

Before the beginning...

Memories were a tricky thing. They could elude you—or refuse to leave you alone. They could linger and linger, or refuse to return, no matter how hard you tried to recall them. For so long, I only had the memory of Inara’s birth to cling to from *before*. But as suddenly as my father came back into my life, so, too, did another memory return to me, a gift from before that fateful night.

The sun was warm on my back, I remembered the feel of it, and the way my dress swirled around my legs when I twirled. The memory was only a glimpse, a hazy, sunshine-washed dream more than anything. It was my mother, holding my hands and spinning with me. It was putting my hand on her swollen belly, and feeling the baby within squirm, a foot or a hand pressing through her skin to meet my hesitant, wondering touch.

It was brilliant green blades of grass beneath my toes, and the brush of a gentle breeze on my sweaty cheek. It was blue skies overhead and birdsong nearby, a high harmony to the rush of the waterfall that I’d heard but never seen. Mere flashes of color and movement, wrapped up in feeling—in security and love and happiness that was warmer than any sunshine. But I didn’t know to recognize and cherish the warmth until it was taken away—until *he* was taken away, leaving our world dark and cold, the sun banished to memory and dreams.

During all the years of his absence, the memory grew fuzzier and harder to recall, until it was little more than a deep-rooted yearning that would surface when I stood

beside Inara in her gardens, when her eyes flashed a particular shade of fire-blue in the sunshine, that somehow reminded me of a different day standing on those grounds, a different *life*...when we'd been a family. When I'd only known the sun.

He was there that day, but his face had been taken from my memory as surely as he'd been taken from my life, so that I only recalled the sensation of his presence, but not *him*, actually standing beside us as we spun and spun and spun, Mother's skirt billowing out around her swollen belly.

Until now.

He'd come back and with his return, my father's face had also re-entered my memories. So that a glimmer of memory surfaced, and I finally remember him, too. How he'd watched us, his eyes flashing that same blue in the sunlight as Inara's; how he'd laughed, how he'd pulled us both into his arms and held us close.

A circle of sunshine, of love, of family.

He'd come back and so did that one small memory.

But everyone knew that with any sunrise, there was also a sunset. Day must give way to night. We'd lived in the shadow of night for most of my life, and now, even though a glimmer of sunlight had been returned to us, I was still afraid.

Darkness still dominated, and with it a fear that this time, the sun might never rise again.

Chapter 1

Zuhra

Shadows crept across the floor, crawling up my walls and slinking across my bed. Silent, stealthy harbingers of the rapidly falling night. I sat halfway between the door and the window, on the same dingy sheets on the same sagging mattress where I'd sat countless times before, staring at the sun-faded walls and the worn dresser—all as familiar as my own reflection. This was the space where I had lived for eighteen years. I'd come there seeking solace, hoping the familiarity would help me shut out the horrific reality of the past few hours. And yet my room had never felt so foreign. Nothing had changed within the four walls....except for me.

But outside my door, *nothing* was the same.

Paladin once again walked the halls of the citadel that had been empty for so long. The magical beings who had abandoned their home had returned, breathing life back into the stifling emptiness that had suffocated me. The citadel had come alive with their presence. Sounds of voices replaced the eery groans and creaks that could still send a chill of foreboding over my skin. Hallways that had once pulsed with menace, now vibrated with expectancy.

I'd dreamt of this moment, I'd *yearned* for it.

But not like this. Not with blood and terror and death in their wake. Yes, Paladin walked the halls again—and against all odds, my family was reunited—but at what cost?

So much of the death and destruction was my fault. My stomach churned with the guilt of it, compounded by the fact that despite it all, I couldn't deny being *glad* the Paladin had come. Or, rather, that *one* Paladin in particular had come.

Raidyn was somewhere within the walls that had been my prison for the vast majority of my life. I could open my door and possibly see him striding toward me, his long legs carrying him across the worn rugs I'd tread countless times, his blue-fire eyes glowing in the dark of nightfall.

But if I did open my door and saw him, would he be alone—or would Sharmaine be at his side?

The image of Raidyn rushing out to embrace her in the courtyard earlier that afternoon burned in my mind, the way he'd gathered her into his arms, how her fingers had tightened around his shirt, holding him so very close. But she and Sachiel, another Paladin general like my father, *had* just returned from trying to track down Barloc. I still couldn't believe Halvor's uncle, the man we'd all believed to be a harmless scholar, had become a *jakla*—a Paladin word that meant “cursed”—after ripping my sister's power from her body, leaving her to die. I, too, was grateful Sachiel and Sharmaine were both alive and unharmed...especially after what Barloc had done to my grandfather.

His body had been taken to a room and covered with a sheet, prepared for burial tomorrow at dusk. I'd barely had a chance to get to know him before Barloc had taken

him from me, using his unnatural power to kill my grandfather and then blasting his way through the hedge that had been impenetrable up until then.

I lurched to my feet, a fist pressed to my stomach, trying to keep the bile from rising at the memory of the hole in my grandfather's chest...of the blood...his glassy eyes staring up at a sky he would never again see, the fire gone out of them along with his spirit.

I was afraid to open my door, to face what lay ahead, but I could no longer hide in my room—not without more memories assailing me, and the accompanying panic boiling hot into my veins, spewing acid to burn my stomach.

Inara. I should go check on Inara. She'd said she was fine when I tried to speak with her after leaving Loukas's room, claiming to be so grateful she was alive, she wasn't upset her power was gone. But the *sanaulus* from healing her—the bond created between the healer and the one healed—gave me a direct connection to her emotions. Even without the extra insight into her tumultuous feelings, I knew my sister.

She was lying.

I hurried across my room, but just as I stretched out to grab the handle, a loud knock at the door made me jump back, gulping down a yelp. When I pulled it open, the tiny bud of hope of who might be at my door withered.

Shadows swelled behind Halvor, standing a few feet away, his hands shoved into his pockets, narrow shoulders sloped. “Your father has called a meeting,” he said without looking up. He'd been taller in my memory, but now, after my time in Visimperum with Raidyn and Loukas, he didn't seem as big as he once had. “He wanted me to come get

you. They want everyone there.” His eyes flickered up to mine then away again, a flush touching his jaw.

Was he remembering the last time we’d been alone together—when I’d made it painfully clear I’d hoped he wanted me? I grimaced at the memory, at how wrong I’d been.

“Where?” I asked, hoping my blush wasn’t as visible as his.

“The dining hall.”

“All right. I’ll come in a minute.”

But he didn’t move. “I was told to accompany you. They don’t want anyone alone in the citadel.”

My eyebrows lifted.

“I know I’m not much protection against my...against *him*.” He stumbled over his words, a muscle in the corner of his eye twitching. “That blonde Paladin wanted to come get you, but the redheaded girl pointed out he’d probably get lost. So your father sent me.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know how else to respond to his admission. Raidyn had wanted to come get me—but *Sharmaine* had stopped him? I flushed even hotter, my neck probably turning as red as Sharmaine’s hair. The Paladin girl who had grown up with Raidyn and Loukas, who had both of their love, who had always been kind to me. Then why had she refused to let him come get me? It wasn’t *that* hard to find my room.

Shutting my door behind me, I stepped out into the hallway and followed Halvor back the way he'd come.

Awkward silence swelled thicker than the shadows that had always felt alive somehow, as we slowly walked side by side toward the dining hall. I couldn't help but remember the last time we'd walked through the citadel together alone—in the middle of the night, hoping to get into the Hall of Miracles. If only we'd known what havoc our actions were about to wreak upon both worlds.

And of course, that was also the night I'd basically told Halvor I wanted him—only to have him reject me. It was hard to believe that something that hurt so badly then only held the sting of humiliation now. I'd seen him with Inara, I knew something had happened between them. No matter how embarrassing it might be, nothing could be worse than allowing him to continue to feel that I still cared for him like *that*. My cheeks flushed hot. Unlike the heat Raidyn engendered—all melted and sinuous and delicious—this was all itchy, uncomfortable and unwanted.

“Halvor, I, uh...I just wanted to say that...er...that night before all of...when I thought that I...when I said that I...um...” Mortification chewed at my gut as I blundered through an attempt to explain myself.

“You don't have to—”

I tried to continue over his protest. “I'd never met a boy before and my mother made me think that I *had* to—”

“*Really*, Zuhra, you don't need to—”

“I didn’t know what I was talking about. I thought what I felt for you was...well, you *know*. But *now* I know—

“Please, *please* stop.” Halvor reached out and grabbed my arm. I snapped my mouth shut, my face flaming so hot I could only hope the deep tan I’d obtained from my time outside in Visimperum could hide my blush. “You don’t need to do this. We’re friends, right?”

“Yes. Friends,” I repeated gratefully and only a little bit miserable as we continued toward the dining hall. I noticed a large bloodstain ahead, a crimson blotch on a previously gray rug, and had to suppress a shiver. I slid a glance toward Halvor to see if he reacted at all to the evidence of the destruction his uncle had caused. The death and suffering Barloc had brought upon us all.

Something in Halvor’s expression tightened. Upon closer examination, I noticed the weariness in his eyes, the bruises beneath them, the exhaustion that bowed his shoulders forward. I’d never seen him so defeated. We’d all been so wrapped up in our own struggles—healing Inara, finding Grandfather’s body, Loukas collapsing from a wound he’d concealed from us—had any of us stopped to think of what Halvor was going through? Barloc was his uncle, the man who had raised him after his parents’ deaths. What was a shocking betrayal for us had to be a devastating one for him.

“I’m sorry, Halvor,” I said as we neared the dining hall. The low murmur of voices, even though they were barely audible, was still a shock.

“You *really* don’t need to apologize; I understand what you’re trying to—”

“Not for that. I meant...for your uncle. I know you were close.” I glanced sideways at him again. “I’m really sorry.”

He shrugged, but I didn’t miss the way his jaw clenched.

“Me, too,” he finally responded, low and gruff.

After several seconds of weighted silence, I couldn’t help but ask, “Did you have any idea that he knew how to do this? Was it in the books you studied?”

“Do you think *I* had something to do with it?” He stopped so abruptly, his hands clenching into fists, I had to skid to a halt to avoid walking right on past him. “That I helped him attack the girl that I—attack your sister?”

“*No*—of course not.” We stared at each other, Halvor’s eyes flashing in the dim late afternoon light, his chest rising and falling as though prepared to fight—or flee. “I only meant...I wondered if you had any idea where he learned to do this. If you had studied it and knew of a way to stop him.”

There was a tense pause before I saw my words sink in, the anger draining out of him, leaving him deflated once more.

“I didn’t know a thing. I don’t know how to stop him.” He shuddered and I wondered if he was picturing Inara as we’d found them—lying on her back, her throat ripped out, and his uncle’s mouth stained crimson with her blood. “I’m sorry.”

We walked the rest of the way to the dining hall in silence heavy with hopelessness.