

THE BREATH OF ORIGIN

Volume One – Dawn at Tizi n'Ifri



CHAPTERS TWO & THREE

Free sample

DIRYUK

BEFORE THIS

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*It left Tafari on a ledge of rock at dawn, unmarked where a wound
should have been, beside a traveller who knows more than he says –
and under a mountain that has already decided something.*

What follows is the road down.

The Voice Behind the Silence

They have been walking for three days.

Kassim in front, at an even pace that never slackens. Tafari behind, putting one foot after the other without knowing why.

He does not ask where they are going. He asks nothing. The world is the colour of ash, and somewhere behind them, in a village he will not see again, an old woman is sleeping under a brown wool shawl.

On the third evening they stop in a hollow of rocks out of the wind. Kassim builds a fire without a word. Two flatbreads, a little dried meat. He holds Tafari's share out to him.

The boy takes it. Does not eat it. He stares into the flames, his eyes elsewhere — in a kitchen that smelled of warm bread, in a wrinkled hand laid against his cheek.

Kassim watches him for a long time across the fire.

Then he speaks.

"Do you know what she used to tell me, your grandmother, when I stayed the night at your house?"

Tafari barely lifts his eyes.

"She used to say: my boy sleeps like a stone, but he hears everything." A silence. The embers crack. "So listen to me, even from wherever you are."

"Your world has come apart. I know that. You had only her, and she was taken from you, and you don't even understand why. It is the most unjust thing there is. And I won't lie to you: this is only the beginning. The ones looking for you will not stop." His voice is low,

level, without ornament. "You're going to have to pull yourself together, boy. Harder than you ever have."

Something cracks in Tafar's face.

"Pull myself together? To do what? I don't understand any of it. Why her? Why me? I'm only a shepherd. I have no clan, I have nothing—"

The words drown. And this time he cries. On the ridge there had been three tears and an order to put them away; here there is nobody to stop him, and nothing left in him that can hold. Great child's tears rolling in the firelight, his whole body shaking, three days of it coming out at once.

"How could I change anything?"

Kassim lets him empty himself. A minute. Two. He says nothing, and he does not look away.

Then:

"So that's your plan."

Tafar lifts his head.

"Your story ends here. In a hole in the rocks, halfway to nowhere." Kassim's voice is not gentle at all any more. "Your grandmother gave her life so you could get away, and you're going to sacrifice it a second time. Ruin her memory in your own despair. Is that it?"

"That's not—"

"She believed in you to the end. You gave up in three days."

"I'VE GOT NOTHING TO FIGHT WITH!" The shout tears out of him, raw, ricochets off the rocks. "Don't you understand?! I have nothing!"

The silence comes down again. Kassim stirs the fire with a slow movement. And when he speaks again there is — it is very small — something almost gentle in his voice.

“Nothing. Hm.” He lifts an ember on the end of his staff. “Then explain something to me, little shepherd. That night... you took a blade in the side. I saw the blood. I saw the tear in the cloth.”

He raises his eyes. Grey. Calm. Implacable.

“And in the morning, the wound. Where was it?”

Tafar opens his mouth. Closes it. His hand moves, without his meaning it, down towards his hip.

“I... I don’t know what it was—”

“You don’t know.” Kassim nods. “But you know that something happened. You know it, and I know it.” He leans slightly forward. “And nobody else must know. Nobody. For now, that is the only thing keeping you alive. Do you hear me?”

Tafar nods, very slowly.

“What happened in the mountain—” Kassim leaves the sentence hanging, watches for the flinch in the boy’s eyes, and finds it. “Yes. I know you met something in there. Don’t tell me. Don’t tell anyone. Ever.”

The fire cracks. The boy grips the cold flatbread between his hands.

“You’ve inherited a very heavy story, Tafar. A very heavy fate. You didn’t ask for it. But you don’t get a choice either. Nobody is going to give you one.” He lies back against his pack. “I know a place where you’ll be safe. But we don’t go there yet. First there are preparations.”

“Preparations for what?”

“Sleep.”

And that is all. Kassim does not move again, as though sleep had taken him at once.

But under the selham his eyes stay open, fixed on the embers.



The house appears on the morning of the sixth day — a low building of dry stone, alone at the edge of a mountain lake, so far from everything that even the paths have forgotten it.

The water is still. The peaks stand in it upside down, perfect.

“Is this your home?” Tafari asks.

“It’s nowhere,” Kassim says. “Which is exactly why it’s mine.”

Inside: a hearth, two sleeping mats, and one whole wall of objects Tafari cannot name — rolled maps, blades of strange shapes, instruments of copper. For a quiet traveller, that is a great many things with edges.

Tafari asks no questions.

He has understood that answers, here, are earned.



On the second morning Kassim wakes him before dawn, plants him in the middle of the shore, and takes up a position ten paces away, facing him.

“Show me what you have. Attack me.”

“...What?”

“You heard me. On your feet. Go.”

Tafari looks at him. Kassim is motionless, both hands behind his back, his face perfectly neutral. Nothing suggests he is getting ready. Nothing suggests he is not.

“I don’t know how to fight.”

“Precisely. I want to see what’s underneath.”

Tafari hesitates. Then something comes up in him — the wall of the house, the wool torn open in the dust — and he goes.

He is fast. Genuinely fast. He feints left the way he would feint at a runaway goat, cuts right, drops low—

The world tips. Sky. Ground. He lands in the cold water of the lake without having seen a single movement from Kassim.

“Again.”

He goes back in. Ten times. Ten times, the lake.

On the eleventh, lying in the shallows with his lungs on fire, Tafari strikes the surface with his fist.

“What’s the point?! You’re too strong, I don’t stand a chance—”

“You’re wrong.” Kassim crouches at the water’s edge. His voice is flat, factual. “Once, you nearly touched me.”

“...What?”

“You didn’t even notice.” He tilts his head slightly. “Your seventh try. You ducked before I had decided to raise my arm. Not after. Before. Your body reacted to something your head hadn’t worked out yet.”

Tafari sits up in the water, streaming, lost.

“The problem,” Kassim goes on, “is everything else. Your body doesn’t yet follow what your instinct catches. One runs ahead, the other stumbles along behind. We’re going to fix that.”

He glances at the rising sun.

“And when we’ve fixed that, we’ll move on to something else.”



And they fix it.

A week in the scree: run until the legs refuse, start again. A week in the freezing lake: hold on, swim, hold on again. A week carrying blocks of sandstone from the bottom of the gorge up to the shelf — not to build anything, simply so that the body understands what is being asked of it.

Tafar has never suffered so much. He has also never, in his whole life, been so present inside his own body.

In the evenings they share bread by the fire. Kassim is not talkative, but things pass between them anyway — a way of nudging the better share towards the boy without appearing to, a curt word that means sleep well, a silence that stands in for company. Two griefs live here, each in its own way — Tafar's out in the open, Kassim's buried so deep that the boy catches only fragments of it: a gaze that drifts south on certain evenings, an old wooden cup he cleans every morning and never drinks from.

Tafar does not ask. Answers, here, are earned.



One autumn evening, as the cold comes down off the peaks, Kassim sets a round pebble in the middle of the table.

"You're wondering when we get to the serious part. It's now." He sits down opposite. "Think about it. You have no training. You have no element. At your age, clan children have been handling theirs for ten years. On that ground, you will never catch them."

"Thanks. That's encouraging."

Kassim does not rise to it. He stays silent a moment, and when he speaks again his voice has changed — lower, slower, the way a man speaks when he approaches something he respects.

"What makes a man alive, and a stone not?"

Tafar does not answer.

"What goes in and comes out. What animates." He lays his hand flat on his own chest. "There is something in you that keeps you breathing, that keeps this beating, that gets you up in the morning even when you'd rather stay lying in the ashes. The old people had a name for it. They called it Taka. The energy of the soul."

The word falls into the room and stays there.

“It isn’t only yours. It’s the same thing that runs the water under the ice, that holds the rock together, that pushes an olive tree up out of dry stone. Everything that exists is crossed by it. Most men live and die without feeling it once — too busy shouting.”

He pushes the pebble towards Tafari.

“Taka can take several roads.” He raises one finger. “The first: the elements. Fire, water, ice, wind, earth, lightning. That’s the clans’ road. A man can touch several — but he will only ever have true affinity, full mastery, with one. One, for a whole life.” A pause. “There are exceptions. A chosen few, able to master more than one without losing their health or their reason. A handful in a generation. No more.”

A second finger.

“The second road: Taka itself. Not an element — something else. Something that resembles nobody but you. One fighter makes a shield of it, another makes chains that never let go, another makes a thing nobody has ever seen. No limit, except what you are. That’s the road of the fighters nobody can predict.”

A third finger.

“The third: sorcery. Seals, talismans, healing, curses. Kept to certain bloodlines — almost always women. Few of them are left. Some do good. Others don’t.”

He folds his fingers down, and his face shuts by one degree.

“And then there are the Gnawa. A brotherhood apart. They don’t channel — they receive. Spirits, old entities, whatever has no body and is looking for one. Their rites are dangerous in ways very few people imagine. Remember the name. We’ll come back to it.”

A silence. Outside, the wind moves something on the roof.

“And me?” Tafari asks. “Where am I in all that?”

“You.” Kassim looks at him, and something in that look settles, clear and heavy. “You are carrying a faculty that’s asleep. It’s there — I’ve seen it save your life — but it hasn’t woken, because you don’t know how to channel your Taka. You’re a flute nobody has ever played.”

He gets up and goes to the window. Outside, night is coming down over the lake.

“People like us stay away from cities, boy. Away from big villages. Not out of fear — out of hygiene. Quiet is our element. The music of open country, of settled souls. The din of crowds fouls the hearing the way mud fouls a spring.” He half turns. “I think that means something to you, little mountain shepherd.”

Tafar does not answer. He does not need to.

“So look at yourself properly. You’re untrained, that’s true. But you’ve spent fifteen years soaked in the element that suits you best, without ever noticing. Silence. An untouched mind, that nobody has shut behind a single door. Your Taka has no constraint, no habit, no crease in it. You can work it any way you like — which the clan children will never be able to do, cast in their mould since the cradle.”

He comes back to the table and lays two fingers on the boy’s chest.

“What you see as a weakness will become your greatest weapon.”

The fire cracks. Tafar looks down at the pebble. So ordinary. So mute.

“From tomorrow, you’re going to learn to do more than listen. You’re going to learn to answer.”

To Answer

For weeks, nothing happens.

Tafar sits facing the lake for hours, and searches. The wind. The water. His own blood in his ears. He goes looking for the sensation from before — the shelf, the goats, the sound going down into the rock — and finds only silence and cramp.

Some evenings the rage takes him. For Granny's memory. To understand. To make them pay. He clenches his fists, pushes, forces — and nothing happens, nothing, nothing.

"You're forcing," Kassim says without looking up from the blade he is sharpening. "You don't force an ear. You strain it."

One night at the full moon, unable to stand it any longer, Tafar takes his flute and walks to the far end of the shore.

He has not played since Granny Izza died.

He brings the instrument to his lips. The first note trembles, false, strangled. So does the second. On the third he closes his eyes — and he stops playing for something. To avenge. To understand.

He plays for her. For the warm bread. For the hand against his cheek.

And the sound comes. The one nobody ever taught him.

Something unknots in his chest — a knot months old — and while the music runs out across the black water, Tafar feels, for the first time in weeks...

...everything.

The lake shivering under the sound like the skin of a drum. The stones of the shore, each with its own weight. The fish asleep under the ice — points of warmth in the cold. The wings of an owl three

hundred paces off. Kassim's heart, slow and regular, standing in the shadow of the house, listening and saying nothing.

Tafar opens his eyes, the flute at his lips, his cheeks wet.



One winter morning, Kassim decides it is time.

He takes him to the edge of the frozen lake, sets the round pebble on a flat stone ten paces away, and crouches down to his height.

"Listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once."

Tafar listens. Truly listens.

"Sit. Empty yourself." He waits until it is done. "Now listen. To everything. Don't choose. The wind, the water under the ice, the trees, your blood. Whatever speaks, let it in."

The sounds rise, layer after layer. Tafar nods, almost imperceptibly.

"Good. Now the pebble. Only the pebble. All the other voices — put them out. One by one. The way you blow out lamps."

It takes a long time. The wind refuses to die. The water insists. One by one, though, the voices go out — and there is nothing left but the pebble, its small stubborn round presence on the flat stone.

"I have it."

"Now put that out too."

Tafar frowns. Obeys.

The silence that follows is not the quiet of the shore. It is white, and wide, and his own heart has gone out of it too.

"I'm there," he says, barely audible.

Kassim's voice arrives from very far away, very low:

"There is a voice behind that silence. Find it."

Time stretches. Long. Much longer than any of the rest. The cold bites his crossed legs, then stops existing as well. Tafari searches — and finds nothing, still nothing, always nothing—

And then it is there.

A pulse. One only, immense, slow. It resembles the torrent, the wind in the fissures, the step of animals, Granny's heart against his child's ear — it resembles everything he has ever heard, and it is none of it.

His chest locks.

"You have it." Kassim's voice has tightened by a notch. "Don't let go. Hold it." A pause. "Now give it a shape in your head. Like a note you shape before you play it. And breathe it out."

Tafari gathers. The pulse folds in on itself, comes down the length of his arm, banks in the hollow of his palm — swells — pushes against his fingers like an animal against a door—

He breathes it out.

The world explodes.

Not in front of him. Everywhere. A surge bursts out of his whole body at once, in every direction — the snow of the shore lifted in a crown, the ice at the edge shattering in a star, the entire lake heaving in a ring that runs to the far bank, the birds of the whole valley bursting out of the trees in one cry. Tafari is thrown backwards, rolled in the snow, ears ringing, chest empty.

When he lifts his head, Kassim has not moved an inch. Only his selham settles slowly back down his body.

"You didn't breathe it out," he says. "You let it fall."

Tafari spits out snow.

"Is there a difference?"

"That's the whole difference."



It takes him days.

Every attempt ends the same way: the pulse found, held, gathered — then lost at the moment of leaving, scattered to the four winds. The whole valley has learned to distrust him: the birds do not come back.

And then, one grey morning, it goes out straight.

A pulse — invisible, compact, a warping like the air above burning stones — that runs from his palm and touches the pebble ten paces away.

The pebble does not move.

One second. Two.

Then it comes undone.

It crumbles where it stands, from the inside, and pours away in fine dust across the flat stone — which has not a scratch on it.

Tafar stares at the little heap of dust, his hand still out.

Kassim stares at Tafar.

He is looking at a fifteen-year-old boy who has just done, in a few weeks, what men chase for a lifetime. He is looking at the way it comes to him — natural, inevitable, as though it had always been there and had only been waiting for a signal.

A shiver goes up his back. Kassim's back.

He does not show it. He will never say it.

“Again,” is all he says.



Over the following weeks, the wave becomes his.

He learns to measure it — sometimes it takes a block of sandstone apart, sometimes it only lays the grass down flat — and to

throw it in dense spheres you can barely see, pockets of twisted air that run straight. Not mastered. But present. Always.

“The other rule you already know,” Kassim says one evening. “What you found up there, in the mountain: you do not tell anyone. Ever.”

“Even where we’re going?”

“Even where we’re going?”

“Especially where we’re going.” A beat. “And you do not talk about your grandmother. Not about her, and not about what she was to me. As far as they are concerned, you are a boy I picked up in the mountains. That is all they need to know.”

Then comes the body.

“Your Taka is already circulating,” Kassim says one morning, pointing at a dead trunk washed up on the shore. “When you strike, let it come down into the arm. Into the fist. Don’t throw it — carry it.”

Tafar hits the trunk. Once. Ten times. A hundred times.

The day it comes, he barely feels it — only his fist a shade heavier, a shade fuller. The trunk sounds different under the blow: a muffled note that comes from the inside, like a crack under ice.

Kassim rolls the trunk over with his foot. The bark is untouched.

The heart of the wood is in pieces.

“On the surface, nothing,” Kassim says. “Inside, everything.” He lets the trunk drop. “Remember that. One day it will be your best weapon up close.”



Then there is that afternoon.

Tafar is training alone at the edge of the lake. He gathers the pulse as usual — but something itches at him. A curiosity. What if,

instead of letting it spread as it left... he squeezed it? What if he compressed it, again and again, into the centre of his palm — into a single point?

He tries.

The pulse folds, folds again, packs itself into something tiny and hard in the hollow of his hand — a bubble no bigger than a pea, burning—

And the air tears open.

Not a wave. A jet. Needles — hundreds, thousands, a dark beam streaked with red that screams across the shore and rakes the rock face fifty paces off. The whole face of the cliff vanishes in a cloud of dust. When it settles, the cliff is pocked with fine, deep, smoking holes — as though a swarm of fire-wasps had gone through it.

The backlash throws Tatar to his knees.

Something has cracked in his hand. Not broken — burned from the inside, as though he had held a bare ember. His vision blurs. Blood runs from his nose and stains the snow.

Kassim is there in three strides.

He takes the boy's wrist, examines the hand, the nose, the eyes. His face is shut — more shut than Tatar has ever seen it.

"That." The voice is flat, hard. "That, you don't do again."

"But it was—"

"Did you feel what it cost you? Once more and you'd have emptied yourself out. Your body isn't ready to carry that. Not yet." He lets the wrist go. "The day you truly need it, your body will know before you do. Until then, you forget it."

Tatar looks at the pitted cliff at the far end of the shore.

He does not forget it.



That night, Kassim joins him at the table. Two bowls of tea. The fire low.

“What you did this afternoon — compressing it down to a point. That’s instinct. Dangerous, but instinct.” He turns his bowl between his palms. “Your problem: when you miss, your opponent finishes you. When you succeed, you empty yourself. So you don’t touch it. On the other hand...”

He sets the bowl down.

“What you can learn between now and our departure is the opposite of what you did today. Instead of compressing everything into a point — spread it. Your Taka over your body, in a layer. Like a second skin. It protects, it absorbs — it doesn’t last long and it costs. Useful when you can’t get out of the way.”

“And for attacking?”

“You already have everything.” Kassim counts on his fingers, slowly. “Your wave, at range. Your hands, up close. The layer, in between. A man who masters three things is worth more than ten men who have brushed against a hundred.” He picks his bowl back up. “Power that empties you is a straw fire. Power you control keeps you standing all night.”

“Why are you telling me all this now?”

“Because where we’re going, somebody is going to want to test you.” He gathers his bowl and puts his eyes back on the fire. “And you need to have something to show. Without showing what you are.”

A silence.

“And what I am... what is it?”

“That, we’ll talk about when you’re ready to hear it. Not before.”

Tafar stares at the flames for a long moment.

“Kassim.” His voice is low. “The men in the dark robes. The clan that holds the region. Was it them who sent the possessed?”

Kassim does not answer at once. The silence lasts exactly long enough to be an answer.

“Sleep, boy. We have work tomorrow.”



The layer of Taka comes by accident — a block of sandstone sliding off an overhang, his reaction faster than his thought, and a thickness of hardened air between the stone and his skin. He comes out of it untouched. It then takes him ten days to do it again on purpose.

The rest of the time belongs to the body.

Every morning Kassim waits for him on the shore with an ash staff, and every morning the same order: touch me. Tatar learns to fight the way he used to herd — by angles, by patience, by doubled feints. He learns to let his Taka come down into the fist at the exact moment of impact, not before, not after — before, he empties himself for nothing; after, he strikes with nothing but meat and bone. He learns to harden the layer on his forearm in the tenth of a second the staff takes to arrive, and nowhere else.

In the evening his knuckles bleed and his forearms are blue. In the morning he starts again.

The day he breaks the ash staff with a backhand — bark untouched, the heart of the wood turned to powder — Kassim looks at the two halves for a long moment.

Then he goes and cuts another, and says nothing.



The final bout comes without warning.

One spring morning Kassim steps out of the house, looks at the mountain, and says simply:

“Today we test what you have.”

They face each other at the lake’s edge. The ice has begun to melt at the margins. The air smells of wet grass and warmed rock.

“Use anything you want. I’m giving you no rules.” Kassim leans his staff against a boulder. “Except one: if you actually touch me, we stop. And we can leave.”

Tafar empties himself.

Then he goes in.

No distance, no calculating for an opening — straight in, the layer already up on his forearms, the Taka already down in his fists. It is the only ground where he has a chance: contact, where even a giant has only a tenth of a second to decide.

The exchange is brutal.

Short hook — slipped. Elbow coming up — not there. Low sweep, backhand, knee — Kassim is never where the blow is, never hurried, and yet never far: he gives half a sole of ground, turns a quarter of a shoulder, lets the strikes die a finger’s width from his selham. Tafar is hitting empty air in the shape of a man.

So he fights like a shepherd.

He pushes Kassim towards the rocks of the shore — not with blows, with lines, the way you drive an animal back towards the pen. He accepts two counters that knock the wind out of him, takes them on the layer, does not give ground. He waits for the terrain, not the opening.

And when Kassim’s heel touches the first stone — a high feint, doubled, his body dropping under it, lower than anything he has shown so far, and his left hand whipping towards Kassim’s forearm—

His fingers graze it.

Barely. A tenth of a second, with the tips of his fingers — and the Taka still in them.

Kassim breaks two paces back. His right arm stays low for an instant — one — before it comes up again.

His eyes narrow.

“A graze,” he says. “Not a blow.”

But something in his voice has changed thickness.

Tafar does not stop. He opens his hand, gathers what is left in him, and lets the wave go point-blank — a raw, honest push out of the palm that creases the air in a straight line—

—and meets nothing. Kassim is elsewhere. Behind the push, the shore is swept clean for ten paces; in front of Tafar there is no longer anyone to hit.

The boy doubles over, hands on his knees, his lungs in shreds. The well is almost dry.

That is when Kassim starts to talk.

“That’s it?” His voice has gone flat again. Cold. “So this is what you’ve built here. A brush of the fingers and a gust of wind.”

Tafar lifts his head.

“I’ll tell you what I see.” Kassim takes one step forward, slow. “I see a boy who could do nothing, that night. Who arrived too late. Who hid behind a low wall while she went cold against the wall of her own kitchen.”

“Be quiet.”

“She waited for you, you know. All day she knew what was coming, and she waited for you to come home. And when you came home — it was too late. You looked. Then you ran.”

“Be quiet!”

“And if it happens again tomorrow?” Kassim stops at ten paces, motionless, arms at his sides. “If tomorrow somebody you love goes

down against a wall — what will you do, little shepherd? Brush them with your fingertips?”

The blood beats in Tafar’s ears. The shore narrows. There is no lake any more, no mountain — there is the oil lamp shivering, the hand sliding off his cheek.

“Imagine,” Kassim says, very calmly, “that it was me who killed her.”

The world goes white.

Tafar decides nothing. Something decides for him — his left hand closes without his willing it, and everything left in him, everything that no longer even exists, rushes into the hollow of his palm and packs there, folds, compresses into a point that burns—

He screams.

And the shore tears open.

A torrent of needles — thousands of them, dark, streaked with red, together as wide as a barn door — crosses the world in a straight line. The snow is not blown away: it disappears. The ice of the lake splits from bank to bank with the crack of a giant whip. The jet ploughs the shore, opens a smoking trench a hundred paces long, and rakes the foot of the cliff in a thunder of rock.

Then silence.

A total, absolute silence — as though the whole valley had gone still. At the edge of the trench the air is still trembling, blurred, the way it trembles over stones in high summer.

At the exact spot where Kassim was standing, the snow is untouched.

Kassim is three paces to the left.

Nobody saw those three paces. They left no trace.

He looks at the trench. For a long time. Then at the boy.

Tafar is on his knees in the snow, then on his elbows, then nothing at all — emptied to the last drop, his left hand smoking. The sky tips over above him.

The last thing he hears is Kassim's step coming closer, and his voice, very near, stripped of all its coldness:

“Good. We can go.”

Then arms lifting him — the way you lift a lamb.



Tafar wakes in the house, after dark, a blanket over him and his left hand bandaged.

“Kassim.”

The man is sitting by the fire, sharpening his blade, as always.

“You'll live.”

“What you said. About her.” Tafar's voice is hoarse. “Did you mean it?”

“No.” Kassim does not interrupt his movement. “But I had to see what's at the bottom. Before somebody else found it in my place — somebody who wouldn't pick you up afterwards.”

The fire cracks. Tafar stares at the ceiling.

“That jet. I can't control it.”

“No.”

“Then what use is it, if I can't—”

“None, for now.” Kassim does not look up from his blade. “Which is why you don't use it until you've learned to master what produces it. If you miss against someone like the man who sent the possessed — you don't miss twice.” A pause. “What you can do: your wave, the layer, your hands. That's enough for the situations we're going to put you in.”

“And the ones where it isn't?”

Kassim sets the blade down. The silence takes its time.

“Your line isn’t a clan line, Tafari. But it isn’t an ordinary one either. You hear the world differently. So do I — less well than you, but I hear things.” He picks the blade back up, resumes his movement. “The rest will come the way the rest has come: one thing at a time, each in its turn. And you keep the jet for the day there is no other option left.”

The fire cracks. Outside, the wind moves in the trees.

“Kassim.”

“What.”

“Thank you.”

Kassim does not answer. But his eyes, for a fraction of a second, leave the blade and settle on the boy.

Then he goes back to his movement.



One morning in late spring, Tafari wakes and finds Kassim standing in front of the lake, his pack already closed, his staff in his hand.

The boy who comes down the shore to join him is not the one from the campfire. Taller. Shoulders drawn. Something calm in the eyes that was not there before. The grief is still there — it always will be — but it has found its place: somewhere under the ribs, carried, the way you carry a wound while still walking.

“Where are we going?” Tafari asks.

Kassim settles his pack and sets off along the shore.

“To see people who, like you, don’t exist.”

Tafari looks at the lake one last time. The still water. The peaks standing in it upside down.

Then he picks up his bundle and follows.

FOURTEEN CHAPTERS LEFT

Chapter Four takes them to the falls, where Tafari finds out what he has been doing his whole life without knowing it had a name.

After that: an open tournament he has no business entering, a seal older than the clans that hold it, and a night under Imlil when something answers that was never meant to be called.

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Volume Two – The Sleep of Walili – is written and in revision. The mailing list is the only place it will be announced.

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