

Promise of the Eternal Tree

Zara crept toward the hunting grounds in broad daylight, the sunshine spearing her with its rays. Her breaths sounded harsh, and her footfalls seemed too loud as her feet crushed soft grass with each step. It was like the dreaded sun's spotlight not only amplified the chances of being seen but also of being heard. Her village avoided the open meadow, forbidding its children from stepping foot inside it, but that never stopped her and her friends from playing there—but only at night. Only ever in the darkness.

She desperately wished for the comfort of that darkness now as she crouched, heart racing, and crawled into the tall, swaying grass of the forbidden meadow. As she forced her arms and legs to carry her, soft stalks brushed her like a ghost's caress, each touch like a trailing finger of the victims below the ground. The thought made her joints freeze, locking her limbs in place.

She was a fool. Not even Jasar would venture out of his home when the sun was up, let alone trespass on the hunting grounds. But he didn't have a little sister with the Blaze. He didn't spend every day sitting up while everyone slept, assuring that scared little girl that she wouldn't burn up. That her big sister wouldn't allow it.

Zara willed her right arm to move, reaching forward and placing it against the warm soil. She curled her fingers, feeling the dirt press under her nails. Her heartbeat slowed at the comforting touch, and she imagined herself gardening with her mother instead of being in the meadow. Next, she moved her left arm. Then her legs. She focused on one small movement at a time, knowing that was the only way she'd reach the meadow's center where the Eternal Tree stood.

A songbird's high-pitched tune pierced the air and almost released a scream from Zara's throat. She managed to stifle it into a croak, which she hoped was hidden by the bird's song. She

bit her lip to keep quiet, breaking skin so a metallic taste prickled the tip of her tongue. The sour taste brought her back to herself, and she realized she had stopped crawling again.

She reached forward with her right hand. She needed to stop being as paranoid as a hare. Getting to the tree was supposed to be the easy part; she could hide in the grass. When she arrived, she'd have to climb the tree in the wide open to pick its flowers. Flowers that only bloomed in the cursed sunlight. Flowers whose petals, the legends said, could save her little sister. Not that anyone who sought the petals ever returned to confirm the tales.

Something hard and rough pressed into her left palm, and Zara almost cried in relief and fear. It was a tree root. She had made it to the tree. Yet now she had to climb. She shuffled forward a little more until she faced dark, gnarled bark. Placing her left hand against the tree and digging her right hand into the dirt, she prayed for guidance and favor from God.

“Rise, child of dirt,” an airy, female voice ordered.

Zara screamed, a helpless squeal that belonged to one of the red foxes her father hunted. She jerked her hand from the tree and crouched closer to the ground, like a child hoping the blanket of grass would save her from the monsters that lurked in the sunlight.

“I said rise, or I shall char you where you cower.” The female’s tone lashed and cracked like a fire devouring wood.

Slowly, Zara forced her muscles to move and rose with shaky legs. On a branch straight ahead, a woman of fire lounged, her form as dark as ash and insubstantial as smoke. Zara gasped when her gaze locked on the woman’s predatory eyes that burned as twin flames.

A jinn.