

prologue

Thwarted

Most little girls looked forward to the time when their father returned home. Yesubai did not. As soon as the clanging bell announced his arrival, fear seized her heart in a powerful grip and the young girl stopped breathing.

No one who took note of the small child could tell how deathly terrified she actually was. All one could see was a diminutive princess, adorned in the finest of silks. Her large, unusual-colored lavender eyes, framed by thick, dark eyelashes, set in a heart-shaped face, made even the crassest of hearts melt. On the outside, she was as calm and as still as a mountain lake. There was nothing of the shrewd and the mysterious about her, at least not outwardly. Yesubai's demeanor reflected nothing of her father.

Despite this, not one soul who worked closely with the family would risk so much as a whisper regarding the possibility of indiscretions on the part of their master's late wife. No one was that stupid. They thought it though. They all wondered how such a rare gem could come forth from a fount so impure. None pondered this idea more than Yesubai's beloved caretaker, Isha.

The servant woman, Isha, had been called in almost immediately upon the death of the master's wife, Yuvakshi. Isha had, in fact, been friends with the midwife who helped deliver Yuvakshi's baby, but soon after the birth of her young ward, the unfortunate death of Yuvakshi was announced. This was quickly followed by the midwife's mysterious disappearance. Isha, a nursemaid, was hired, and she and the young baby girl were banished to the far side of the sumptuous home in the small kingdom of Bhreenam.

Bhreenam had once been a peaceful place to live. Their king was old but he was a good man with very few political ambitions. Most of the people were herders and farmers, and the military was just large enough to provide security from the occasional rabble-rouser or drunkard. It was a good place to live. Once.

Now a new military commander had taken over. The very man who had hired Isha. He was a dark man. A dangerous one. Outwardly, of course, he was all smiles, and to the king he played at deference, but it was all Isha could do not to chant a plea to the gods to ward off evil every time he came near. Her employer frightened her. More than anyone she'd ever met.

Isha's suspicion that the young baby's father had done something terrible to his wife was amplified when he visited the nursery. She'd often enter the room to find him staring down at the young baby with naked loathing on his face. Like a coward, she'd wait in the doorway, half hidden and wringing her hands as she whispered silent supplications that the little girl who she'd come to love would not do anything to upset her father.

When he'd leave, she'd breathe a sigh of relief and thank the gods for keeping her ward asleep through the ordeal. But after each of his visits, she'd discover the little girl was awake after all, her liquid eyes still staring at the spot where her father's face had recently been. The baby's little limbs were still, and her blanket remained tightly tucked around her.

Later, despite the frequent appearance of the baby's father, Isha would want the girl to show more emotion; in fact, she often wondered if something was wrong with her charge. She wasn't a mean child. It was nothing of that sort. Yesubai just had a serious nature.

She didn't play as other children did. Instead of daydreaming or playacting with her toys, she merely propped them up in a place that she said displayed them in the best light. Her smiles were rare. Though her beauty was undeniable, most saw her as merely a pretty doll. Only Isha could sense the deep feelings that ran beneath the surface.

The visits from Yesubai's father became less frequent as the child grew older, and most of the time, he left his daughter alone, the exception being when he trotted her out for political assemblies and parties. The child's rare beauty seemed to please him then, especially when it was remarked upon by the king. Yesubai followed her father from minister to minister, even holding his hand when he demanded it, and made not a sound unless she was directly addressed. Even then, she was as polite and as perfect as a princess, and her quiet nature charmed all who met her.

Though he used her to his advantage, Yesubai's father spoke not a kind word to her and passed the girl off as soon as was immediately possible. Only when ensconced safely in Isha's arms did the young girl's shoulders droop and her beautiful eyes flutter closed. Isha would then tuck the little ethereal creature into bed and wonder, not for the first time, if she was a grown woman, wise beyond her years, trapped in the body of a little girl.

When Yesubai was eight, her father departed for a trip he'd been strangely excited about. The gleam in his eyes was frightening, and Isha secretly hoped that whatever compelled him to leave would somehow keep him away indefinitely, but, as always, he returned, and she waited with crippling fear for the aftermath. If her master's trip had gone well, he'd have the servants deliver boxes of cut flowers, but if it had gone badly, he'd seek out Yesubai personally. Isha didn't have to wait long.

When she bustled into the room, she saw the little girl she'd come to love standing immobile and staring at the door. She took the hand of her charge and squeezed lightly. Lavender eyes blinked once, twice, and then she looked up at the old servant woman. The tiniest lift at the corner of her mouth indicated to Isha that Yesubai was grateful for her presence.

As Yesubai carefully covered her waist-length hair with a purple scarf, Isha bustled around the already pristine room and slid a book an inch lower on the table, wiped condensation from the cold flask of water, straightened a blanket, and fluffed a few pillows.

The stomp of heavy boots was heard in the hallway, and quickly Yesubai secured her scarf across her face so that only her lovely eyes could be seen. Isha took her place off to the side of the room and hovered in the shadows, steeling herself to protect her ward but secretly hoping it wouldn't be necessary. As much as Isha wanted to be a strong woman, one who would not bow down to evil, she always felt the guilty relief that came when the little girl who knew too much was able to handle her father on her own.

Someday, she thought. Someday, I will stand fearless beside her.

But Isha did not stand fearless beside Yesubai, at least not right away. As the girl's father entered the room, power crackling at his fingertips, both the girl and the old woman knew that the visit that day would not bring flowers but thorns. As Yesubai curtsied for her father and diminutively lowered her eyes in the way he expected, he lashed out—first with the unnatural power stored up in his arms, and then with his fists.

Precious silks went up in flames. Chunks of stone blew away from the wall and crashed into the opposite one. Little dolls with intricately carved wax faces melted into puddles. When the physical destruction proved ineffective in calming his temper, he finally turned on his daughter.

Bravely, she stood before him, head bowed and calm while he raged about the things he wanted but were just out of his grasp—such as his lust for a woman who spurned him, the fact that Yesubai was a cowering weakling, and that her birth had denied him the son he so very much wanted at his side.

With the rage of a bull, he drew back his arm and struck Yesubai across the face with so much strength that the force picked up her thin frame. The wind tossed her veil aside and whipped her hair. With a sickening smack, Yesubai hit the wall and slid slowly down, crumpling into a heap on the floor. The little girl lay still, her broken body hung like a lifeless doll tossed carelessly over jagged pieces of stone.

With a cry, Isha rushed forward into the path of the monster only to be rewarded with a broken leg, a crushed windpipe, two blackened eyes, and deep purple bruises down her body. Her ward was dead and Isha knew she would be soon joining her.

In the quiet after his departure, she wakened. Pain licked her limbs and pounded beneath her eyelids, and yet she sensed a fluttering touch on her arm. Yesubai. The girl was alive.

She touched her beloved caretaker with tender, tentative fingers, and a warm tingle soothed the pain that arced through Isha's limbs. Hours passed and, as she healed, Isha pondered the things she'd been able to glean from her master's rants. It seemed he had recently failed in an attempt to infiltrate a neighboring kingdom, which spurred his rage. He'd screamed that the amulets *would* belong to him and that if he had to go through a thousand soldiers to get his hands on the young princes, then so be it.

As he'd beaten his daughter, he'd said that she was worthless and as docile as her mother and that a powerful man such as himself needed a strong and compelling woman to stand at his side. He said he'd only wished he'd killed Yuvakshi before she'd given him a mewling daughter to be the thorn in his side.

Isha lay quietly, the swelling in her face and body subsiding thanks to Yesubai's healing touch, but the young girl, with bleeding cuts from her father's rings marring her beautiful face, cried and softly apologized, saying that there wasn't much she could do to help with the leg. It didn't matter. Isha would heal enough.

The limp she had following that day was a reminder for Isha to stand firm against evil. It actually gave her a sense of pride to know that she'd been brave enough to defend her ward after all. Yet, as heroic as she'd been that day, she still desperately feared the future. What would her master do when he learned that the two of them had not died?

On that day full of pain and sorrow, Isha came to understand two very important things.

First—there was a magic, darkly used by the father, which had been somehow passed on to the daughter. And second—Yesubai's father had indeed killed his late wife and would not hesitate to murder again. She'd suspected him of the blackest evil before, but now she knew that he was capable of worse. Much worse.