpor of one who no longer wished to live

in her own skin. Sadiq had managed to leave no mark on my neck or face—just the scrapes of his rings against my thighs.

I wanted to rise only to walk into the desert waste until the sands consumed me, but had no will even for that. As night came on the fourth evening, I called for my nurse. I would ask for the deadly nightshade that Hagarlat used to dilate her pupils. Or for the honey of rhododendron nectar.

But she just blinked at me and said, “Why, child? Why do you want these things? You are beautiful already and such honey will only make you ill.”

I couldn’t bring myself to give voice to the words.

She gave me qat to chew instead, but even the stimulant leaves would not rouse me from my bed.

The second time Sadiq forced himself on me, I said, “My father will have you killed. I will accuse you before the entire council!”

“Will he? They will ask you, ‘Did you cry out? Who heard you? Why did you not come immediately to your king father the first time?’ When I claim you tried to seduce me and voice concern about your honor, whom do you think they will believe?” And I knew he was right: he was brother to the queen and master of waters. I was the daughter of a woman born under a bad omen, too often alone.

“When they send for the midwife and she finds you not intact, I will have no choice but to publicly set you aside for the sake of my honor, and the queen’s.”

I should have been filled with righteous fury. I should have accused him before my father if only to escape him—and any other man, as no man would marry me without a hefty bribe after such a public scandal. Instead, I was overcome with shame like the rot of worms beneath the skin.

I begged Shara not to leave my bed at night. But she could not deny the queen if called for. Sadiq raped me twice more in the

months that followed, even as clouds gathered over the highland terraces and the first gusts of the coming season shook the trees on the hills.

The rains came and I kept to my bed. The torrents swept down the hills through the afternoon, carrying trees and earth and any building in their way into the wadi ravines. At last I slept through the night, exhausted by my vigilance of the weeks prior. For now, at least, I was safe; the master of waters was away from the palace, monitoring the floods and the condition of the canals with a labor force ready to repair any breach in the sluices.

Sometime before dawn, I rose and walked to the window. I was a wisp beneath my shift, having lost the young curves I had only begun to come into. Claspings the sill, I threw open the latticed shutter. The first servants were in the yard; I could make out their shadowed forms against the faint hue of dawn. As I had on so many nights since my mother's passing, I sought out the Sister Stars. But that morning the moon obscured one of them. I stood at the window long after the sky had brightened and the stars began to fade, watching it pass before their company.

For the first time in years, I prayed. Not to Shams, the sun, who had failed to protect my mother . . . but to Almaqah, the moon god who had received her.

*Save me or let me die.*

That was all. I slid the ruby bracelet, the most precious thing I owned, from my arm and laid it on the sill before the fading crescent.

Later that day, men came rushing into the courtyard, their shouts rising to the open window of my chamber. Not long after, a great, singular wail went up from the hall of women, so loud that it carried to my chamber.

My nurse brought the news an hour later: one of the sluice gates had buckled. Sadiq had been carried away in the flood.

I raised my eyes heavenward.

*I am yours.*

Sadiq's body was never found. A month after his death, Hagarlat accused me before my father. Her face was drawn, her clothing hanging on a frame turned gaunt. I had grown into my own gowns once more, as though I had acquired the lushness she had lost in her grief.

"That girl is a curse to this house." Her voice broke. "She cursed my brother as she has cursed me!"

"My queen, you are overwrought," my father said, sounding weary.

"Am I? My brother—her betrothed—is dead and I have miscarried twice since coming into your household. Her own mother gave birth to only one girl and died with your son in her belly. I tell you that girl brings death to everyone near her!"

When my father finally looked at me, I knew he saw the shadow of the woman he had married not for treaties but for love. And I understood at last why he had not sought me in my grief, or summoned me in the years of my withdrawal since her death.

"Wife," he said, lowering his head.

"You will send her away or I will leave this court and take my son with me lest she kill him, too, as she did her own mother and unborn brother! My mother had seven children by the time she was my age, and my sister five sons. But not once in four years have I carried another to term. Would you cost us the lives of our other unborn children as well?"

I turned on her with a hiss. I was like the branch, no longer green, that splinters beneath the weight of a single bird. I was



prepared to be reckless, to curse her, her son, and every hoped-for issue of her womb, and every tenant of her tribe with their camels and goats down to the last rabid dog.

But the breath I had drawn to curse her came out as a soft chuff of wonder instead. For one insane moment, I nearly laughed.

There was nothing she could do to me, nothing that could be taken from me that had not already been taken or that I had not been willing to shed—down to my very life—myself.

I, who had no power, did not need to utter a word. She had lost all supremacy over me. And in that moment, she knew it, too. I watched the color drain from her cheeks.

“Yes,” I said to my father. “Send me away. Let me go across the narrow sea to the land of your mother’s mother before you. And give me priests and offerings for the temple of Almaqah there, and I will take them in your name.”

Was that relief that flitted across his face?

I could not begrudge him his quick agreement. Almaqah had been his salvation, too.

That fall I boarded a ship with my tutor, a retinue of priests, new ministers for the growing colony, and a wealth of incense, offerings, and gifts for the temple in Punt. I was not allowed to bring my nurse or Shara with me—Hagarlat had seen to that—and so bid them both tearful goodbyes, kissing their necks and commending them to the gods.

I was resolved that I would never return to the palace at Marib with its dark corridors and darker memories. That I would live my life in Punt—and in peace—all my days.

But Almaqah, once summoned, had other plans for me.