

Chapter 1

ASHARA

Forbidden Tongues & Flickering Flames

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*In the southern Republic of Samara, destiny did not rest on words
written in ink; it was woven from celestial light into a tapestry that left
no room for choice. The moment a soul tried to carve out their own identity,
dark forces from both earthly and spiritual realms moved in to crush them.
For those tethered to the dirt, fate was reduced to a heavy, daily struggle.
The only real choice left was whether to submit, or to be unraveled.*

Inside the hum of the Weaver's Guild, the looming design of destiny felt entirely distant as thirteen-year-old Ashara shifted her weight, readjusting her hold on baby Pavel. Her youngest brother was warm and heavy in her arms, his small chest rising and falling against hers—a solid, breathing contrast to the ethereal light show above them. He gurgled, stretching a chubby hand toward a fluttering length of turquoise silk that danced just out of reach. Its frayed edges tickled his tiny palm before snapping away in the breeze. Ashara offered him a quiet, patient smile, her movements calm and deliberate; common for a girl who had spent most of her youth learning the balancing act of elder-sister duty.

Looking up, Ashara watched the white afternoon glow stumble into the great room as it pierced the delicate, damp fibers high overhead. The light slowed, twisting through the skeins

until it spilled out the other side, released in radiant arcs. Vivid ribbons of color splashed across the surrounding surfaces.

Like a sunset shattered into silk and hung to dry, she noted, blinking against the sudden brightness. To her, the air inside the Weaver's Guild was like a living tapestry of falling light, thick with the humid, sweet-and-sour steam of the indigo vats and the grounded, earthy scent of crushed madder root.

High above the stone floors, thousands of saturated strands hung in gravity-defying curtains—violets, saffrons, deep-sea blues, rippling like the surface of a dream-lake stirred by a gentle hand. The mountain air swept through the open, high-level windows, the hanging silks swaying and dancing in a synchronized, fluttering rush, throwing long shadows over her and the baby.

Nestled in the heart of this spectral forest, the rhythmic clack of the great looms vibrated through the soles of Ashara's leather slippers. To her right, a circle of older women, known in their district as the spinners of the Golden Horn, laughed over the low whirl of their wheels. Their fingers, stained a permanent, regal violet, pulled delicate spider thread from the air as if they were spinning moonlight into cord. They moved with a harmonized grace, transforming raw, chaotic bundles of fibrils into disciplined lines of gold and crimson that caught the vaulted sun, flaring like dragon fire before Ashara's eyes.

Nearby, her mother stood at the master loom, her hands moving with an ancestral speed that seemed to command the very air. The peaceful hum of the Guild offered the perfect marriage of sun, wind, and work—fractured when her Uncle Evgeniy slipped through the side entrance in a hurry.

He moved past the master weavers, his dark outer robe looking like a smudge of charcoal against the brilliant, dancing silks, his deep hood casting a shadow over his face. He didn't approach the vats, as other common patrons would do. Instead, he skirted the edge of the hanging silks, moving toward Mata's loom with a stride that was too quick, too sharp for a day this beautiful.

Ashara pulled Pavel closer and retreated into a hidden pocket of hanging reels. From behind the silk curtain, her world turned the same vibrant yellow as an eastern wagtail. She bounced the baby and made faces, desperate to keep him quiet and distracted.

"The Sultan's tax is no longer just coin, Misha," Evgeniy hissed, leaning over the loom as if inspecting a flaw in the silk.

From behind Ashara's golden veil, Pavel stirred. He reached for a dangling tassel, and she gently caught his wrist, pressing a finger to her lips. His eyes went wide, mirroring the amber glow of their sanctuary, entirely oblivious to the irritated rasp of his uncle's voice cutting through the guild's whir.

"He wants names," Evgeniy continued. His shadow stretched across the floor toward Ashara's feet. "The names of every worker displaced when they shuttered the Scriptorium. He wants to know where they've gone, who they're breaking bread with, and if their tongues are still tripping over the banned dialects of the ancestors."

Ashara could hear that her Mata didn't break her pace; her shuttle flew with a defiant, steady click. "The Sultan wants many things, Evgeniy, but the old tongues aren't like books he can burn. They are in the songs we sing to the babies and the way we haggle for salt."

Pavel let out a soft, wet huff of breath, and Ashara hugged him tighter.

Mata caught a loose thread with a deft flick of her stained fingers. “Half the women in this hall are whispering in the old ways right now. They aren't afraid of a ghost-ban on words they've spoken since the cradle.”

“Then they are fools, and you are playing with a lightning strike,” Evgeniy countered, his eyes darting toward the open archway. He leaned closer, his dark robes smothering the light that played across the vibrant threads. “Ignorance won't hide us anymore. The ‘Republic’ of Samara has disappeared, Misha. It has become authoritarian and you know it. All of the people of the seven mountains sense it. We must be the needle, not the fabric... like our Samaran warriors with their synchronized spearhead attacks—focus on single weak points to penetrate the Sultan’s false republic.”

Ashara held her breath as his voice dropped. Pavel squirmed, his small heel kicking her ribs, but she was frozen as the shadow of her uncle paused over the silhouette of her Mata.

“We cannot fight his Zagore Sedem, but we can pierce his secrets.”

Evgeniy tapped the cedar frame of the loom, his gaze intense. “I have an idea to weave the truth where his Sedem will never think to look—coded illustrations hidden in the borders of your designs. A specific flower for a safe house. A jagged mountain peak for a midnight gathering. We can create the code we need and make the information part of its beauty, Misha. We map the resistance into the very rugs his high-ranking ministers walk upon.”

Mata’s hands finally stilled, the shuttle clutched tightly in her fingers. Her silhouette did not turn towards Evgeniy, but remained fixed on the sprawling, unfinished landscape on her loom, her eyes tracing the paths he wanted her to subvert.

“Enough, Evgeniy.” Her voice was tight with a sharp edge of caution. Her chin tilted upwards toward the rafters where the silks fluttered like nervous birds. “You are Mikhail’s brother, and I love you as my own, but I am not happy keeping these secrets from him. My husband has enough weight on his shoulders without me weaving treason into our home while he isn’t looking.”

She took a deep breath, her gaze softening just enough to show her maternal compassion beneath. “Leave now. Let me sit with this. But I shall consider your request sincerely.”

Behind the silk, Ashara’s fingers cramped where she gripped the baby’s tunic. Consider it? A hollow, cold pressure tightened beneath her ribs, turning her breath into shallow, uneven slips. She looked down at the dark tuft of her brother’s hair; his innocent weight no longer a comfort, but a burden.

If the Sultan finds out, the Sedem might kill her. If she weaves secrets to overthrow him, every vibrant strand on that loom will become the tightening fibers of a braided noose. What would our family do without her?

The golden light filtering through the silk bled into something ominous; the canopy pulling taut in her peripheral vision. The threads, once comforting, now thrummed with the phantom vibration of a disturbed trap. Ashara couldn’t unsee the warp and weft of it, waiting for the slightest tremor. She yanked Pavel into her arms, burying her face in his hair, squeezing him until he squirmed in her desperate grasp.

Evgeniy opened his mouth to press his point further, but her Mata shook her head, a strand of dark hair escaping her headscarf. “Go. We will speak of it away from the looms. I will

see you later for the celebration of Eid al-Fritof. We will break the fast together under the roof of your brother, where the only thing he weaves is his brilliant storytelling.”

Evgeniy straightened, pulling the hood of his djellaba lower. With a final, meaningful look at the loom, he melted back into the aurora of hanging silks, vanishing like a shadow into the vibrant refraction of the Weaver’s Guild. Ashara stayed perfectly still, her heart hammering a frenzied rhythm with Pavel clutched to her chest, waiting for the whispers of her uncle to truly be gone.

In the suffocating silence that followed, the vibrancy of the guild no longer felt like a playground. Ashara had entered as an adolescent sister, but she had since turned into a worried guardian, carrying a secret that acted as the first spark in a tinderbox—one destined to set her childhood, and her world, ablaze.

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The air outside the Guild remained crisp, the temperate breath of the mountains carried with it the sharp tang of cedarwood and the pervasive, animal heat of the tanneries. Ashara followed her Mata through the narrow, winding streets of the northern sector, the heart of the capital. They moved through the ancient medina, where terracotta walls held the day’s warmth and flowering vines spilled from the upper balconies. Hovering around them, the clay and stone walls of the ryads leaned in like old friends sharing secrets.

The stone felt cool underfoot as the sun dipped behind the Shevua Mountains, and a low breeze tickled like a soft hand against Ashara’s damp neck. When they emerged into the Bazaar of Erez, the world opened up into a harvest of plenty. With the autumnal equinox approaching, the stalls groaned under the weight of the season’s final, peak-ripened offerings—heaping

mounds of emerald figs, bursting pomegranates, and crates of sun-gold grains. It was the beautiful, frantic bounty of a land gathering its strength before the tilt of the world brought the lean shadows of winter.

As she held tightly onto Pavel, she scrambled to keep up, weaving after her Mata through the stalls. Sloping around the market, irrigation canals ran clear and fast, a silver reminder of the Gods' blessings, feeding the orchards that hugged the city's skirts. Vendors shouted over the din, showcasing honey-dripping combs and wheels of salty goat cheese, their faces bright with the ease of a good harvest.

Ashara passed a merchant shouting into the crowd, his voice echoing in the rigid cadence of Seraphic—the only legal language the Sultan permitted. “Glory be to You, O Lehabim, and with Your praise; blessed is Your name; exalted is Your majesty; there is no god besides You,” the man bellowed. He concluded the prayer by performing the mifftah, pressing a freshly minted coin from a substantial sale against his lips before tapping it to his forehead as a devout offering. The sharp tongue and forced piety made Ashara flinch, her brows scrunched low in rebuke. She swerved with Pavel to skirt the shadows.

Ashara tried to focus on the vendors' displays, but the market was a minefield of golden light. She forced her gaze away, only for it to snag on a bolt of yellow silk draped in a nearby stall. Her stomach dropped. The fabric felt like a living thing, tracking her straight out of the Guild. The mellow sunlight felt like a mockery, reflecting off the market stalls exactly like the golden weave, a phantom reminder that the quiet, protected days of her girlhood were already unraveling.

As they reached the edge of the bazaar, she froze mid-step as the crowd surged around her. Mata stopped and turned on instinct. “Keep your eyes on the path, Ashara,” she breathed, as if she could sense the girl’s wandering thoughts. “Leave the clouds to the birds and keep your mind on our next task at hand. The feast of Eid al-Fritof won’t prepare itself.”

Her Mata reached out for Pavel, kicking and fussing.

“Pass him to me,” she murmured, settling him against her shoulder before doing something that made the air in Ashara’s lungs freeze.

In the middle of the bustling Bazaar of Erez, under the watchful gaze of the capital’s guards, she began to hum. Then, the words came—soft, melodic, and spoken in Kerubim. It was a language that now invited the gallows, a sound that would draw the Sedem like blood in the water.

“Numi numi k’tanati, numi numi nim...”

The lullaby was a string of liquid vowels, a fragment of the ancestral tongue that felt like a prayer and a provocation all at once. Mata walked with her head high, the melody drifting from her lips as if the ancient rhythm itself provided a shield of invisible grace.

“Sleep, sleep my sweet little one, sleep sleep,” she sang.

The gentle moment was shattered as the crowd buckled. A wedge of the Zagore Sedem, clad in boiled leather and the phoenix crest of the Sultan’s regime, shoved through the flow of the bazaar. Ashara’s chest tightened, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. Even Mata’s song faltered for a fraction of a heartbeat, her hands tightening on Pavel as the soldiers crested toward them like a dark wave.

What is she thinking? They’ll arrest her. Speaking the banned tongues out in the open.

She backed away, her arms crossed tightly around herself with nothing to hold on to. Her nails dug into her skin like talons in self-defense. She counted the soldiers' march without meaning to—one, two, three—the way Savta had taught her to count verses of the ancient texts, to count anything when there was nothing else to hold on to.

But the guards surged past, their iron-shod boots clattering over the cobblestones. Instead of the weaver and her forbidden song, they had a different target, collapsing upon a spice merchant.

“Blasphemer!” the leading guard bellowed, dragging the man from behind his counter and scattering expensive tendrils of saffron into the gutter. The man’s crime was selling small wooden charms of the old mountain spirits, forbidden idols found tucked among his jars of sumac.

“There is no power but Lehabim!” the guard roared, forcing the man to his knees. “No voice but the one true God!”

Mata’s hand clamped onto Ashara’s shoulder, her grip a silent, suggestive command. She didn't let Ashara look back at the merchant’s desperation. Instead, she steered her forward, her face a mask of stone and her lips pressed into a thin, unmoving line.

They crossed the square to the Seraphic Press; the scroll shop owned by her Pata and Uncle Evgeniy. Occupying the ground floor of their ryad, its street-facing facade was a modest stretch of weathered cedar that blended into the shadows of the archway. They approached the heavy, sun-bleached cedar doors, slivered by age and serving as the final barrier between the quiet trade of letters and the frantic pulse of the bazaar.

Ashara's gaze drifted to the sign hanging above the lintel. The fresh paint was still too bright, the word Seraphic glaring in the only language the Sultan deemed legal. Yet, beneath it, the ghost of the old world remained stubbornly visible.

Carved deep into the wood in the Kerubim script were the words *Otiyot HaKadesh*—The Sacred Letters.

For the Sultan's Sedem, these were just banned symbols representing forbidden sounds. But to Ashara's family, they were the letters of creation. They were not mere tools for speech, but holy vessels designed to evoke the light of the Gods; summoners of divine energy.

As Mata pushed the doors open, the scent of ink and vellum rushed out to meet them. They stepped over the threshold, retreating into a space that would serve as a deliberate conduit for that celestial power; a street-level sanctuary where the physical and the divine were still bound by the stroke of a pen.

The interior of the ryad was a sanctum of cooling, ornately painted tiles amidst unwavering order. It stood as a testament to a time when Mata's hands were as skilled at keeping house as they were at the loom. In those days, the air never felt stale; it carried the scent of citrus-oil polish and the persistent sweetness of jasmine drifting from the courtyard. Every copper vessel gleamed like a fallen sun; the lace runners laid with a geometric precision that made the world feel safe. As if no chaos from the medina, or revolts from the mountains, could ever find a foothold here.

With Pavel in tow, they moved toward the heart of the home—the kitchen. Sunlight drenched the center of the ground floor, illuminating intricate zellige tiles of lapis and cream.

Savta, Ashara's grandmother, waited for them, her presence as constant and warming as the *aish baladi* bread she was pulling from the kiln.

"He looks heavier today, yes?" Savta teased. She reached out to smooth Pavel's jet-black hair while, with practiced purpose, the women began to prepare for the Eid al-Fritof.

"He is growing like a mountain weed," Mata replied, already reaching for a heavy bowl of soaked chickpeas. She paused, her expression clouding as she looked at her mother. "Aleksey will be here as soon as his lessons finish, but we'll be a smaller circle for the breaking of the fast tonight. Artyom is still held at the Block of Haaros. His conscripted training with the Sedem has no regard for families, even on holy days."

Savta's hands faltered over the herbs she was stripping. The mention of the Sultan's new conscription block cast a long shadow over the festive table.

"So, not all of the children will be here to witness the lost traditions," Savta remarked.

"And the guests," Mata added quickly, shaking off the gloom. "Mikhail's brother, Evgeniy, will also join us. We must prepare a feast large enough to drown out the silence our sweet Artyom leaves behind."

Savta pulled a heavy, blackened clay pot toward the center of their workspace.

"The Khoresh of Yaaros," she whispered, her eyes twinkling with a gravity that went beyond cooking. "It is the stew of the embers, Ashara. It requires more than just heat; it requires a conversation with the flame. You must feed the fire underneath just enough to coax the juices from the lamb, but never let it boil, or the meat will turn to stone."

Savta handed Ashara a long iron poker. "Watch the coals. They must glow like the eyes of a resting lion. If they turn white, you've lost the soul of the dish."

Ashara knelt by the hearth, her mind a worried landscape of treasonous talk and the terrifying image of the merchant dragged into the dust. She shoved the iron into the embers, her frustration boiling beneath her skin.

Why must everything be a secret? Our songs, our letters, our traditions, our freedom—and now Artyom, trapped in service while we pretend to celebrate.

The heat from the hearth rushed up her arms to meet a pressure building in her chest. She wasn't just simmering, but flaring. As she jabbed angrily at a few stubborn, wedged coals, a spark jumped. Not from the wood, but from her own lifeblood.

“Emmek tarash! Ze lo musadak!” Ashara hissed, the forbidden curse of defiance slipping past her teeth.

With a violent whoosh, the hearth exhaled. A pillar of brilliant, iridescent blue flame roared upward, far surpassing the chimney's height. This wasn't wood-smoke; it danced with an electric, predatory grace. The fire leaped from the grate, snagging the hem of the linen towel in Mata's hand before bursting through the open kitchen window with a terrifying crackle.

Outside, the canvas awnings of the neighboring tannery shrieked as they ignited. A ghostly, shimmering indigo light suddenly bathed the alleyway—a hue not seen in Mount Sefira since her Savta was a young girl.

“Ashara!” Mata's voice was a whip-crack.

Mata and Savta moved with a practiced speed that suggested they had been waiting for this disaster. Mata doused the hearth with a bucket of sand while Savta threw a heavy wet rug over the window, smothering the blue glow before it could draw the eyes of the Golden Horn guards.

“Upstairs! Now!” Mata grabbed Ashara by the shoulders, her firm hands digging into the girl's skin. Her face was beyond angry; it was terrified. “This cannot stand, Ashara! You must control your emotions! Push down any rising feelings. The Sedem will smell forbidden magic on you. Not to mention, your Pata and brothers still do not know of this!”

“I didn't mean to,” Ashara said, her voice breaking as the guilt hit harder than the heat.

“Go!” Mata pointed toward the stairs. “This must stay between the women. Temper your feelings, or it will harm us all.”

Ashara fled, her leather slippers slapping against the tiles as she scrambled to her room. She collapsed onto her bed, her sobbing instant. She was a girl who lived to please, who found safety in the orderly rows of her Mata's dwelling. To cause such a loud, resonant mess was like a stain she could never wash out.

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Downstairs, the women turned to each other as the neighbors outside panicked, struggling to staunch a fire that moved with an untamed will. Mata's voice offered a worried whisper. “It's getting stronger. It's not just the spark I gave her, Mother. It's more wild. It's in her blood, waking up, and she's too young. I don't know how to hide it.”

Savta watched the stairs, listening for Ashara's footsteps. The floorboards were quiet. She ignored the smoking hearth, her focus entirely on her daughter's trembling hands.

“You cannot weave a shroud for the sun, Misha,” Savta stammered. Her voice caught on a dry cough. “And you cannot scold the fire out of her. It is not a tantrum. It is her pulse.”

“It is a death sentence,” Mata hissed, glancing at the window where the panicked tanner was already scrubbing the indigo stain, freshly smothered. “If the Sedem see that blue light and

discover its source, they won't just take her—they'll kill her and pull the seven mountains down to find the rest of us."

Savta reached for the chain at her neck. With weathered fingers that didn't tremble, she unhooked the pendant—a falcon-headed beetle carved from deep, midnight lapis lazuli. The stone seemed to swallow the flickering light, its surface cold and ancient. It hummed with a low, grounding resonance that pulled the excess heat from the room.

"She must not know she is being caged," Savta said, her eyes fixed on the beetle. "She is a child of duty. If we tell her she is a danger, the guilt will break her. But if we give her this, a family heirloom for the holiday, we can dampen the channel. I will have the Widow imbue it with leaden ash to act as a weight on her spark, keeping the fire deep in the marrow—where the Sultan's regime cannot sense it."

"It must be strong enough," Mata added, her voice trembling. "Strong enough that even the forces beyond the Sultan's shallow reach—beyond the edging shadows—will find nothing to track."

Mata looked at the necklace, then back at her mother's bare, wrinkled neckline. A flicker of panic crossed her face. "But Mother... if you give it to her, what of you? If you cannot repress your own magic..."

Savta gave a sharp, dismissive wave of her hand, with the effortless confidence only the elderly can muster. "I am a guttering candle, Misha. My flame is too small for even a moth to notice anymore. Let me be the one to worry about my own shadows." She pressed the lapis into Mata's palm. "Go. Give her the gift of silence and protection."

Mata took the necklace, the stone's unnatural coldness seeping into her skin. She looked up toward the ceiling, where her daughter was weeping, and then back at Savta. "A gift of silence. Hopefully a path more protected and peaceful than my own."

She turned toward the stairs, the pendant clutched so tightly the falcon's wings bit into her palm. But before her foot could find the first step, a rhythmic, heavy thud shook the cedar frame of the ryad's front doors. It wasn't the tentative knock of the upset neighbor or the hurried rapping of Uncle Evgeniy.

It was the iron-shod strike of a mace against wood.

"In the name of the Sultan and the Light of Lehabim," a voice bellowed from the square, "open or an arrest will be imminent by order of the Zagore Sedem."

Mata froze, her eyes flying to the window where the scorched, iridescent scent of Ashara's blue fire still clung to the air like a confession.

Her fear didn't paralyze her; it galvanized her.

She shoved the necklace deep into her apron and raised her violet-stained hands. With a sharp, circular motion of her wrists, Mata commanded the air. A sudden, localized gale erupted in the kitchen, a swirling vortex that bit like wind atop a mountain storm. It caught the lingering smoke, funneling it up the chimney in a frantic rush. In its place, she pulled in the mundane smells of the bazaar—sizzling fat, charcoal, and mule dung—masking every trace of the blue fire.

The guards struck again, the wood groaning. "Open!"

Upstairs, Ashara pressed her palms harder against her ears, her fingers digging into her scalp as the heavy blows struck. Downstairs, a soldier's mace collided with the thick wood of the

front door, sending a splintering crack vibrating up through the floorboards. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to sink into the silence of her own mind, but the muffled *thud* still pulsed against her eardrums. And then, she heard it—her mother’s voice dropping into a register she’d never used before, low and humming, like the moment before a held breath.

Down below, Mata smoothed her dark hair, her eyes glazing over with a shimmering, milky film. She was more than a weaver, and her mother was more than a silent translator for the shuttered Scriptorium. They were shapers of currents.

Listening to that strange, resonant hum, Ashara knew that whatever was awakening down there, it wasn’t just desperation anymore.

The ancient bloodline stirred in Misha’s veins before she called it. To the soldiers outside, she was merely a woman at a door, but in the realm of the divine, she was a conduit, plucking at the atmospheric threads as if they were silk on a loom to reweave the very reality of the room.

Reaching the doors, she slid the bolt and exhaled a soft, lilac breath against the wood—a thread of persuasion designed to tangle in the minds of the men outside.

She pulled the door open, her face a mask of weary, domestic annoyance.

“Blessed be the One True God,” she said, her voice humming at a frequency that made the lead guard blink in sudden confusion. “Forgive the delay. My son spilled volatile indigo oil near the hearth, and we’ve been scrubbing the fumes before they choked us all. Is there a problem, Captain?”

The guard’s aggressive stance faltered. The sharp urgency that had brought him to the door drifted away, replaced by the mundane image of a messy kitchen, a tired mother, and an old

woman shushing a fussy child. He sniffed the air, but Mata's wind had done its work; he smelled only the heavy, acrid tang of dye and the greasy smoke of the lamb stew.

"An indigo spill?" the guard muttered, his hand dropping from the hilt of his mace. He looked at his men, brow furrowed as if he had forgotten the exact shade of the light he'd seen from the square. "We saw a flare... strange colors."

"The salts in the dye," Mata said, her voice a soothing lilt. "They burn bright when they hit the embers. A frightful mess, sure, but hardly a miracle."

The guard grunted, the suggestion settling over him like a heavy blanket. "Watch your hearth, woman. The Sultan has no patience for careless fires on a holy night."

He signaled his men to move on. Mata stood on the threshold until their shadows vanished into the early evening gloom, her lungs burning as she finally released her breath. She leaned against the heavy cedar door, her eyes clenched tight, while against her hip, the lapis beetle pulsed with an unnatural weight.

It was a bleak promise of silence—one that would hopefully buy Ashara a few more years of safety. No matter how many had to hide their secrets, a fire like Ashara's was never meant to be a flickering candle; it was a scorching sun waiting to rise. One that could shatter the sky like a falling star's searing arc, tracing the ancient map of a revolution in fire.