

Prologue

It all began eons ago. An unknown world existed within another dimension, known only to its own people. The most powerful deity who ever lived created himself *under the cover of darkness* by continually turning within the void. On a fateful day, he brought forth a red, oval sun, along with golden stars, vast oceans, and diverse plants and herbs—the atoms of life.

After years of working alone to create a vast land, the Originator realized the need for a partner—someone supportive, kind, nurturing, and able to continue his legacy. Taking a piece of himself, he made his other half. She was not only stunning and intelligent but also humble and compassionate, wielding significant power—a deity in her own right. With his goddess by his side, he produced a mighty progeny.

Their community grew and evolved, producing powerful deities, other magical beings, and eventually ordinary humans. When conflict broke out with non-magical society, the deities took the original beings and sealed themselves off, creating a beautiful, secluded world beneath the earth called Zabashi. There, a council of twenty-four elders, called the *Majilis-Sarel*, was formed to

ensure secrecy and peace. As their world advanced, many deities ruled, but no one ever evolved with the intellect or the ability to influence others like the Originator—his kingdom remained intact for centuries until Yakov was born.



Long ago, in the great city of Rabicca, within the exalted House of Ba'kar, lived two deities who were brothers: Lords Malik and Yakov. From a young age, Yakov had a sharp mind driven by curiosity and desire; he possessed one of the greatest intellects of his time. He loved to read and studied for hours into the night, always earning top marks in science and mathematics.

His brother, Malik, being the eldest, became the ruler of Zabashi, leading with love and peace. Yakov felt pushed aside and less important—he believed he was the supreme being of his time, not his brother. As his dissatisfaction grew each day, so did his desire to prove his greatness and to rule. One night, during an experiment, a thought occurred to him: *what if he could be the first to make a different kind of being?*

Consumed with the notion of a new society to rule and control—targeting the people of Zabashi, whom he felt lacked inquisitive minds and abilities—Yakov got to work.

Seeing Yakov's growing hatred towards their people in Rabicca, Malik did what was best for his community. With a heavy heart, he expelled his brother from Rabicca and the surrounding lands.

Filled with rage, Yakov gathered a group of dissatisfied people who were also displeased with his brother's leadership, and took them with him. They traveled to an island outside Rabicca, where it took several years for Yakov's vision to come to fruition.

He experimented on and killed many of his followers until he could bring a diabolical, powerful, and heartless horde of fiends into the world.

Over time, their forms grew fragile and deformed, transforming them into demonic creatures. As they evolved, they gained special abilities and became savage, destroying everything and everyone on the island. Years passed, during which the demons brought about a universal change that no one expected to last for centuries.

After Yakov died, the demons went into an uproar and destroyed their homeland in a blaze. They scattered across Zabashi, wreaking havoc. The natives tried to accommodate them, but when they realized the demons remained too difficult to live with peacefully, they banished them to a remote island in the worst part of Zabashi, called Mt. Imarcu.

Over many years, various events caused factions to form among these demonic beings. It was chaotic. Without rulers or leadership, they lived a savage and demeaning life. Then one day, one among them rose to lead them toward a better and more prosperous existence. His name was Malice, the first Lord of Darkness. He was formidable, with dark eyes and wavy, jet-black hair.

Malice devised a plan to infiltrate a small village outside Rabicca, home to a powerful tribe. It took him twenty years to build the villagers' trust. Then one day, he convinced several men to follow him back to his homeland, where mounds of gold lay, promising they could bring that fortune back to their families.

Once they reached Mt. Imarcu, the group realized Malice and his demonic horde had tricked and captured them.

As time went on, many of the natives submitted to the Dark Lord, while those who resisted underwent torture and execution. Malice had no compassion for them and treated them inhumanely. Little did he know that one of his captives would one day bring forth his *first* great foe.

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House of Ba'kar

The House of Ba'kar was an ancient kingdom that had stood since the creation of Zabashi. Every Ba'kar deity had lived within its great walls. Lord Raziq sat on the ground outside the castle, surrounded by nature. The sun shone down, warming his skin, while the scent of fresh air and aromatic plants filled his senses. He was in complete peace, allowing his mind to wander.

A beautiful face appeared in his thoughts. It was the same face that had haunted his dreams most nights for the last two decades.

“Zana,” he breathed. Zana was his wife, who had disappeared many years ago, leaving no trace of her whereabouts. He never knew what had happened to her and had spent countless hours searching for her over the years.

Sadness filled his heart. He had always thought everything was perfect and often wondered why his wife had left him.

Raziq had been married once before—an arranged marriage to unite two lands—and though he cared for his late first wife, it was nothing like the love he shared with Zana; she was his world.

He thought about how often they had spoken of having children together someday. Even though it had been nearly twenty-two years since he had seen his wife, he still had many questions. *Why did Zana leave? Was she not happy? Did something happen?* Now he sat alone once again, filled with endless questions and years of regret.

A sudden warmth spread through his body, and his ring glowed. His heart leaped. Zana? It had to be. Who else could it be? He stood and focused his mind on the power of the ring; as he took one step forward, he ezailed, vanishing from the spot.

He inzailed by the ocean, spotting a woman with long, wet, black hair and glowing, earthy skin lying half in the water and half on the shore. His heart stopped.

“Zana!” He rushed to the woman’s side and carefully turned her over. His face fell. It was not Zana. It was someone else. With a sinking heart, he gently pulled the woman out of the water and examined her, noticing a familiar resemblance. After a moment of staring at her in confusion, he gradually lifted the young woman into his arms and ezailed back to the castle.



Inside, he laid her upon a bed and called for help. The physician arrived immediately and examined the woman. Days passed, and the mysterious woman remained unconscious. Raziq had questions that demanded answers: how had she come to possess his ancestral ring, and had she seen his wife?

Realizing the woman was not getting any better, he called upon one of his servants, Batise. He trusted the

young man entirely and knew great things would come from him.

A low knock on his chamber door stopped his mind from wandering. “Enter.” He stood as Batíse walked in and bowed before him.

“My lord.” Batíse’s deep brown eyes held curiosity. He was an inch shorter but slightly more muscular than Lord Raziq’s tall, well-built frame.

“Batíse, I require your aid.” He explained the ring’s history and the woman he found wearing it.

Batíse’s demeanor softened. “My lord, I do not know if I am able—”

“She must awaken, and I know well the gifts you possess in these matters.” Raziq’s dark russet eyes twinkled in the candlelight.

Batíse’s lips twitched. “My gratitude, my lord. I shall do all that is within my power. Yet, I must give warning—there is no certainty of success. I have yet to master—”

“I understand.” Raziq stepped closer to Batíse. “I ask no more of you than that.” He trusted Batíse could do it. The young man was more powerful than he realized.

Batíse gave a soft nod. “Grant me a moment to gather my remedies and prepare. I shall meet you in the medical wing shortly.” With another slight bow, Batíse left the chamber.

Raziq paced the medical room, his eyes returning to the sleeping young woman. He hadn't been this nervous in years.

The doors opened. Batíse walked in carrying a small bag. "My lord." He turned to the woman and froze. He sucked in a deep breath and muttered, "Beautiful."

Batíse placed four candles near her bedside and a bowl of mixed herbs. He whispered, "*Ignis al nār*." Each candle lit. He then placed one burning candle into the herbs, chanting. The smoke turned a deep emerald green.

Raziq noticed Batíse's hand trembling as the young man stared at the woman with uncertainty. "You possess the gift to do this."

"My gratitude, my lord." Batíse took a calming breath, rubbed his hands together, and placed one hand on her forehead and the other above her chest. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. A radiant white light shone from his hands and over the woman.

Raziq observed them, yet nothing occurred.

Batíse sighed and looked upon the young woman once more. His eyes softened. "You possess a warrior's spirit. I can sense the grievous wounds your mind, body, and soul have endured, yet you endure still. Turn back from the threshold of death and meet me halfway. Choose life; allow me to aid you." He leaned in, placing his lips gently on her pale ones.

Raziq's eyes widened in amazement as an impressive white glow materialized. Batise lifted his face, which was full of intense emotion.

The air in the room shifted as the woman drew an audible breath, her lips returning to their normal color. She shivered and blinked slowly, revealing familiar eyes, though they were glowing, deep brown eyes flecked with amber and dark green.

Raziq smiled. "Welcome back."

CHAPTER ONE

The Seeds of Downfall

Qayya

Have you ever wondered why many people go through so much each day? The struggles they experience in their lives often seem endless. I believed in a higher power and had faith that something was out there that was bigger than me—bigger than everyone. However, one thing I could not seem to wrap my mind around was why.

Why all the destruction, pain, chaos, and death? Why did I live in a world where I was judged not by the kindness of my heart and actions, but one where I had to suffer simply because of my being?

To live in a world where children were snatched away from their parents at birth, or separated from their families solely to serve another's quest to gain power. An existence where if I dared open my mouth to speak my mind, those who ruled would punish me. So, what was I to do? Sit back and watch women like me be forced into

submission by wicked and treacherous demons? Or swallow the fear that had been beaten into me since the age of three? Definitely *not* the latter.

That was why I was bound to three other women as we waited for our death sentence. I stood in tattered, grime-stained white garments, covered in dirt and bruises.

My feet were bare, scraped, and blackened; my wrists and mouth were bound by cloth. My long, thick black hair carried tree leaves and mud. The three women next to me were shaking with terror. I should also have been in tears, trembling, with my heart trying to break out of my chest, yet I was not doing any of those things—because unlike them, I welcomed death.

Did I want to die? Of course not. However, I could no longer take the abuse—not just the physical, but the emotional and mental torment I had endured every day. How much longer would I have to put up with Malice and his men? Until they took every ounce of life I had left? I preferred to go out with a little pride, rather than like my mother, who was ripped apart and left soulless until they showed her mercy and slit her throat. That had taught me a lesson: Do as you're told, or you too will meet your mother's fate.

That had happened many years ago, before I had reached womanhood. If I had thought for a moment that I could live in a world where terrible things did not

happen, I would not have accepted my impending fate so easily.

The doors to the dungeon opened, breaking my train of thought. “Rukay?” a harsh voice called. The demon must not have been that smart, or he would have seen that I could not answer with my mouth bound. I grunted. His brows shot up, and he moved closer to untie the cloth around my bruised lips.

“Which of you four parasites is Rukay?” he asked.

I met the dark, stony gaze of the man who said my name with such spite. “It is Qayya.” I tried to sound strong, but the name came out as a croak. I tried to think back to the last time I had tasted water.

“Do not talk back!” he snapped. “Follow me.”

As I dragged the heavy chains that bound my hands and feet, it felt like minutes had already passed by the time I reached the front of the small cell. The demon roughly released my sore wrists and ankles.

“If you move out of line, I will kill you on the spot.”

I bit back the part where I was about to die, anyway. Perhaps it was from years of submission and learning not to talk back, or how my mother always warned me about my tongue. So, I said nothing.

“You dumb parasites are always getting into trouble,” he ranted. “You’re not even smart enough to do as you’re told. Bet you think you’re going to try and run.”

I glared at him as he chuckled. Since I was going to die anyway, I muttered, “I would not dream of it.”

He slapped me hard across the face.

“I thought I told you not to talk back. No wonder you are getting put to death. You do not listen. Now move it!”

The pain from his hand stung my cheek as blood dripped from my split lip, but I refused to cry in his presence.

As I walked behind him, I reached into my clothing and grasped the ring my mother had given me. I had never worn it. I had always kept it hidden, in case a demon tried to take it. The thought of selling it for food had crossed my mind a few times, but I could never bring myself to do it.

I watched the guard and noticed he was paying me no mind, so I glanced back down at the ring. It bore a platinum band with four separate jewels: a ruby, a sapphire, an emerald, and a diamond, surrounding a red gem engraved with a brilliant star and crescent. It was exquisite. As I placed the ring onto my right ring finger, it glowed, and a pleasant warmth embraced my heart. A tear slid down my face while I thought about how I would have my mother with me as I joined her in death.

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The stars and crescent moon glowed in the night. Mt. Imarcu was a large island; in its center was Malice’s

compound. Outside, near the rocky sea, was a spot where many *factions* enforced their torture and punishment on others. They wanted everyone to witness what would happen if they stepped out of line—death. Villagers watched as guards dragged me to the center, where a massive fire burned in the chilly night.

I shivered—part from the cold, and part from sudden, unexpected fear—I would be lying if I said I was not a tad afraid, not of dying, but of what comes after. Is it painful? Is it darkness? Or just nothing? Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to ignore the ache in my chest and awaited my fate.

I stood there, listening to the demon explain what my crime was—my crime, HA! I had stopped a demon from beating a woman to death in front of her child. My crime was stepping out of line and laying hands on a demon.

“Anyone who disobeys us will receive punishment under the law, as we have told you many times before. Our Lord Malice has come tonight to hand down this girl’s sentence personally.”

The blood in my veins ran cold. Malice! For the first time that day, I shook violently, and my heart twisted—not out of fear, but utter anger.

Malice was the Dark Lord who had ruthlessly tortured and murdered my mother right in front of me many years ago. Standing tall, I gulped back the bile that threatened to surface as Malice strolled into the center. His cold, dark

eyes scanned the crowd. The air in the clearing shifted, spreading fear. Even the sky turned from clear to stormy.

No one spoke. Malice's demeanor spoke volumes. The only sound in the clearing was the drops of rain beginning to fall. Malice bore the mark of a snake along the side of his neck that I had never seen before. He met my gaze, and another shiver went down my spine.

Malice grinned wickedly. "Tonight, we must execute four women who disobeyed the laws I have set up to make this world more... durable. I give you food, clothes, and shelter. In return, you are only asked to work off your debt and follow the laws I have put into place to keep everyone on the same page." Again, no one dared to speak.

"Don't blame me for your inability to listen and follow the rules. You brought this on yourselves. If I do not punish you, we would have a society where things would get out of hand and chaotic, a world you do not want to live in."

The wind picked up, blowing through my hair. The waves crashed fiercely as thunder and lightning streaked across the sky. Malice finished his speech; cheers erupted from his demonic followers.

Without warning, two strong, oversized hands lifted me from the ground. My pulse increased by the second as they dragged me across the terrain. Malice placed a stiff hand around my neck; my right eye twitched uncontrollably. I summoned as much saliva as I could in

my dry mouth and spat on his smug face. Satisfaction coursed within me as fury blazed in his dark eyes. Malice's fist met my face, and pain struck me for a third time that night. Except I didn't care—rage, disgust, and malice washed over me. Without worrying about the consequences, I scratched his haughty face with all I had. Blood appeared on his cheek, and gasps rippled through the night.

We stared at one another, and a glimmer of rage and lightning flashed across his face. Seething, Malice tossed me to the *earth*, and all the air left my lungs. Covered in dirt and blood, my body throbbed. I endured the aching pain, but did not move. Trying to focus on breathing, I kept my eyes closed until hands gripped my body once more, yanking me towards the water as thunder boomed.

Malice leaned in and whispered into my right ear. "Too bad, you'll never know why I killed your mother."

My eyes widened as I met his wicked gaze, and I tensed up. My heart stopped, and the blood drained from my face. "If you see your mother again, you can ask her why."

Shocked by his words, I did not notice the ball of fire he hurled at me until I felt the flames on my body. The force of the blow tossed me into the *air*, and I screamed as the *fire* consumed my body. *Lightning* struck mid-flight, hitting the ring my mother gave me, and my right hand. The ring beamed brightly *under the cover of*

darkness. I shut my eyes from the fierce glow, and darkness filled my mind as I crashed into the depths of the *sea*.

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Malice—Mt. Imarcu. Many years ago.

I paced within my lair. “What do you mean they won’t comply?” I hissed.

Ruk winced. “The people we just captured... they refuse to leave the vessel.”

“What do you mean? Make them!”

“They—they are more powerful than expected, my lord.”

I narrowed my eyes at the weak man before me. “Then take the young and kill the rest! Once you have done that, seize another group. This time, Ruk, raid a different village.”

Ruk bowed his head and hurried from the room.

I took a moment to observe the home I had made for myself—or rather, the citadel I had forced others to build for me. The massive estate encompassed many rooms and vast lands near the ocean. To the outside world, Lord Malice was a wealthy, handsome man who kept to himself, loved and envied by many. However, I was hated by those who knew the truth—that beneath my residence lay

dungeons, and inside the cells were many people who had been tortured for years.

I did not have to hide my true self from the world, but it was best if I did, at least until I had all of Zabashi under my reign. I could not risk any deities discovering my plans until it was too late to do anything about it.

I had already ventured out of Mt. Imarcu for over twenty years, living with and befriending some of the most powerful people ever created. I had learned their culture, gained their trust, and tricked the original inhabitants of a few villages that surrounded Rabicca. They were fools.

I remembered how they had willingly boarded my vessel, leaving their loved ones to follow me to the land of gold, where I had promised them they could bring wealth back to their homes and families. I chuckled at the memory of how easy it had been—granted, it took longer to build their trust than I had initially anticipated. Nevertheless, I succeeded. For a second, I almost felt bad about killing the ones who had believed me to be their closest friend—only a second.

In the end, I took their children and raised them without any knowledge of who they were, what greatness and power they possessed, or where they were from. I named them, kept them in line, and used them to build me a lucrative fortune. Over the years, I passed down teachings to my children and my horde on how they, too,

would accomplish much through others' hard work and free labor.

The brainwashing was difficult and tedious with all the killings and torture, but in the end, I triumphed. At least I believed I had, until one day in my lair years ago, a young woman entered my chambers, shaking from head to toe. Her shoulder-length dark hair was messy, and her brown eyes were wide with fear.

My eyes wandered over her small, curvy body wrapped in a white bedsheet, noting a fresh bruise on her tanned arm. She glanced around the room, spotting the bed in the corner. Slowly, she backed away until she bumped into my guard, Fawn, who backhanded her across the face and tossed her onto the bed. She didn't cry out; she was a tough one. I could sense it.

Fawn bowed as he left my chambers.

A small tear fell down her gorgeous face. "Please, my daughter—"

"Shhh." I touched her face, and her eyes glossed over, shining a greyish white. Stunned, it took a moment before I let go. She gasped, locking her normal eyes onto mine. I recognized that look. I had seen it many times when I lived in that village outside of Rabicca. She had experienced a vision. She could not have been just anyone to get a vision from me; she had to be a powerful seer.

My chest tightened at the look she bore upon her face. "What did you just see?"

“N-nothing,” she choked.

I didn’t believe her. For days, I inflicted pain and various torments, but she would not break. She was stronger than I thought, but I had patience. I had waited twenty years to get her people to trust me, and I could wait a few more days—once I gave her something to think about. I ordered my men to bring in her young daughter. The woman pleaded and cried, but I left her alone. Isolation would be suitable for her.

I returned six days later. She was weak, cold, and hungry. “My d-daughter, please. I must see her. Please,” she whispered.

My lips curled into a grin, and I knew I had her. “Are you ready to share your vision?”

She gave a slight nod. “First, I need your word—”

“You dare to ask something from me!”

“Yes, I need your word that you will not harm my daughter.”

After a few minutes of staring her down, I realized she was serious. She would die before she gave me what I wanted to know. I hated the power she held over me. It was only one little girl, but if I hadn’t wanted to know so badly, I would have killed the woman and her daughter out of spite.

“Fine, I give you my word. I will not harm your daughter—unless she breaks the rules. I cannot have chaos.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I want to ensure it.”

“My word is not good enough?” I growled.

She met my gaze. “No.”

I grinned, rubbing my jaw. “Fine, you little witch.”

As I watched her gather the strength she needed, I wondered how she could still have any knowledge or powers intact—they should have been stripped from her. Depending on what her vision held, she had to go.

She performed a spell, binding me to my word—I could not kill her daughter unless she broke or disobeyed a grievous rule.

“Bek!” My right-hand man entered. “Bring me her daughter.” I stared at the woman until the door opened.

“Mama!” the girl yelled.

Tears blurred the mother and daughter’s eyes. Their embrace made me nauseous, and my patience grew thin.

“Now!” I barked. “What did you see?”

Holding her daughter tight, she met my furious gaze. “Your downfall.”