

# NASIBAR

## *History and Prophecy*

**Shahril Azwin Zainul Abidin**

**Overall Narrative Structure:** A journey of an amnesiac hero to discover his identity, intertwined with a prophecy, a tyrannical king, and the mystery of a powerful artifact (the book "Nasibar"). The story heavily relies on layered revelations and a major identity twist.

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Book Title: Nasibar: History and Prophecy

By: Shahril Azwin Zainul Abidin

**Logline:** An amnesiac Al-Raq-Shar, clutching a mysterious chained book bearing the name "Nasibar," embarks on a quest to find its owner and his own lost identity, only to uncover a conspiracy involving a body-swapping king, a devastating prophecy, and the realization that he himself is the key to Qudra's fate.

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## Foreword

The journey of a story can often be as winding and unpredictable as the paths its characters tread. When "Nasibar" first began to take shape in my mind back in 2001, it was less a clear vision and more a whisper, a name tethered to a sense of profound mystery and an ancient, powerful artifact. Who was Nasibar? What was the significance of the chained book that would become so central to his fate? These were questions I asked myself as much as the reader might. The story took on multiple revisions before finally being publicly available.

This tale grew from that initial seed of curiosity. It was a process of excavation, much like its protagonist's quest, unearthing identities, forgotten histories, and the intricate webs of prophecy that bind us even when we are unaware. Qudra, with its diverse Djin, its simmering conflicts, and its majestic, dangerous landscapes, revealed itself piece by piece. The characters, from the amnesiac hero to the enigmatic Shifter, the determined water ecolyte, and the tormented king, each brought their own voice, their own secrets, and their own part to play in a much larger design.

Inspiration for this burgeoning story drew deeply from two distinct wellsprings: the rich and captivating tapestry of Arabic djinn folklore, with its myriad of mystical beings and their ethereal realms, and the elemental forces that I encountered and manipulated while engrossed in games of Magic: The Gathering during my undergraduate years in the late 1990s. The strategic interplay of land, mana, and creature abilities within the game profoundly shaped my understanding of world-building and character development.

The most significant factor contributing to the protracted delay in the publication of this story was undoubtedly my own incessant self-doubt and indecision. I found myself caught in a seemingly endless cycle of revisiting and revising, constantly deliberating over the inclusion or exclusion of filler content. A persistent question echoed in my mind: was the narrative compelling and refined enough to resonate with a broader audience? This internal struggle, a constant battle between creative impulse and critical judgment, ultimately prolonged the journey from initial concept to a publishable manuscript.

Writing "Nasibar: History and Prophecy" has been an exploration of identity, memory, destiny, and the enduring power of hope even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. It's a story about how the past is never truly past, and how the choices of one can indeed ripple outwards to change the fate of many.

I owe an immeasurable debt of gratitude to a select few whose unwavering support and insightful contributions were instrumental in shaping this narrative. Foremost among them is

my beloved life partner, Norzaiha Norhan. Her persistent encouragement, often manifesting as a gentle nudge to "do something" with this half-baked story, was the catalyst that transformed a collection of fragmented ideas into a coherent whole. Without her belief and steadfast support, this project would undoubtedly have remained a mere figment of imagination.

Equally deserving of profound thanks is my dear friend, Ahmad Saiful Yusnor. His remarkable ability to always find the time to be present, no matter how outlandish my new ventures might seem, has been a constant source of inspiration and camaraderie. From appearing at some of the gigs with my band, The Silverlab Animals, to patiently listening to my latest wild concepts, his genuine interest and willingness to engage have been invaluable.

Beyond these two pillars of support, I must also extend my sincere appreciation to the countless others who have patiently endured my eccentricities and listened to my myriad silly ideas over the years. Some still with us, some demised. Whether their engagement stemmed from genuine fascination or simply polite indulgence, their presence and attentiveness have provided a crucial sounding board, allowing me to refine my thoughts and gain new perspectives. This collective patience and understanding have been a quiet, yet powerful, force in my creative journey.

It is my sincere hope that as you turn these pages, you too will become lost in the deserts and cities of Qudra, that you will feel the weight of the chained book, and that you will journey alongside its bearer as he uncovers not only who he is, but who he is meant to become. The adventure awaits.

Shahril Azwin Zainul Abidin

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## Introduction: The Veiled Land of Qudra

The world of Qudra, in the era preceding the tumultuous fall of Katar Al-Qudst, was a land of stark contrasts and simmering energies. Twelve years before that historic decline, the sprawling city of Irem Zhat Al-Imad, the Qudra Capital, stood as a beacon of power and ancient lineage. It was a time when Grand Vizier Hamzah's counsel was paramount in the courts, and the formidable Fir-Arn held the crucial post of Irem's Defence Minister, his strategies shaping the security of the Djin races under Katar's rule.

Qudra is home to a diverse array of Djin races, each with unique characteristics, dispositions, and territories. Among the most prominent are the enigmatic Al-Raq-Shar, known for their ancient wisdom and often elusive presence, typically found in the most secluded and magically charged regions of Qudra. The fiery Salamandars, true to their name, inhabit volcanic lands and scorching deserts, their tempers as volatile as the flames they command. They are a passionate and proud people, often clashing with other races due to their intensity.

The Al-Insan, perhaps the most outwardly human-like of the Djin, are renowned for their adaptability and ingenuity. They can be found in nearly every corner of Qudra, often integrating seamlessly into various societies and acting as merchants, scholars, and artisans. Their territories are less defined by geography and more by their vibrant communities and sprawling settlements.

Shifters, as their name suggests, possess the remarkable ability to change their forms. They are a mysterious and often solitary race, preferring to dwell in wild, untamed lands where they can blend in with the natural world. Their dispositions vary greatly, but they are generally pragmatic and cunning, masters of disguise and evasion. Their territories are fluid, shifting as they do, making them difficult to track.

Finally, the Nymphs grace the lush forests, serene lakes, and verdant riverbanks of Qudra. They are ethereal and deeply connected to nature, embodying its beauty and its untamed spirit. Nymphs are generally benevolent, protectors of the natural world, but can be fiercely territorial when their sacred groves and waters are threatened. Their dispositions are often gentle and harmonious, though they possess a formidable power when provoked. These races, while distinct, frequently interact, leading to a complex tapestry of alliances, conflicts, and shared histories across the lands of Qudra.

Our story begins not in the grand halls of Irem, but in its shadow, amidst the settlements that sprawled beyond its mighty walls, and in the desolate wastes where memories are lost and

destinies forged anew. It is here we first encounter the mystery that is "Nasibar."

When I first began to pen this chronicle, I confess, I didn't truly know who Nasibar was. Was he a myth, a man, or perhaps a place long lost to the sands of time? The name itself echoed with a certain gravitas, a weight of history yet unknown. The answer, I discovered, lay in the pages of the very book that gives our tale its name—an iron-bound journal, chained to a forgotten past, its script chronicling a journey that would unravel the fate of Qudra itself.

This narrative will largely unfold through a first-person perspective, that of our central protagonist whose quest for identity mirrors our own search for the truth behind "Nasibar." However, there will be moments when the lens will shift, offering glimpses into the wider world, into the machinations of kings and the quiet whispers of prophecy that weave through this land.

This saga unfolds in a realm teetering on the precipice of chaos, where ancient pacts unravel and the very earth groans under the weight of forgotten magics. It is a tale of shifting allegiances, as loyalties once thought immutable are tested by the insidious whispers of power and the lure of dominion. Hidden powers stir from their long slumber, their awakening casting long shadows over the land, threatening to rewrite the very laws of existence. At the heart of this maelstrom lies a prophecy, etched in the stars and woven into the fabric of time itself, that portends the absolute consumption of a kingdom, its glorious past reduced to ashes, its future obliterated. The only hope against this impending doom rests on the shoulders of a hero, a figure shrouded in mystery, lost even to himself, his memory a fragmented tapestry of a life he cannot recall. He must reclaim his past, piece by agonizing piece, not merely for his own salvation, but to forge a new future for a world on the brink of despair. His journey will take him through desolate landscapes and bustling cities, into the heart of ancient forests and across treacherous seas, confronting both external adversaries and the demons of his own forgotten history. The fate of all rests on whether he can rediscover who he once was, embrace the destiny thrust upon him, and stand against the encroaching darkness.

Prepare to step into Qudra, a land where magic is real, dragons soar the skies, and the search for one's true self can lead to the salvation, or devastation, of all. The story of Nasibar is about to begin.

## Prologue

I was alive.

I did not know how, but I was alive. Whether it mattered or not, I couldn't say, but the harsh reality was that air still filled my lungs, a fact I had to face. I wished I wasn't, though. A profound, aching desire for oblivion coiled in the pit of my stomach. I wished I were dead. The irony, sharp and cruel, was that I didn't even know *why* I longed for such an end. Was it a sadness too deep to remember, a pain that had consumed my thoughts until only the ache remained? They say amnesia often takes hold when emotions are at their weakest ebb. Perhaps my own depression, a vast, nameless sorrow, had finally swallowed my mind whole.

All I knew for certain was the grit of sand against my skin and an overwhelming reluctance to open my eyes. But I knew not why.

The burning sun, however, was an unforgiving master. Its light, even through my closed eyelids, was a blinding glare in this cloudless desert. Slowly, reluctantly, I forced my eyes open. I managed to push myself halfway up, the world swimming into a gritty focus. Sand. I was covered in it, up to my neck. And bodies. The dead lay everywhere, a grotesque carpet of Al-Raq-Shar and Al-Insan alike.

The battlefield, once a cacophony of war cries, clashing steel, and the roar of cannons, was now reduced to a haunting tableau of destruction. A thick, coppery scent of freshly spilled blood hung heavy in the air, mingling with the acrid stench of burnt gunpowder and the visceral odor of dismembered flesh. Everywhere, bodies lay twisted and broken, a gruesome testament to the savagery that had unfolded. Some were sprawled face down in the churned earth, their eyes wide and unseeing, while others were piled in grotesque heaps, their limbs intertwined in a macabre embrace. The glint of discarded weapons, shattered armor, and tattered banners caught the dim light, reflecting the silent horror.

Yet, above this scene of carnage, an eerie silence had descended. It was a silence so profound that it seemed to absorb all sound, muffling the distant cries of the wounded and the mournful creak of swaying tree branches. Only the wind, a mournful whisper, dared to break this solemn hush. It snaked through the fallen, rustling tattered cloaks and stirring the hair of the deceased, carrying with it the faint, unsettling echo of what had transpired. Each gust seemed to mourn the lives lost, weaving a chilling elegy through the desolate landscape. The silence was not one of peace, but of utter desolation, a heavy blanket that pressed down on the few survivors, reminding them of the terrible cost of war.

If this place had ever been a settlement, a place of life, it was now nothing more than a charnel

house, utterly uninhabitable.

I didn't remember why we were fighting. Worse, I didn't remember fighting at all. We had our differences, of course; that much was obvious even in death. The Al-Insans, the humanlike species of the Gnome Djins, often bore a resemblance, it was said, to the humans on the prison-world called Earth. Had I been to Earth? Perhaps in a dream, but memory offered no purchase. Only Shifters, they said, could make such journeys and return. I doubted any Al-Raq-Shar had become Shifters. Our kind was more... Ogre-ish. Green skin, large and burly frames, tusks protruding upwards from our lower jaws. I knew I was an Al-Raq-Shar; a phantom sensation, an undeniable familiarity, told me I possessed tusks, just like the dead ones scattered around me. But what did it matter, Al-Raq-Shar or Al-Insan? The stark fact remained: I was lost, and I remembered nothing of myself.

My hands... I tried to move them and realized I was clutching something, gripping it with a fierce, unyielding tightness. Slowly, painfully, I loosened my hold, sitting up fully as the sand cascaded off me like a collapsing grave. Perhaps I *had* woken from a grave. I truly did not know. From beneath the remaining sand covering my lower body, I pulled out the object of my desperate grip—a book.

And what a magnificent book it was. Bound in what looked like dark iron, it was chained shut. More surprisingly, the chain was secured to my own wrist, as if someone had been terrified I might lose it. Something I might have held dear in my forgotten past, though the knowledge eluded me now. Yet, a strange attachment, an undeniable pull, emanated from it. I stared at it for a long moment. Letters, carved deeply into the metal in a script I found I could read, spelled out a single word: "NASIBAR."

Nasibar. What was Nasibar? A place? A person? Some artifact of immense value? Could Nasibar have been someone I knew? The questions swirled, offering no answers.

Was I the only survivor? The thought felt distant, unimportant. Analyzing the book, too, seemed a task for another time. My immediate concern was more primal: where was I? My stomach churned, a hollow ache demanding sustenance. I forced myself to stand, testing my limbs. Remarkably, I wasn't badly injured—mere cuts and bruises, nothing more. I dusted the sand from my large, green hands and began to walk, picking my way through the corpse-filled land. Ahead, a battered inn sign creaked in the desolate wind. It read "Qarun al-Hemmad." The treasures of Hemmad. So, this place was Hemmad.

*For some, the name Hemmad might evoke a brief internal reflection, perhaps a flicker of unease at its unfamiliarity, a vague sense of a half-forgotten memory, or for others, a complete blank, offering no immediate association or recognition. This internal pause, however fleeting, could*

*... speak to a deeper, unspoken history, or merely to the peculiarity of a name that stands apart from the common lexicon. The sensation of unease could stem from an almost premonitory feeling, a subtle intuition that something about the name is not quite right, or it could be the echo of a forgotten tale, a whisper from the past that momentarily surfaces before receding again into the subconscious. Conversely, a complete lack of recognition might highlight the name's unique or perhaps obscure origin, hinting at a heritage or narrative that is not widely known or understood.*

Food was my priority. I went inside. Luck, it seemed, had not entirely deserted me. Rummaging through the wreckage, I found some rations—just enough for someone of my considerable size.

It was then I heard it: a groan. I froze, turning towards the sound. It came from outside. Grabbing what I could, I shoved a large piece of bread into my mouth and headed back out into the carnage. I followed the moans to their source and found an Al-Insan, barely clinging to life. His eyes... they were no longer in their sockets.

"Is anyone there?" he whispered, his voice a fragile thread as I approached.

Kill him? Save him? Leave him to his fate? I didn't know. But I couldn't bear to see him like this. Since he couldn't see me, he wouldn't know I was Al-Raq-Shar. I sat beside him.

"C-Can you move?" I asked, my voice rough, slightly stuttering.

"Who are you?" he rasped back.

"Look, I'm here to help," I said, avoiding his question for two reasons: I didn't want to frighten him, and, more damningly, I didn't know the answer myself. "What happened here?"

He was quiet for a moment, then a weak chuckle escaped him. "Look? How can I look without my eyes?" The attempt at humor faded quickly, his face contorting in sadness. "It was a trap. Hemmad is no more." His voice grew fainter. "Tell Nasibar not to come back. This place—Hemmad... Is no longer on the map of Qudra." He was losing too much blood. A wave of sadness washed over me. I wanted him to die in peace, but the book, that name... Nasibar. It was a person.

"Who is—" I began, but he slumped over, lifeless. Dead.

There were too many corpses to bury them all. But this Al-Insan Djin... I felt I owed him a proper burial. His dying wish was a hook in my own curiosity—he wanted Nasibar to know, and I desperately wanted to know Nasibar. He was my first acquaintance since I awoke, perhaps even my first friend in this new, blank existence. A strange sympathy resonated within me, regardless of which side of the war—if there even was a war—he had been on. From the state of this

ruined town, it was impossible to tell if it had belonged to Al-Insan or Al-Raq-Shar.

With nowhere else to go, I made a grim sort of refuge in the inn where I'd found the rations. And there, with the dead as my silent witnesses, I began to flip through the book. It contained descriptions of places and people —a journal of travels, it seemed. Though I didn't read it from cover to cover then, I gleaned that it began in Hemmad and, fatefully, ended in Hemmad. To know him, this Nasibar, I felt I had to follow the path laid out in these pages. This was his book. The Book of Nasibar.

Whoever he was, I had his journal. And with nothing better to do, no past to cling to and no future to foresee, I might as well look for him. And in doing so, perhaps I would find myself as well. It felt like fate, this book chained to my wrist. I had to understand the connection between Nasibar and me.

Thus began my solitary journey out of the ruins of Hemmad.

The last vestiges of hope, like the dying embers of a forgotten fire, flickered and died within me. The world stretched out, an endless canvas of desolation, each brushstroke a stark reminder of what was lost. With a heavy heart and a spirit as broken as the ruins surrounding me, I took my first uncertain steps, a lone figure silhouetted against the vast, unforgiving expanse of the unknown. Each footfall echoed not with purpose, but with a profound sense of trepidation, a quiet lament for a future unwritten and a past irrevocably shattered.

## PART 1: THE SEARCH FOR NASIBAR (AND SELF)

### Chapter 1: My Name is Nasibar

*“Hemmad—The place that will always be a part of me wherever I go. I will miss the villagers here. I will miss the old lady from the fruit stall at the market. I will miss Hedon, my closest childhood friend and I will certainly miss my father and mother. Mother always said that I wasn’t old enough to take care of myself, but I feel that she’s only saying that to make me stay. I will come home to you mother. I promise. When my travels are over, we will sit down together and I will tell you of my adventures.”*

— Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

The words swim before my eyes, and a curious ache settles in my chest. This book, this "Nasibar," speaks of a life so vibrant, so full of connection, it makes my own hollow existence feel even more pronounced. Each night, as I make camp under the two watchful moons and the silent stars of this cruel land, I read from its pages. Nasibar writes of his home, Hemmad, of his family, his friends, and his deep love for a life I cannot recall. A profound sadness washes over me when I read of it, my eyes often growing watery despite myself. Whether this Nasibar was Al-Raq-Shar or Al-Insan, he didn't deserve the destruction that befell his home. From his writings, he seems a peaceful, cheerful soul, someone who cherished all life.

I hope Nasibar found his mother again before Hemmad was torn apart. I hope his parents are safe, and the old lady from the fruit stall too. A chilling thought often surfaces: I hope the man I buried back in that desolate ruin was not Hedon, his friend. These are empty hopes, perhaps, but hope is all I have, contained within this iron-bound book chained to my wrist. I cannot bear to read too much at once; a few pages are all I can manage before a heavy weariness, a deep depression, claims me, and I surrender to slumber.

By day, I walk. The book is my constant companion, my most treasured possession. I wear it on my forearm, the remaining length of chain wound tightly around both it and my arm, a crude bangle securing my only link to a past, to a person who might help me find myself. Giving up on this book would be giving up on myself. Nasibar is the only name I know that might lead me out of this fog.

My path takes me across a treacherous mountain range. The peaks claw at the sky, and the drops are sheer enough that a single misstep would mean instant death. The thought of ending my life, so easy here, flickers, but the need to find Nasibar, to return his book, pushes me

onward.

It is in a narrow gap between two colossal rocks that the ambush occurs.

“Tsk, Tsk.... One must pay toll,” a sinister voice grates from ahead.

I look up to see a short, troll-like creature, no taller than my knees, grinning intently and brandishing a dagger. He stands with a confidence that suggests he’s either a fool or a fighter of considerable skill.

“A toll,” I grunt, weary.

“A toll,” he echoes. “Must pay toll—even large friend, like one.” He points at me with his dagger. I assume he means me.

Too tired for an argument, I rummage through my meager belongings and offer him some fruit, thinking him hungry.

“Fruit? One take Dangar for a simian? Dangar want more, one cheapskate!” he screeches, jumping up and down.

I scratch my head. “It is all I have. If you cannot accept, I will find another path. I am sorry.”

“Wait!” Dangar cries. “Dangar will take book.”

My gaze drops to the iron-bound volume on my arm. “I am sorry, Dangar. I will not part with my book.”

His response is a tantrum. “Dangar want book! One will give Dangar book right now!” With a sudden leap, he’s on me, his dagger slicing into the flesh of my arm. I roar, more in surprise than pain, and slap him away, my hand instinctively covering the gushing wound. The little creature is an idiot, I decide, to pick fights with those so much larger. He charges again, dagger raised, and this time I catch him easily, plucking him up by his arms with one hand. Then, I hold him out over the cliff’s edge.

“Arrgh! Wait! Dangar beg to one! Don’t kill Dangar! Dangar take fruit!” he squeals, legs windmilling above the abyss.

Annoyance flares through my fatigue. “I am paying this toll with your life, Dangar. I am not giving you fruit. Let me pass, and I will let you live.” I set him back down on the path.

Dangar stands still for a moment, trembling. Then, he says words that pierce through the fog in my mind like a thunderclap: “One beat Dangar again, Nasibar. Dangar let one pass. This time

Dangar let one pass as much as one like.”

Before I can recover from the shock of hearing that name—my name, spoken by this creature—he scrambles away into the mountain crags and is gone.

I was here before. I have met Dangar. I have fought him.

The pieces click into place with a dizzying rush. The dead Al-Insan in Hemmad... he couldn't have been Hedon, Nasibar's childhood friend. An Al-Insan would not be a close friend to an Al-Raq-Shar if a war raged between their kinds. And Dangar... Dangar called me Nasibar.

Nasibar is of Al-Raq-Shar blood.

It is I. Even if I can't remember anything else, this is my book.

My name is Nasibar!

## Chapter 2: Al-Hamaddun

*"I have passed by Al-Hamaddun once, but never stayed there to attach myself with anyone. Stories have been passed down to me from the elders that Hamaddun is where Al-Insans are reared like cattle to feed Salamandar battle dragons. I dare not make any attachments, as I know that one-day that attachment might be food for the Salamandar dragons. I wish somebody will do something about it."*

– Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

The name echoed the grim entry in the book: "Al-Hamaddun: The Flesh Farm". The settlement before me was nestled within a formidable ring of mountains, a place where, according to Nasibar's writings, intelligent Djins were treated as mere livestock for dragons. The thought sickened me. No sentient being deserved such a brutal end. Dragons were carnivorous, certainly, but surely cattle would suffice over the flesh of Al-Insan. Why the Salamandars practiced this cruelty was a mystery the book didn't solve.

The place was heavily guarded by Salamandar troops. My rations were dwindling, and the map in the book indicated it would be days before I reached another settlement or any viable hunting grounds. I found a concealed spot near a pool of water, shadowed by rocks on the valley side, and began to analyze the compound from afar, searching for a weakness, an entrance. My Al-Raq-Shar strength could likely get me over the walls in a single leap, but landing amidst a host of Salamandar Guards was not a promising strategy. Two of their guard dragons circled lazily overhead, a constant threat to any escapee. I recalled reading in the book about these Salamandar-controlled dragons; their senses, particularly smell, were often dulled by the drugs their masters used. At the main entrance, two Salamandar guards stood vigilant.

Night had fallen, and the flickering torchlight of the guards gave me an idea. Water. There was plenty flowing from the nearby mountains. A small, controlled flood might douse their lights and create enough chaos for me to slip in. The walls looked sturdy enough to withstand a minor deluge that would only affect the exterior guards.

"What are you doing?" an annoyed female voice snapped from behind me.

I startled, turning slowly. A young ecolyte, a water djin, regarded me with sharp eyes.

A young woman, no taller than my chest, stood before me, her long, dark blue hair cascading down her back like a waterfall. Her eyes, the color of a clear mountain lake, were sharp and perceptive, studying me with an unnerving intensity. She wore simple, unadorned robes of deep blue, cinched at the waist with a braided cord that held a small, intricately carved wooden

amulet. Despite her youthful appearance, there was an undeniable air of confidence about her, a readiness that hinted at a spirit far older than her years.

"You're thinking of getting in there, aren't you?" she accused.

I sighed. "Guilty as charged," I replied. "Are you going to stop me?"

"Of course not. It would be a waste of my time." She tilted her head. "But I could use some entertainment though. No one has ever gone through there. What makes you think you can?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. My appetite for food?"

"Food? You can find lots of fish here, you know," she gestured to the stream.

"I know. But I've been eating fish since I met this river, and I can't carry fish with me on my travels. They would go bad, right?"

"Travels? Hmm." She bit her right index finger, as if mocking me. "I know your kind. Just looking for adventure, aren't you?" Then her expression shifted. "Tell you what. I've always wanted to go in there myself. I hear the Al-Insan make very good pottery. I'd like to see that myself. If you can find a way in and take me with you, I'll help you do whatever you want me to do while we're there together."

I would come to know later that her true motivation for entering the Hammadun was far more profound than mere pottery. Since childhood, Ai-yer had been captivated by the ancient stories and prophecies that spoke of the Hammadun as the last bastion of true knowledge, a sanctuary where the forgotten arts of healing, celestial navigation, and elemental manipulation were still practiced. Ai-yer believed that within its hallowed walls lay the answers to the encroaching blight that slowly consumed their world, a blight that no conventional remedy could halt. This was not a desire for personal gain, but a burning conviction that the Hammadun held the key to their very survival, and Ai-yer was determined to uncover its secrets, not just for themselves, but for all who suffered..

I nodded. "Sounds fair. But I'm going to need your help now."

"Already? Okay. As long as you don't put me in the front line."

"Don't worry. I just need your knowledge on the water flow of this mountain. Is there any way I can redirect it or make a separate channel strong enough to flood the outside of that settlement?"

The ecolyte paused. "Smart. Wonder why nobody thought of that before." She explained the

Salamandars' defenses: dragons against nymphs from the sky, guards against Gnomes on the ground, and watertight walls to keep ecolytes like her from seeping through. Only Salamandars could pass freely to harvest the Al-Insan for their dragons.

"I think I can help you with that," she finally said, pointing towards the pool I was near. "There is a large rock preventing the main flow of this water. You can only push this rock out from inside the pool. Once you do, you'd better hold on to something, because the whole side will collapse when the water flows out, and you'll be taken down with the current. So be careful."

It was no mere rock. I had to dig underwater for what felt like hours to even reach it.

"You seem determined, Al-Raq-Shar," the ecolyte commented when I surfaced for air. "I haven't properly introduced myself. I am Ai-Yer." She grinned. "From the words engraved on your book, I guess you are Nasibar. I've seen a few travelers like you who carry journals with their names on it so they don't lose it. Smart observation, huh?"

"I guess," I said, as she slipped into the water beside me. "And what do you think you're doing?"

"Helping you, of course," she giggled. "I figured since we're partners now, I should carry my weight around."

Partners. It was good to have a friend, even a temporary one.

It took us almost six hours, with Ai-Yer providing me a hollow plant stem to use as a snorkel, to finally dislodge the keystone holding back the water. Dawn was fast approaching. The iron-bound book, thankfully, remained watertight against my arm.

Then the mountainside gave way with a tremendous roar. I grabbed Ai-Yer's foot as the current tried to suck her out, clinging to a weed branch, but it soon tore free, and we were both tumbling down the torrent together. The book, still lashed to my arm, took the brunt of several impacts against rocks as I was swept towards Al-Hamaddun's walls.

I found myself an unwitting participant in the unfolding pandemonium. I was swept along with the surge of panicked villagers, my gaze darting from one terrified face to another. The air crackled with a palpable fear as men, women, and children scrambled, their movements a frantic ballet of self-preservation. I watched, a silent observer amidst the clamor, as they strained to barricade the heavy wooden gates, their collective strength fueled by desperation. The sounds of their labored breathing, the scraping of wood against stone, and the low, guttural murmurs of terror painted a vivid, unsettling picture of their plight. Each face that passed me was a canvas of raw emotion – wide, fear-stricken eyes, clenched jaws, and trembling lips – all mirroring the dread that had gripped the village.

The Salamandar guards outside didn't stand a chance. Water was their elemental weakness, and this volume, this pressure, was overwhelming. I crashed into one fleeing guard, and he simply disintegrated before my eyes, his bones scattering in the torrent. I managed to snag a protruding flagpole on the wall, the current tearing at me.

"Nasibar! Stay under the water! That way you won't be hit too much!" Ai-Yer called out, already swimming expertly in the forming pool around the base of the settlement.

Gritting my teeth, I plunged beneath the churning surface as she advised. The water was a suffocating chaos, especially here at the wall where the main force of the flood hammered down. My only hope was to get to the other side. I swam along the wall until I found a point where I judged I could make the leap. The wall was a good fifteen feet high, but it was my only chance. I launched myself upwards, cleared the parapet, and then there was nothing but air before I crashed down hard on my back on the other side, the impact jarring the breath from my lungs and sending me into blackness.

Am I really Nasibar? The question echoed in the void. Dangar's voice: "One beat Dangar again, Nasibar..." If I am not Nasibar, then who is? And who am I? I need an identity, even if I don't know how to be this Nasibar.

Yes, I decide as consciousness flickered. I am Nasibar. At least for now.

I opened my eyes to a ring of Al-Insan faces, their expressions a mixture of fear and hostility, the points of their spears glinting ominously. Above, the two guard dragons still hovered, confirming I had made it inside Al-Hamaddun. Whether I'd make it out was another matter entirely.

"It wears clothes. How disgusting. What is it?" a voice muttered from the crowd.

I sat up, and they all took a nervous step back. They'd likely never seen an Al-Raq-Shar before.

"It—it has a book... It can read?" another voice cried, pointing to the volume on my arm, the name "Nasibar" still visible.

"Yes," I said, my voice hoarse. "I can read. And I can talk too." Gasps rippled through the villagers. I stood, ignoring the spear points that wavered but didn't withdraw. "I see the gates held up properly. But I'm sorry that your only way out of here now is by swimming. I'll help."

A man in his thirties, his face tight with anger, pushed forward. "What do you mean, help? Are you the one who caused all this? We should kill you right now! What are you? And why are you here?"

"He is Nasibar!" Ai-Yer's voice cut through the tension as she appeared from behind the crowd.

“He has just saved you all! I think he deserves a bit more than being killed, don’t you?”

“Saved us?! He almost drowned us all!” the angry man, whom I’d later learn was Ariman, retorted. “If we hadn’t barricaded the gates, all of us would’ve been washed away!”

A young woman with striking features pushed through the crowd. “Uncle Ariman,” she said, her voice calm but firm, “I think we should let the creature explain himself. He solved our water problem, didn’t he?” This was Xara.

I felt a weariness settle over me. “I don’t think I’m wanted here,” I said, turning to Ai-Yer. “I might as well be on my way.”

“But what about your rations?” Ai-Yer protested. She then rounded on the villagers. “You bunch of ingrates should at least give him some food!”

“Oh, come on!” Ai-Yer said, trying to cheer me. “Think of the Salamandars you just triumphed over! I think you did a wonderful job cleansing this place of their kind!”

Ariman’s eyes widened. “He—he got rid of the Salamandars? All of them?” A murmur of disbelief spread through the crowd.

“Well, not all of them,” Ai-Yer clarified. “But at least you people are free to get out of Al-Hamaddun now that the guards are no longer here. How many days until the next Salamandar collection?”

“Ten days,” Xara supplied, stepping closer. “And I apologize for the ignorance of my people.”

A young man, Hassan, rushed to her side protectively. “Xara, you should not be coming near these strangers. They might be dangerous!”

“Dangerous. Yes, I believe I am,” I said sadly. “As I have said, I will be on my way now.”

Xara looked at me, a deep sympathy in her eyes that seemed to understand the burden of being misjudged by appearance. “Nasibar,” she said gently. “Please stay.”

At her words, the villagers behind her slowly lowered their spears, a collective shame flickering across their faces, though unease still lingered.

And so, I stayed. Over the next three days, I learned much about Al-Hamaddun and its people. Ai-Yer was invaluable, explaining the outside world to the isolated Hamadduns. Slowly, very slowly, I began to earn a measure of their trust.

On the fifth day, a new crisis emerged. The water from my flood, having found its way into the

settlement's only well, was now causing it to overflow. The blessing of water had become a threat; the village itself might drown.

That night, at a tense public meeting, Hassan urged everyone to evacuate. Most settlers, however, were terrified of the unknown dangers of the outside world. Xara bravely supported him. "We have to leave before the next collection anyway," she argued. "If we don't, we'll have to sacrifice more of our loved ones. And when the collectors find out what happened to their guards, I'll bet they'll take more than just the normal collection!"

Ariman, ever the conservative, voiced his fears. "Here we only need to face the Salamandars. Outside, we have to face the Salamandars AND other threats! Is it not stupid to leave Hamaddun?"

I listened in silence, the memory of Hemmad's utter destruction a cold weight in my gut. I knew the waters I had unleashed would soon overwhelm these walls, and the guilt of it was a heavy burden, yet it wasn't my place to sway their decision.

Suddenly, strange screeches pierced the night. I was on my feet instantly. "Stay here," I told Ai-Yer, who immediately ignored me and followed as I headed towards the barricaded front gate.

There, to my surprise, sat the two guard dragons, calm and seemingly unconcerned. One was lapping at the pooling water outside the gates, the other resting on the ground.

"I think you should tell the others," I said to Ai-Yer, handing her the torch I carried after lighting another nearby. "But tell them to be careful. We don't know what these dragons might do if we get too close."

"And what will you do?" she asked, her eyes wide.

A reckless thought, perhaps born of my own confused state, surfaced. "Make some more friends?" I replied.

"They'll rip you to pieces! Have you lost your mind, Nasibar?" Ai-Yer exclaimed.

I managed a weary smile. "You forgot, Ai-Yer. Haven't I told you that I have lost my mind?" She shook her head but hurried off to the meeting.

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A world away from the nascent hope of Dragon Country, in the arid, iron-rich lands of Tariq, Hardid Al-Jameer sat in his opulent, yet increasingly tense, audience chamber. The air, usually

thick with the scent of burning incense and the murmur of sycophantic courtiers, was now heavy with a different kind of tension. His immense wealth, his very power, flowed from the veins of his ore mines, and those veins were drying up. The dwindling water supply, a persistent rumor now a stark reality, threatened to choke the life from his enterprise. Reports from his scouts were grim: the rivers that fed Tariq were receding, and even the underground springs showed signs of depletion. The source, he knew, was linked to the distant mountains, near the cursed settlement of Al-Hamaddun. Their recent dispatches had also been disturbingly vague, filled with talk of "unforeseen natural occurrences" and "uncooperative natives." Al-Jameer did not believe in natural occurrences where his profits were concerned.

And then there was the Red Dragon. His own faction, meant to be his enforcers, had grown too bold, their insubordination a festering wound in his authority. Whispers of their independent raids and growing stockpiles of captured Djin reached him daily. This was more than just a matter of resources; it was a challenge to his very sovereignty. Hardid slammed his fist on the armrest of his throne. He would go to Al-Hamaddun himself. And on the way, he would remind the Red Dragon exactly who held the reins of power in Tariq. The water, the Hamadduns, and his rebellious subordinates would all be brought to heel.

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When the villagers, led by Ai-Yer, arrived at the gate, they found an astonishing sight: I was leaning against the resting dragon, patting its massive snout as if it were a common pet. The great beast seemed to enjoy the attention.

"The Salamandar drug must have worn off," I explained to the gawking crowd. "It usually takes about three days for that to happen after a dosage. It has been five. They're really nice creatures once you get to know them."

"Easy for you to say, you're an Al-Raq-Shar!" Ariman burst out, still fearful. "They eat Al-Insan like us!"

I squinted thoughtfully. "Somehow I don't think they will now. Dragons usually don't devour sentient beings unless they think that being threatens them."

"And how would you know all that, Nasibar? Haven't you lost your memory?" Ai-Yer asked, a playful challenge in her voice.

"Well, I think I used to know such things," I said, tapping the book on my arm. "It's in the book." I turned to the crowd. "Don't you see? This is the Hamaddun's ride out of this place. The walls will not hold the water for long, and the longer you wait here, the closer the collection day

comes. If you're going to decide to leave, then do so. Fast."

"But, we can't all ride two dragons, can we?" Hassan interjected, practical despite his earlier fear.

Xara stepped forward, her gaze steady. "Oh yes we can. How many are they capable of carrying, Nasibar?"

"About twelve Al-Insans, each," I replied. "I count as two."

Xara turned to her people, her voice ringing with newfound hope. "We'll just need them to get across the mountains. We can leave in stages. Bit by bit until we are all out of Hamaddun and find our new home."

A new home. The words resonated strangely. In the short time I'd been here, Al-Hamaddun, despite its grim purpose and initial hostility, had started to feel like something akin to a home. But now, I had to leave again. I met Xara's determined gaze and nodded, a faint smile touching my lips. The exodus was about to begin.

## Chapter 3: The Dragon Riders

*"Dragon Country—situated at the end of the mountain range on the opposite side of Genorene. The beauty of Dragon Country surpasses that of any city. The reason behind its beauty is the fact that no Djin would dare settle in these lands for fear of the dragons. This means no Djin waste pollutes the land. It is a known fact that dragons are one of the most magnificent creatures on Qudra. I hope that if ever one day a group of settlers find their way and courage to live here that they do not pollute this land. In this magnificent place was where Dar-Shak and I first met after he saved me from hungry sky demons. We went our separate ways after that. But I hope to meet him again, someday. Despite his clumsiness, I admire Dar-Shak for his charisma and the way he talks so boldly about things. One day I will visit Qamdan, his home village. I would certainly want to see how he fares there."*

— Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

The settlement of Al-Hamaddun was a hive of frantic activity. Hope, a fragile but potent force, had ignited among the Al-Insan. They were packing their meager belongings, a desperate urgency in their movements as they prepared to leave before the next dreaded Salamandar collection day. Ai-Yer, now fully committed to their cause, was with Xara, tirelessly helping the elders, children, and the handicapped prepare for the journey.

Hassan, eager to impress Xara, had volunteered as one of the dragon pilots; I was the other. His dragon could carry eleven passengers plus himself, while mine, due to my larger size counting as two Al-Insans, could manage ten. This first trip was an exploration, a foray into the unknown, with the worn map in my book as our only guide.

With a powerful thrust of their wings, both dragons soared into the air, the cheers of the remaining settlers echoing from below, a sound that both warmed and weighed upon me.

"Careful, people... we wouldn't want anyone to fall now, right?" I called out over the rush of wind.

Hassan's dragon climbed above mine, and he laughed, a joyous, carefree sound. "Ah, Nasibar! What fun would it be if we cannot cheer our savior on top of magnificent dragons!"

His change in attitude towards me was not lost, and I felt a smile touch my own lips. "Stay clear of the mountain peaks, Hassan. We still have a long way to go".

Suddenly, the dragon Hassan was riding screeched loudly and veered sharply off course,

heading north.

“Hassan! What in Qudra are you doing?!” I yelled, alarmed.

“I’m not doing anything! This dragon will not respond to my steering!” he shouted back, his voice tight with panic.

A strange intuition sparked within me. “Hang on, Hassan. Let’s see where he’s taking you”.

“What if he’s taking us back to the Salamandars?!” Hassan cried.

“I don’t think he is, Hassan. He knows far better than to be doing that!” I steered my own dragon to follow, trying to reassure him and myself. “Who knows, he might be able to find some place better for us!”.

I maneuvered my dragon beneath Hassan’s and looked up. A detail, previously unnoticed, struck me with sudden clarity, and I couldn’t help but laugh despite the situation. “I’m sorry! I made a mistake!”.

Hassan looked down, his face pale. “What mistake?! Are we all going to die?!”.

“No... your dragon is a SHE. Not a HE!” I called out, the laughter bubbling up. The passengers on both our dragons, hearing this, began to laugh as well, the tension momentarily broken. Hassan’s face turned from pale to a deep red. “Don’t you ever scare me like that again, Nasibar!” he yelled, before joining in the general mirth.

The dragons, or rather *the female*, led us to a place of breathtaking beauty – a lush, vibrant forest nestled in a hidden valley, untouched by the harshness of the surrounding lands. My eyes widened as I gaped at the wonders before us; the verdant greenery was a balm to a soul that had known only desert and ruin since my awakening. Even Hassan was mesmerized. More screeches echoed around us, but these were not sounds of aggression. From all sides, other dragons emerged, their calls a chorus of welcome. It was a homecoming, a reunion for the two dragons we had inadvertently liberated, members of a family separated for years. A tear I didn’t expect rolled down my cheek, witnessing their joy. The flight of dragons seemed grateful to us for returning their lost kin. Our two dragons were home, and in an unexpected miracle, the Hamadduns had found their new sanctuary: Dragon Country. This, we silently agreed, would be New Hamaddun.

Hardid Al-Jameer, seated on his obsidian throne in the suffocating opulence of Tariq, listened with growing fury as his trembling captain delivered the reports. "Al-Hamaddun... breached, sire. Flooded. The guards... all lost. And the dragons... they deserted, taking the Hamadduns with them." The words hung in the air, each one a hammer blow to Hardid's carefully constructed order. His knuckles whitened on the armrest. "Deserted?" he snarled, his voice a low, dangerous rumble that silenced the murmuring courtiers. "Those beasts are drugged into obedience! And the Hamadduns... taken? Not one remained for the Red Dragon's pit?" His eyes, usually cold and calculating, now blazed with a terrifying rage. "Find them! Every last one! Scour the mountains, the valleys, every cursed patch of Qudra! I want every Hamaddun dragged back, alive or dead, and flung into the pit! And prepare my personal guard. I will oversee this 'reacquisition' myself. No more failures. The Red Dragon will have its feast." He rose, his masked face a portrait of implacable wrath, and stormed from the chamber, the heavy doors slamming shut behind him, leaving behind a court gripped by a chilling premonition.

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Flush with the success of finding a safe haven, I returned to the old, crumbling Al-Hamaddun, not alone this time, but accompanied by a contingent of our newfound dragon allies. Their presence would allow us to relocate the remaining Hamadduns in one massive effort. Hassan, along with two other settlers, Arif and Jasni, rode with me on the lead dragon.

The evacuation was a carefully orchestrated chaos. The inner compound of Al-Hamaddun was too small for all the dragons to land at once, so we loaded five at a time, each carrying twelve settlers—except mine, which carried fewer due to my bulk—before they flew off towards Dragon Country. Ai-Yer and Xara were instrumental, organizing the lines, ensuring children and the elderly were accompanied and that each dragon bore its proper load. Isma, meanwhile, kept watch from the tower. The plan was for them, along with Ariman, to be on the very last transport. The cracks in Al-Hamaddun's walls were visibly worsening, water seeping through in ever-increasing streams. Time was our enemy. I led the first wave, the dragons following in a single, majestic file.

As the last dragon was being loaded, and Isma was about to descend from the watchtower, her excited expression froze into one of sheer terror. "The collection HAS come early!" she shrieked to herself, scrambling down to warn the others.

But it was too late. A volley of heavy spears rained down, and the final dragon, moments from takeoff, crashed to the ground, dead. Ai-Yer, Xara, Isma, and Ariman were stranded. As if on cue, the main walls of Al-Hamaddun finally gave way with a deafening groan, and the settlement began to flood rapidly. Through the chaos, Salamandar guards on their own dragons swooped down, snatching Ariman, Xara, and Isma into the air with cruel efficiency. Ai-Yer, caught in the surging waters, was washed away and vanished from sight.

Unaware of the tragedy unfolding behind us, our group of dragon riders, now flying as a scattered flock rather than a neat line, pressed on.

“We did it!” Jasni cheered from behind me. “Say goodbye to the Salamandar oppressors. Hurray to Nasibar!”

But a cold dread was coiling in my stomach. Something felt wrong. “Did we get everyone?” I asked, my voice tight.

Hassan scanned the dragons around us, his face paling. “Xara. I don’t see Xara”.

I circled our dragon, searching frantically. “I don’t see Ai-Yer either,” I confirmed, my heart sinking. “I’m heading back. Who’s with me?”.

“We have to save Xara and the remaining settlers. I’m with you, Nasibar!” Hassan declared without hesitation. Arif and Jasni looked at each other, worried. “We’re on the same dragon,” Arif said grimly. “Do we have a choice?”.

I hailed one of the dragon riders at the head of the main group. “Oi! You! Let the dragon fly you wherever she’s headed for! The rest will meet up with you in New Hamaddun when you reach it! We have some small matters to attend to!”. Then, with a shared look of grim determination, we steered our dragon back towards the ruins of old Hamaddun.

“Err, small matters?” Hassan asked, tapping my shoulder. “Why didn’t you tell them?”.

“We wouldn’t want to ruin their morale, would we?” I replied heavily. “It was already a tough job getting them to leave Hamaddun in the first place”.

My worst fears materialized as we approached. Old Hamaddun was gone, its walls collapsed into a murky pool of water, only small segments still standing defiantly against the flood. The sight of a dead dragon floating in the water made my heart clench. No. They must have made it. I felt a crushing weight of responsibility; these were more friends lost, and it felt like my fault.

Just as despair threatened to overwhelm me, Jasni pointed. “Look! It’s that jumpy water djin

friend of yours!”.

There, on a precarious section of a remaining wall, was Ai-Yer, jumping up and down frantically to attract our attention. I steered the dragon towards her immediately, extending a hand to pull her aboard.

“Where are the others?” I asked urgently.

“The collection came early,” she gasped, soaked and shivering but her eyes blazing with determination. “Nobody drowned. But the Salamanders captured the rest—Xara, Ariman, Isma. If we head east in time, we might still be able to follow them!”.

Hassan scanned the horizon, shielding his eyes. “There!” he shouted. “I can see them! They’re heading east!”.

Without a word, I urged our dragon in pursuit.

Jasni was trembling. “Are you sure we’re doing the right thing? Are you sure we’re not going to get killed?”.

I gritted my teeth, a cold fury simmering within. “No. I’m not sure. But if anything happens to Xara, somebody has to pay”.

Arif scratched his head. “Nasibar, you must be out of your mind”.

Ai-Yer, despite everything, managed a knowing smile. “You forget. He IS out of his mind”.

## Chapter 4: The Red Dragon

*"...and it was Dar-Shak who taught me how to steer a dragon. It was not that difficult, since dragons had the ability to be in sync with the pilot's mind. If you treated one well, he or she would be your friend for life. Just like how Arq-Nar is with Dar-Shak. No matter how long Dar-Shak leaves Dragon Country, Arq-Nar will always recognize him when he returns. I believe since I am now in league with Dar-Shak, he will recognize me too."*

– Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

The flight of Salamandar dragons led us over a desolate, smoky, barren land, punctuated by the brooding shapes of dormant volcanoes. They seemed intent on their destination, unaware of our pursuit. We landed our dragon atop a higher mountain peak, giving us a vantage point over the grim scene below. It was some sort of high-security prison, even more heavily guarded than Al-Hamaddun. My heart lurched as I saw them: Xara, Ariman, and Isma, being roughly tied to sturdy poles fixed in the ground before the gaping mouth of a large cave. A murky stream of water trickled out from within the cave's darkness.

Hassan, beside me, was trembling with rage. He drew a crudely made dagger and made to charge down the mountainside. I grabbed his arm. "Hassan, I may have lost my mind, but I'm sure that would not be a good idea."

"We have to do something," he insisted, his voice choked.

"Yes, I believe we do," I replied grimly, "but getting killed would be something we shouldn't do."

"I'm sorry, Nasibar. Do you have a plan?"

I didn't, not yet. I scanned the fortress-like area. More guards than Al-Hamaddun, and no obvious water source I could use for another flood.

"Where are their dragons?" Arif suddenly asked.

Ai-Yer pointed. "There. They won't let their dragons near the place. It looks like the Salamandars land their dragons in that open space and walk to this cave mouth."

"We need to find a way into that cave without being noticed," I muttered, more to myself than the others. My gaze fixed on the stream flowing from the cave. Amongst the murky water, I saw them – small, green leaves, dragged out by the current. Green leaves don't grow in the pitch darkness of caves; they need sunlight. They must have been washed into the cave from an

outside source. I turned to Ai-Yer. "That water is coming from somewhere outside the cave. There must be another entrance. You must be able to spot it."

"Water again? You must really think about me all the time, huh Nasibar?" she joked, but her eyes were serious. "I'm on it," she said, and before I could stop her, she slipped away from the group, moving with a silent grace.

"Arif and Jasni," I said, "stay here with the dragon. Hassan, you and I will follow Ai-Yer. We'll send for you and the dragon if we need a quick getaway."

Not long after, we found Ai-Yer by a dark pool of water near what seemed to be the other end of the volcanic outcrop housing the cave. She surfaced moments after diving in. "There is an underwater passage leading into the cave," she informed us. "I didn't follow it far, but I'm sure we'll find out what's in there if we do."

I sent Hassan back to fetch Arif, Jasni, and our dragon, instructing him to ensure they weren't spotted. Then, taking a deep breath, I followed Ai-Yer into the cold, dark water.

We resurfaced into utter blackness, the air thick and heavy. I could hear the slow, ponderous breathing of something immense nearby. Ai-Yer grabbed my arm as I felt my way cautiously along the slick cave wall. My hand brushed against something vast, warm, and strangely furry. Suddenly, a brilliant ball of orange fire erupted in front of us, momentarily banishing the darkness. In that brief, terrifying illumination, I saw it – another dragon, but one that dwarfed any I had seen in Dragon Country, easily five times their size. Then the fire died, plunging us back into impenetrable blackness.

Arq-Nar.

The name surfaced in my mind, unbidden but undeniably familiar. Fragments of memory, sharp and clear, pierced the fog of my amnesia: this colossal dragon... I knew him. We had a bond, a psychic link forged long before my memories were lost. He was my friend. And from the faint, pained impressions I received through our reawakening connection, he was gravely ill.

The distant sound of footsteps and the growing light of torches sent a fresh jolt of alarm through me. We were perilously close to Arq-Nar's massive wing; I grabbed Ai-Yer and pulled her down, concealing us beneath its leathery expanse just as a group of Salamandar guards entered our section of the cave. At their head was a masked figure whose ornate robes bespoke high rank.

"Hardid Al-Jameer," Ai-Yer whispered, her voice barely audible beside me. "The Salamandar king."

Hardid stopped some distance from Arq-Nar, as if wary of the dragon's fiery breath. "It hasn't eaten? For how long?" he demanded of a nearby guard.

"Since we cut off its supply of plant life and started serving it only Al-Insan," the guard replied. "It will not touch Al-Insan meat no matter how we disguise it."

"What about the drugs?" Hardid pressed.

"It does not work on this one. Possibly we need a larger dosage because of its size," the guard said. "But it seems like the drug is only making it weaker. I do not dare increase the dosage lest we lose it altogether."

Hardid sighed, a sound of pure frustration. "That would be a waste. A dragon this size would be a good advantage against the Gnomes. With this dragon, we could raid the Al-Raq-Shar in Qamdan with no problem at all." He paused. "Enough drugs. How many Hamadduns were salvaged from the water disaster?"

The guard's face changed, and he began to tremble. "Th-Three sire."

"THREE?!" Hardid's voice rose to a furious roar. "HAVE YOU NO SHAME?! YOU DARE BRING THREE HAMADDUNS AND FACE ME?!" He turned to another guard. "You are the new captain now. Kill him. That will be your first task." The newly appointed captain swiftly drew his sword and dispatched his predecessor with brutal efficiency.

"Good," Hardid said, his voice cold. "Now bring in those Hamadduns and tie them up inside. Give the dragon some light to see them with so it knows it has no choice but to devour them in order to continue living." As he stalked out, he bellowed, "And no more drugs!"

A few agonizing moments later, Xara, Ariman, and Isma were dragged in, chained together, and forced to stand directly before Arq-Nar's massive head. The Salamandars, after ensuring the chains were secure, retreated hastily.

"Into the dragon's belly," Isma lamented, her voice a desperate whimper, echoing the grim reality of their impending doom. "That's where we're going, isn't it? To be consumed by its fires, trapped in its suffocating maw."

This was our chance.

"Dragon's belly?" I said, stepping out from under Arq-Nar's wing as Isma lamented their fate. "Now that isn't a nice thing to say about us, is it? Why didn't you say dragon's fart?"

“Nasibar!” Xara exclaimed, relief warring with disbelief on her face.

“I told him,” Ai-Yer said, emerging from the shadows beside me. With my strength, I shattered the chains binding them.

“Ai-Yer found another unguarded entrance,” I explained as Ariman questioned our appearance. “But you’ll have to swim out of here. Hassan is waiting for you outside with the dragon.”

I turned to Arq-Nar. He was so weak, his eyes barely open; I doubted he could even lift his head. “Arq-Nar,” I whispered, laying a hand on his vast snout. “I will help you.”

“Arq-Nar?” Ai-Yer looked puzzled. “It has a name? C’mon, you just met! Let’s go.”

I hugged Arq-Nar’s neck. “No. You go. I have to help him. Just leave me here.”

“How are you going to help an oversized creature such as that?” Ariman demanded skeptically.

“I think he’s hungry. He just needs to eat,” I said simply.

Ai-Yer, bless her adaptable spirit, quickly formulated a plan. “I’ll take the others to the dragon outside and see them off. Then I’ll come back with some food.” She figured the pool outside was full of fish, and they could supplement with my rations.

Surprisingly, Xara and Hassan returned with Ai-Yer, laden with fish and fruit. Arif and Jasni had departed with the others on our spare dragon, promising to return in three days.

As Arq-Nar slowly regained some strength from the steady supply of food, I read to him from the book, specifically the passage that mentioned his magnificence. I pondered over the name Dar-Shak from its pages – was he Al-Insan? The book said he was from Qamdan, the very place Hardid had spoken of raiding the Al-Raq-Shar. If Dar-Shak was still alive, he might hold keys to my forgotten past.

Our makeshift routine was punctuated by daily checks from the Salamandar guards. The new captain, eager to avoid Hardid’s wrath, readily accepted the explanation that Arq-Nar had devoured the prisoners, even inventing that the dragon preferred its meals cooked to explain the smell of our fish fires. After two days, Arq-Nar was noticeably stronger.

On the third day, Hardid himself arrived. He was immediately suspicious. “Where are the

Hamadduns?" he asked his captain.

"Devoured, my lord. Just as you planned," the captain replied, trembling despite his bravado.

"I see," Hardid said, turning to the dragon. "He looks ready now."

At that moment, Arq-Nar lifted his great head, his eyes blazing, and fixed Hardid with a terrible glare, a low growl rumbling in his chest. We remained hidden beneath his wing. As Hardid took a hesitant step closer, Arq-Nar roared, a sound that shook the very foundations of the cave, and with a mighty heave, shattered the massive chains that bound him. The Salamandars scattered in terror, Hardid the first among them to flee.

In the ensuing chaos, I managed to get Xara, Hassan, and Ai-Yer onto Arq-Nar's back, but as the colossal dragon charged out of the cave in pursuit of the fleeing Salamandars, I found myself clinging desperately to his lashing tail. Arq-Nar, reaching the cave mouth, swept the remaining Salamandar guards before him off the cliff edge to their deaths on the rocks below. Hardid and a few of his personal guard scrambled onto their own waiting dragons and took to the air. With a powerful beat of his wings, Arq-Nar launched himself into the sky after them, me still clinging precariously to his tail.

Hardid, looking back from his dragon, spotted me. "There!" he shrieked, pointing. "There is the culprit! An Al-Raq-Shar! Kill him!"

His dragon riders wheeled, closing in on us. Hassan was now trying to guide Arq-Nar, but the pursuit was relentless. Spears whistled past. One struck me squarely in the back, and an explosion of agony ripped a wail from my throat. My grip on Arq-Nar's tail faltered. The pain was overwhelming.

"Leave me!" I roared at the others on Arq-Nar's back. "Hassan! Shake the brigade off before heading for Dragon Country... Don't let them follow you there!" Then, my strength failed. I let go.

The last thing I heard as I plunged towards the dark forest far below was Xara's piercing scream: "No! Nasibar!"

Devastated but resolute, Hassan steered Arq-Nar towards a bank of ominous dark clouds Ai-Yer had spotted. "It's a storm!" Ai-Yer cried. "The Salamandars would be crazy to follow us into it! It's as dangerous as the flood Nasibar created on Hamaddun!" Hassan urged Arq-Nar faster into the churning tempest. The Salamandar brigade, on seeing the storm, halted their pursuit. Hardid, enraged at being thwarted, had yet another of his captains executed for the failure.

But I knew nothing of this. I was falling, alone, into darkness.

## Chapter 5: The Book and the Al-Raq-Shar

*"A prophecy was once revealed to me by one of my teachers. It stated that a salamandar king will end his own life unwillingly. I always wondered if this king would be Hardid. It was puzzling. How can someone end his own life unwillingly? Suicide is always something someone does willingly."*

– Excerpt from the Book of Nasibar

The calm surface of the wilderness lake shattered as I plunged into its cold depths. Sinking, the world muted, my mind, unbidden, began to speak to me again, painting vivid, terrible scenes against the darkness of the water.

I saw people running, Al-Raq-Shar and Al-Insan fleeing in a shared terror. It was an attack. Women and children scrambled for shelter as homes were torn asunder around them. The sky rained down burning rocks, each impact a sizzling punctuation of death, instantly killing any Djin they struck. It was an apocalypse, a day of utter doom.

I was there, running, desperate to reach an old wooden house before they did. Who were they? The vision offered no answer. The house erupted in flames. Inside, I saw an old Al-Insan woman. I called out to her, but my voice was lost in the cacophony. The roof, wreathed in fire, collapsed upon her. Who was she? The question screamed in my mind. Then, I was on the ground, head in my hands, the vision dissolving back into the silent, oppressive stillness of the deep water.

With a gasp, my eyes flew open. I thrashed towards the surface, breaking into the air, lungs burning. Weak, depressed, and utterly lost, I crawled onto the bank. The book, my anchor, had somehow unwrapped from my wrist during the fall, its chain now a hindrance, tangling around my limbs. I fumbled with the cuff, freeing myself, then reached for the spear still protruding from my back. The shaft snapped, leaving a foot of it still embedded in my flesh. Pain lanced through me, but I crawled onward, leaving the precious book behind by the water's edge.

A hut shimmered in my blurry vision. Rest... I needed rest. I collapsed again.

Darkness, and my mind spoke once more: I was falling, tumbling into a bottomless pit. The book... it was with a man in a cloak, his face obscured. He was calling out to me, urging me to stop falling... and I did.

I woke to the sharp sting of blows and a torrent of angry words. "Get up, you beast! Go away! You will not get my animals this time!" An old woman, her face a mask of fury, was beating me with a stick. My sight was still blurred, every movement an agony, but I struggled to my feet, trying to leave. She continued to strike me as I stumbled away into the relative cover of the

trees. Once I felt I was far enough, my strength gave out completely, and I collapsed into a fitful sleep.

The metallic scent of my blood drew them. Wolves. They appeared moments later, their snuffling cautious as they circled me, testing if I was still alive. Just as one lunged, an arrow hissed through the air, thudding into the ground near them, sending the pack scattering back into the wilderness with startled yelps.

My savior was tall, nearly my own height, and cloaked. As the figure approached, the hood was pushed back, revealing green skin, short, upward-curving tusks, and the unmistakable features of a female Djinn. An Al-Raq-Shar.

More images flickered through my mind, fevered and disjointed: a village... Al-Insans... Al-Raq-Shars... not fighting, but running together, a desperate, scampering flight. A house collapsing... the injured... the dead. My book... I saw myself looking at it, reading the name aloud: "Nasibar". Then a sharp impact to my head—

I wailed, a raw sound of pain, and awoke properly, sitting bolt upright, my skin drenched in sweat. The female Al-Raq-Shar was beside me, her expression calm.

"You must have had quite a day," she commented, her voice surprisingly gentle as she dipped a cloth in water and wiped my forehead. "You've been talking in your sleep. You'd better rest some more. That wound you have is pretty nasty. It would take a few more hours for it to heal properly. Thank Qudra that the Al-Raq-Shar heal faster than other Gnomes."

"Who are you?" I managed, my voice hoarse. "Where am I?"

"You're in Terradon. And I am Qi," she said, a hint of a smile playing on her lips. "Nice to meet another Al-Raq-Shar. Don't forget, there aren't many of us left." She was striking, even with her short tusks; her long, dark green hair was tied up high on her head.

"Not many left," I repeated, the words chilling me. "Why are you here?"

Qi crossed her arms. "I believe it is my turn to ask you all those questions?"

"I'm sorry," I said, the apology genuine. "I would tell you if I was sure. But I am not. I have lost my memory and I cannot tell you much about myself."

"You do remember your name, right? Who's Nasibar?" she pressed.

"Nasibar." The name felt like my only anchor. Then, a jolt of panic. The book. It wasn't with me.

"Where is my book?"

"What book? I didn't see any book when I found you," Qi said, her brow furrowing. "I heard you saying that name in your sleep. You still haven't answered my question."

"I'm sorry. I believe that I am Nasibar," I told her. "But I do not know the rest of my story yet. All I know is that I woke up in Hemmad with a book which I believe is mine."

"Hemmad?" Her eyes widened slightly. "Where the Al-Raq-Shar and the Al-Insan co-exist? You really must take me there some time."

"Co-exist?" I was puzzled. "You mean we weren't at war?"

"War? Did something happen in Hemmad?" Qi asked, a sudden urgency in her voice.

I sighed, the weight of the desolation I'd witnessed pressing down on me. "Hemmad is no longer on the map of Qudra. I believe that I am the only survivor."

"By Qudra! That's terrible! What monstrosity could have done such a thing!" Qi exclaimed, genuinely horrified.

"You are not from Hemmad then," I stated rather than asked.

"No, I'm from Qamdan," she replied. "Only Al-Raq-Shar there. Since you say Hemmad is gone, then the only Al-Raq-Shar settlement left on Qudra is now Qamdan. If it still stands, that is. I haven't been home in eight years now. The Salamandar warlords had wiped out most of our kind for the fear of our strength and the military advantage it would give to the Gnomes if we were ever in a major war."

"May I ask why you haven't been home?" I was curious.

Qi looked away for a moment. "Qamdan Al-Raq-Shar prefer to travel. See Qudra in different perspectives. I have been doing so for eight years now. Of course, Qamdan isn't too far away from here, but I barely think about going back. There is nothing for me there."

"I see." The thought of my missing book resurfaced with urgency. "I am sorry. I need to go and find my book now." I tried to sit up, but Qi gently pushed me back down.

"No. You stay put. If you lost the book around the forest, then it will definitely not go anywhere. It is too dark to be looking for things now. You need your sleep. I don't want an Al-Raq-Shar dying on me. It is already difficult to find any company around here. And besides, you still need to tell me of your adventures and how you got that spear stuck in your back."

Adventures. The word reminded me of Ai-Yer. They both seemed interested in these supposed "adventures," while all I longed for was peace, an identity, perhaps a family, a home. Exhaustion claimed me, and I decided to sleep, at least for now.

The next day, Qi, already dressed in her hunting cloak, found me still in bed. "Going somewhere?" I asked.

"I'm getting breakfast. Are you coming along?" she offered. "What would you like? Deer? Bird?"

"Wouldn't fish be easier?" I suggested, a surprising fondness for it surfacing. I'd eaten a lot of it since my travels began.

"Fish?" Qi looked at me strangely. "An Al-Raq-Shar wanting to eat fish... That's peculiar. Normally, an Al-Raq-Shar would take pride in his or her hunting. We eat fish, but only if there's nothing else around. Plus, I have never been able to catch any fish before. We normally just buy them off Al-Insan fishermen... Never recalled any Al-Raq-Shar who enjoyed fishing. It's too boring waiting for them to bite your bait."

My face lit up despite my aches. "No bait necessary. I shall show you." I was eager to be on my feet again.

We walked alongside the lake, the greenery of Terradon a soothing balm. Along the way, I recounted my story so far: Dangar, Ai-Yer, the fall of Al-Hamaddun, Xara, the discovery of Dragon Country, and my encounters with the Salamandar King, Hardid Al-Jameer.

My method of fishing was unconventional. I stood waist-deep in the cool water, motionless, until I spotted my prey. Then, with a swift movement, I'd snatch the fish with my bare hands and toss it onto the bank.

Qi seemed to enjoy our outing. Perhaps it was simply because I was the only other Al-Raq-Shar she'd encountered in eight long years of solitary travel since losing her family as a young girl. We bonded, sharing what little we knew or remembered of ourselves.

"You seem to think highly of this Xara," Qi remarked as we ate our cooked fish by a crackling campfire.

"Not very well," I admitted. "But she helped me a lot. In the short time we met, we had already become very good friends."

"You mean like us?" Qi assumed, a hopeful lilt in her voice.

I paused, considering her words. Then I nodded. "Like us."

Her smile was bright, reminding me of Ai-Yer's energy, yet Qi possessed a maturity, a shared heritage, that felt different, comforting. I found myself hoping the others, Hassan and Xara and the Hamadduns, had made it safely to their new home.

As we walked back towards Qi's hut, a piercing shriek cut through the air. I dropped the remaining fish and ran towards the sound, Qi close behind. It was the old woman from the day before, surrounded by the same pack of wolves that had nearly made a meal of me. Without a second thought, I launched myself into their midst, teeth bared, slapping and punching the wolves as they lunged for the terrified woman. Qi watched, a puzzled expression on her face, but didn't intervene. The wolves, outmatched by my ferocity, soon fled. The old woman had slumped to the ground, trembling.

"You—you saved me," she stammered. She stared into nothingness, still shocked. I went to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Did they wound you?"

Then, her eyes focused on me with a startling intensity. "Nasibar—That is your name. Is it not?"

Now it was my turn to be shocked. How did she know? "I have your book," she said simply, and the pieces clicked into place.

"Why did you save me?" the old woman, whose name I learned was Mishra, asked as Qi and I helped her back to her hut. Qi looked at me, the same unspoken question in her eyes; she clearly had no love for Mishra, who had apparently accused her of stealing eggs in the past, an issue exacerbated when Qi accidentally killed one of the old woman's livestock.

I thought for a moment, then pointed to a large tree where a squirrel poked its head from a hole. "Do you know what that is?" I asked Mishra.

"A squirrel," Qi answered for her, a hint of impatience in her tone. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"That," I explained, watching the squirrel scamper off with a nut, "is a living creature. Taking life away from it is easy. Every creature only has one chance at life. Take it away, and it's gone. There is no turning back. A bad deed can still be corrected if a person isn't dead. But if they die, they bring every deed they did or would be able to do with them."

"What about fish?" Qi challenged.

I turned to her. "When you kill for food, you make sure to finish your meal. Some lives end in order for others to continue. It's a cycle. But that does not mean that your prey has no right to

defend itself. Those wolves were hungry, but they were just unlucky today. They will find something else to eat, of course."

Mishra stopped walking, her eyes wide with a dawning understanding. "It is you. The one with the book," she whispered. "From the prophecy."

Mishra, a soothsayer who had spent her life in Terradon studying Qudran mythology, returned my precious book to me. "This book is your history," she told us, her voice filled with a strange conviction. "It is related to your destiny. I do not know what it is, but it is something that will change the shape of Qudra as we know it. Find your history, and you will fulfill the prophecy."

"Change the shape of Qudra?" I mused, a wry smile touching my lips. "Hmm... I did change a settlement into a pool of water once. Does that count?"

"You jest, Nasibar," Mishra said sternly. "If the writings are true, your destiny will free us all. From the moment you were telling me what you saw in life, and how you explained it to me, I believe that you are the one. The one with the book. The book of life."

"The book of life? What, my book?" I questioned.

"Your book mentioned something about the fall of a Salamandar King," Mishra pronounced, her gaze piercing. "I believe this will be your doing."

"Hardid?" I said, the name tasting like ash in my mouth. "I have no intention of going against him."

"It is your destiny, Nasibar. It cannot be denied. You will want to go against him one day, but it will be because of something he has. Something you must have. Something which should belong to you. This book," she placed a frail hand on its iron cover, "this will show you the way. It has shown you more than what can be shown to you by other means by now, I believe."

I bowed my head, a strange mix of weariness and resolve settling within me. I hated war, had tried to avoid confrontation since my awakening. But I knew, deep down, that if Hardid threatened those I had come to care for, I would be forced to act. And Mishra was right; the book, my book, had indeed shown me more than anything else in this confusing existence.

## Chapter 6: Mishra's Wish

*"Gnome soothsayers don't really predict the future magically as most djin would believe. The science of future prediction is a mathematical practice. Patterns and events of the past are looked into and a prediction is made based on past events. From that point onwards extrapolations are made. Although not very accurate, a rough idea can be taken into account. There is a link between history and prophecy; Observing the past to see the future. However, these predictions are based on a number of variables, which include individual behavior, the chosen path, external events and more than often, Luck. Luck is the most difficult variable to predict. Second to luck would be external events, it would be a matter of finding out which path crosses at what time and place. A soothsayer once told me that my path would end at a point and begin at another which will not give me many path choices and that I will have to follow through it no matter what happens because of my principles and stubbornness. And I was also told that my path would change the face of Qudra in some way or another. I wonder if I can change things now before that happens. I really wouldn't want to change Qudra for the worse."*

– Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

It had been four days since Qi found me, four days of slowly regaining strength here in the verdant embrace of Terradon. The lush greenery was a welcome respite, and Qi's quiet insistence that I stay and heal was a comfort I hadn't realized I needed. She had supplied me with lodgings in her small, well-kept hut, shared her knowledge of Al-Raq-Shar ways, and even lent me one of her two camel-like mounts for my daily visits to Mishra. The old soothsayer's hut wasn't far, but Qi insisted I save my energy. Each day, I'd sat with Mishra, hoping for more clarity on the prophecy she spoke of, but she would only offer cryptic advice to follow my own path, a path whose destination remained shrouded from me.

On the fifth day, Mishra wasn't at her door when I arrived. Normally, she'd be waiting, the entrance to her humble dwelling open in welcome. I waited outside with my mount, pulling out my book and screening through its familiar, yet alien, passages. Hours crawled by. It wasn't until the sun began to dip towards the horizon that I heard the sound of hooves. It was Qi, and slumped over the front of her mount, bloodied and frail, was Mishra.

"What in Qudra happened?" I exclaimed, rushing to her aid and carefully lifting Mishra's limp form.

"The wolves," Qi said, her voice tight with a sorrowful anger as she dismounted. "They got her

in the end. I am sorry. It was too late when I got there.”

I carried Mishra inside and laid her gently on her bed. Qi hurried to prepare water and cloths. Mishra was still conscious, but barely. Her hand, surprisingly strong, gripped my arm as I put her down.

“Nasibar...” she rasped, her breath shallow.

“No. Rest,” I urged, my voice thick. “You will be fine.” I didn’t know why I said it; the words felt hollow even to my own ears. She was losing too much blood, her face a pale mask of her former self.

She gripped my arm tighter. “I... My... Time has come.” Each word was a struggle. “I-It is time I joined them... My family. It’s time you did as well.” Her eyes, clouded with pain, began to roll. She was fighting hard.

“Family?” The word struck a confused chord. “No, Mishra. You must stay alive. You must help me.” A lump formed in my throat, and my vision blurred with unshed tears.

“I... am sorry... Nasibar...” she stuttered. “It is time. I have lost my family. You may have not lost yours yet... Go to... Qamdan... Nasibar... go... to... the remaining Al-Raq-Shar... Before it is... too late—” And with a final, shuddering breath, Mishra slumped into stillness. Qi entered then, sitting quietly beside me as the silence of death filled the small hut.

“I’m sorry,” Qi said softly after a long moment. “I couldn’t save her.”

I bowed my head low. “It was her time. There was not much you could do.” I rose and walked out, leaving Qi to sit with the departed.

We buried her together soon after, beneath a sturdy tree whose roots ran deep into the soil of Terradon. It reminded me of burying the eyeless man in Hemmad, that first act of bewildered empathy, but this time, I was not alone. This time, I had company. And this time, another quest had been laid upon me. The eyeless man had wanted Nasibar to know what happened to Hemmad. Now, Mishra, with her dying breath, wanted Nasibar to seek his family in Qamdan.

Another responsibility I took on. For Nasibar. For me. If I really was Nasibar.

“I’m going,” I said to Qi, after the last stone was placed on Mishra’s grave.

Qi stood abruptly. “Where? Qamdan? You’re better off here with me, Nasibar. Do you actually believe the ravings of—” She stopped herself as I turned to look at her, a silent rebuke in my

gaze. She dropped her head. "I am sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

I looked away, my thoughts churning.

"Look," Qi began again, her voice softer but still edged with a desperate plea. "Qamdan is not your home. You told me yourself that you were from Hemmad. Why should you go there when you are certain that you have no family there? It would be a waste of your time, wouldn't it?"

I looked back at her. "But it is yours, is it not, Qi? Tell me, why do you fear Qamdan? Why have you left it so long to be on your own when it is not too far from here?"

"What has that got to do with anything—" she countered, but I cut her off.

"It has got a lot to do with everything. Do you believe in destiny, Qi?"

"I do," she said, her jaw set stubbornly. "And I believe that your destiny is to stay here. With me."

"Qi," I said gently, "you're as uncertain of that as I am of my true origins. Do you think I should just live a lie? Forget who I really am? Live in ignorance? Deny my own destiny?"

"But you don't need to know your past!" she cried. "You might not like it. You might not like who you really are—"

"As you don't like yours, Qi?" I countered, the question hanging heavy between us.

"We're not talking about—"

"There's something you're running from, aren't you?" I pressed. "Something you don't want to remember. Something which is preventing you from returning to Qamdan. Come with me. Show me that you're not afraid."

Qi looked down, her shoulders hunching. "I—I cannot." A single tear traced a path down her cheek. Then she dropped to the ground, her body wracked with sobs. "I cannot... please don't make me." Her words were broken, choked. "And please. Don't leave me here. I don't want to be alone anymore."

I walked to her, kneeling, and gently took her shoulders, pulling her up to stand. She collapsed against me, embracing me tightly, her tears soaking my tunic. "I cannot face them," she whispered, her voice muffled against my chest. "Not after what I've done."

She pulled away slightly then, her eyes red-rimmed but her gaze direct, and began to speak, her voice low and trembling as she recounted a past she had clearly tried to bury for eight long

years.

"I was thirteen when it happened," she began. "My father, Zak-Rya, and my elder brother, Thoth, were the only family I had left. Mother had passed away when I was very young; I barely remember her. Father was a warrior in the Qamdan Elite Guard, and Thoth was training to follow in his footsteps. They were often away, but I learned to fend for myself, hunting and cooking. Father would always return, often with gifts, and it was his return, not the gifts, that made me happy.

"It was the same day Thoth was due back from his training that father was also expected. I had prepared a special meal. Night fell, and I waited. A knock came at the door, but it wasn't them. It was a man in a mask. He asked for Zak-Rya, my father. When I told him father wasn't home yet, he handed me a rolled-up parchment. 'Will you be kind enough to ensure that your father gets this tonight?' he asked. 'And by no means should you open it.'

"Curiosity, or perhaps some ill-fated premonition, got the better of me. I opened it. It was a letter from Hardid Al-Jameer himself." Qi's voice hitched. "It said Tariq was under siege and demanded father's assistance. It spoke of 'unfinished business' and... and it said they knew about Thoth and me, that our family was under observation, and that father knew the consequences of denying them."

She took a shuddering breath. "I panicked. I knew father's return would be a problem if the house was being watched. I thought if I could intercept them, we could all leave Qamdan before Hardid's men realized he'd returned. I packed the food I'd cooked and crept out, heading for the village entrance where I knew they'd arrive.

"But I was spotted. One of Hardid's henchmen captured me just as I saw father and Thoth approaching the gates. I called out to them." Her voice broke. "I shouldn't have. They rushed to my rescue without a thought, but there were more Salamandars waiting than I'd seen. We were outnumbered.

"The bloodshed... father wielded his axe like a demon, but Thoth... Thoth wasn't experienced enough. I managed to escape my captor and joined the fight with only a small dagger, just as I saw Thoth fall, stabbed... stabbed with his own sword." Qi choked back a sob. "Father roared his name, and in his rage, he became careless. A flight of spears pierced his armor, and he dropped to his knees. The Salamandars stopped then. Their task had only been to prevent father from escaping, to ensure he aided Hardid. Because of what I did, my warning, my capture, they were forced to kill them both. Now Hardid couldn't use him. Their only fear was facing Hardid with that news.

"They left me there," she whispered, fresh tears streaming down her face. "In the dark. Beside

my father's dead body. Crying. I had to bury them myself. There and then. I never returned to Qamdan after that. I just walked away and have been away for eight years now."

"Hardid," I said softly, sitting on a rock beside her as she finished her harrowing tale. "Why didn't you tell me all this before, Qi?"

She looked up at the darkening sky, her eyes filled with a pain that mirrored my own nameless sorrow. "I—I wanted to forget. I've killed them. It's a past I don't want to remember. I envy you, Nasibar. I wish I could've lost my memory too. I wish that I didn't have to wake up every morning, realizing that I was the cause of Thoth's and my father's death. If I had a book like yours, I'd throw it away. That's what you should do as well, Nasibar."

A sudden anger, fierce and unexpected, surged through me. "Never wish for things like that!" I shouted, startling her. "You don't know what it's like! You think the pain would go away once you forget. But it doesn't. Believe me, it doesn't!" I saw her flinch and look down, and I reined in my outburst, my voice softening. "Look, you didn't kill them, Qi. Their death was written, perhaps. You tried to save them. Hardid was at fault here. Not you. You should be angry with Hardid. Not yourself."

I got up, dusting off my clothes. "Come with me, Qi. Let us see Qamdan. Let's both find our way to a better future. If the past has been cruel to us, let it pass. Running away will not solve anything. We need to face our destiny."

Qi remained silent for a long moment, then she rose and walked away without a word.

I packed what little I needed. My mind was made up. Leaving Qi alone in Terradon didn't sit well with me, but I had to move on. I opened my book again, checking the hand-drawn map of Qudra one last time before securing it and beginning my journey out of the Terradon forest, back towards the cruel, open nothingness of the Qudran desert.

After only a few steps beyond the forest's edge, I heard hooves. I turned to see Qi riding towards me, another of her mounts trailing behind her.

She stopped when she reached me, gently pulling the second mount forward. "You'll need a mount," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "It would take you ages to reach Qamdan on foot. There are some extra supplies on it too."

I looked from the sturdy, camel-like creature to Qi, a wave of gratitude washing over me. "Thank you." I mounted.

Qi spoke once more, her gaze searching mine. "Tell me, Nasibar. Teach me. How does it feel to

forget?"

I looked out at the distant horizon, the vast emptiness stretching before us, and paused before answering. "Painful," I said finally. "Painful and confused. Sad without a reason. It is painful when you remember the past, I know. But it is even more painful to feel pain that you're not sure where it comes from. I may have forgotten my past, but it still hurts me, although I'm not sure why. Some believe that amnesia is a defense mechanism. I must have forgotten because the pain was so great. You lose the memory. But not the pain."

Qi urged her mount next to mine. "Nasibar."

I turned to look at her.

"Ask me again, Nasibar," she said, her voice imbued with a newfound resolve. "Ask me what you asked of me before. Ask it as much as you want me to do it." Her eyes locked with mine.

I held her gaze, a slow understanding dawning. I nodded. "Come with me, Qi. Let us go to Qamdan together."

A tear traced a path down Qi's cheek, but this time, she was smiling. She nodded, her voice clear and strong. "Yes, Nasibar. I will follow you. I will follow you wherever you want me to."

## Chapter 7: The Journey to Qamdan – Simply Dying

*"It is difficult to blame a Salamandar for its arrogant nature. Salamandars are fire djins. They would almost cease to exist if they did not follow their elemental attributes. However, the tribes of the Efreet and the Marid are those who should be taken by with even more caution. It is rare for any salamandar to consort with other elementals, with the exception of quite a few..."*

– Excerpt from the Book of Nasibar

The journey from Terradon stretched before us, a tapestry of changing terrains as we pressed eastward towards Qamdan. Qi and I rode mostly in a companionable silence, the weight of her revealed past and my shrouded one an unspoken understanding between us. Each night, I would read from my book, the words of Nasibar a strange comfort in the vast wilderness.

One particular night, as the twin moons cast long, dancing shadows from our crackling campfire, a rustling in the nearby bushes startled me from my reading. I was on my feet in an instant, the heavy sword Qi had given me from her supplies already in my hand. Qi, awakened by my sudden movement, was also up, her own weapon drawn.

"I know you're in there," I called out, my voice low and steady as I pointed the sword towards the agitated bush. "You'd better come out where we can see you."

The bushes parted, and a figure stumbled out – a Salamandar soldier, a Dragon Rider by his garb, though he bore none of their usual arrogance. His arms shot upwards in a gesture of surrender, his body trembling. "Please—Don't kill me. I mean you no harm," he stammered, his voice thin with terror.

"Hardid sent you to spy on us then?" I assumed, my grip tightening on my sword.

The soldier looked utterly lost. "I—I'm sorry—who?"

"He's playing dumb, Nasibar! Kill him!" Qi hissed, stepping forward.

I put up a hand to stop her. "Wait. Let's see what he has to say for himself." I gestured with my sword. "Get out of there. Where are the others?"

The soldier shook his head, his red skin pale under the moonlight. "I'm sorry, but there are no others. I have been here alone for what seems like almost a lifetime." He took a few hesitant steps clear of the bush. "I—I fell. I think. But I don't know why. And I don't know anything about anything. I was only hiding because I thought you were going to be hostile towards me."

"Aren't we already?" Qi muttered darkly. She lunged. "What, you believe him, Nasibar? How can you believe a story like that? He's making it up to save himself. We need to get rid of him!"

The soldier shrieked and fell to his knees, bursting into tears. "No—please. I beg of you. Take whatever you want from me. But please. Not my life. I have done you no harm to receive such treatment."

I put my sword down slowly, then used one hand to pull Qi back just as she was about to strike. "Qi. Let him talk. Don't complicate things." I looked at the sobbing Salamandar. "You're too pathetic to be a Salamandar soldier. Who are you? Tell us the truth."

He looked up, his face a mask of misery. "I—I don't know who I am," he choked out. "I woke up in this rocky desert knowing nothing. I must have forgotten. Not far from where I was, there was an injured dragon. I may have been mounting it, because it is the only explanation for my whereabouts since there were no tracks to prove that I walked to this place. I've been nursing this injured dragon ever since."

I paused, exchanging a look with Qi. Was he lying, or was he, like me, adrift in a sea of lost memories? "How long have you been here?" I asked.

"A week. I think," he replied. "I hope to get out of this place and find out who I am, but before I do that, I must help Simply gain her strength."

"Simply?" Qi blurted out.

"The dragon," I confirmed, looking at the soldier. "Right?" He nodded.

"Alright," I said, sheathing my sword. "Take us to Simply then. Prove your story to us."

"Nasibar, it could be a trap!" Qi objected. "You can't fall for this one!"

I hushed her again. "Qi. You needn't rush into things. If he can't prove his dragon story, he's dead. As simple as the word Simply."

The Salamandar soldier nodded eagerly. "Yes. I can prove it. I will take you to her. But please. Can I have some food?" I roughly pulled him towards our supplies and handed him a piece of bread, which he devoured greedily.

"Patience," I grunted, "or you'll die choking before Qi gets a chance to kill you first."

We packed up our camp and followed the soldier through the moonlit, rocky terrain. His story, improbable as it sounded, was confirmed when we saw her: a shadow in the darkness, the

immense form of a dragon lying on its belly in the heart of the rocky desert. Simply.

The soldier ran towards her, embracing her great muzzle. "You have saved me again, Simply... even without your presence," he murmured, his voice thick with emotion.

Qi and I watched from a distance, astonished. A Salamandar, showing such tender affection for another creature, was a sight rarely, if ever, witnessed. Their kind usually treated their dragon mounts with harshness, relying on drugs and brute force to ensure obedience. This dragon was clearly not drugged, but she was far too weak even to lift her head. In Tariq, a dragon in such a state would have been killed without a second thought.

"A Salamandar nursing his dragon," Qi breathed beside me. "Now I've seen everything."

I nodded, then walked towards the pair. The soldier looked up as I approached and bowed his head. "I thank you for sparing my life, and for giving me some of your food. I am most grateful. All I have managed to catch so far are desert rats, which I mostly feed to Simply. The taste is not very accommodating to my tongue."

I placed a hand on Simply's great snout. Her breathing was slow, shallow, and labored. Much of her scaled hide was badly burnt, and some areas were already showing signs of rot. "It looks like she was struck by lightning from a storm," I said softly. "It is rare for any dragon to survive that. I doubt that she'll be able to make it."

The soldier's head drooped. "I. I know," he whispered. "But I don't want Simply to die. She is my only friend." He embraced her muzzle again, his shoulders shaking.

A pang of empathy shot through me. I remembered Arq-Nar, the pain I felt seeing him so weak, so vulnerable. I knew this soldier's grief.

We set up camp there, beside the dying dragon. The soldier, as if needing to share his burden, told us more. "...I didn't know what else to call her," he explained, his voice hoarse. "So I was thinking of simple things to call her, and the word Simply came to mind."

Qi, her earlier hostility softened by the raw display of grief, listened intently. "We know what to call the dragon now," she said gently, "but what do we call you?"

"Whatever you wish to call me, milady," the soldier replied.

"Lady? What is that supposed to mean? Just Qi will do," she corrected, though not unkindly.

The Salamandar nodded, then looked at me. "And you are Master Nasibar, I presume? I heard

you being called that by your mate.”

I glanced at Qi, who blushed slightly. “She isn’t my mate,” I clarified. “We just travel together. And drop the ‘Master’ bit.”

I looked at the flickering campfire, then back at the soldier. “What if we called you Los?”

Qi pondered for a moment. “What, you mean Loss? As in being deprived of something?”

“Nope,” I said. “It was simply a word that came to mind.”

The soldier managed a faint smile. “Los it is. I am honoured.”

We stood before Simply, a silent vigil in the vast, indifferent desert. There was nothing more we could do but watch. It was not the simplest thing to do, to watch something die. For some, it was simpler to be the one dying. Simply dying. Her breath became slower, shallower, until, as the Qudran second moon painted the sky a mournful red, Simply was no longer breathing.

Los slumped to his knees, his arms wrapping around her great, still muzzle for the last time, a single, choked sob escaping him.

As the last spark of life left Simply, a tremor seemed to pass through Los. He cried out, a sharp, anguished sound, and clutched his head, his eyes squeezed shut. When he opened them again, the vacant, lost look was gone, replaced by a dawning horror and a flicker of something else – memory.

“The storm...” he whispered, his voice shaking. “We were flying... a mission for Lord Hardid... a rebellion near the Genorene border... then the lightning... it struck her... struck us...” His eyes focused on me, wide with a terrible understanding. “I remember... my squadron... they... they left us. Left us for dead.”

He looked down at his hands, then at his own reflection in a piece of polished metal from Simply’s saddle. “I was... I am Captain Varkos of the Tariq Dragon Guard.” The name felt alien on his tongue. He looked at Simply’s lifeless form, and a fresh wave of grief, sharper now with the sting of remembered betrayal, washed over him.

“They abandoned her,” he said, his voice raw. “Abandoned me. My Lord Hardid... would he have done the same?” The question hung in the air, heavy with dawning disillusionment. He had served Hardid loyally, believed in the might of the Salamandar empire. But to be left, discarded, after one stroke of misfortune...

He rose slowly to his feet, his gaze sweeping over me and Qi, then back to the vast, uncaring

desert that had almost been his tomb.

"I have no squadron," he said, his voice hollow. "No dragon. My past... it is one of service to a master who would leave me to die with my mount." He took a deep breath, a new, fragile resolve hardening his features. "My old life is ash, like the memory of the lightning. You... you showed me compassion when my own kind would have shown me contempt or a quick death for my failure."

He looked directly at me. "Nasibar. Your path... I do not know it. But mine has ended here, only to perhaps begin anew. If... if you would have me, I would travel with you. Perhaps in understanding your quest for identity, I can forge a new one for myself. One not bound by the fires of Tariq or the betrayals of false lords. Varkos is no more. I have decided to remain being Los"

Qi looked at me, an unasked question in her eyes. I met Los's gaze, seeing not a Salamandar captain, but another soul adrift, seeking meaning in a world that had stripped him bare.

"There is always room for another lost soul on this path, Los," I said. "If you choose to walk it."

He nodded, a flicker of gratitude, and perhaps something like hope, in his eyes. The three of us, an unlikely trio bound by loss and an uncertain future, stood together under the silent gaze of the twin moons, the journey to Qamdan now shared by one more.

## Chapter 8: The Journey to Qamdan – Bharath the Green

*"Amongst the race of the Al-Raq-Shar, few were gifted with the ability to truly listen to the whispers of the ancient earth, to understand the silent language of stone and stream. These were the Green Ones, their souls intertwined with the primal energies of Qudra itself."*

– Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar (expanded from original thought)

Our journey towards Qamdan took us deeper into territories unmarked on the crude map within my book. Los, now a quiet but steady presence in our small company, proved to be surprisingly resilient for one who had so recently recovered from amnesia and the loss of his dragon. Qi, ever observant, seemed to be slowly accepting him, though a certain wariness remained in her interactions with the former Salamandar captain.

We had been traversing a dense, ancient forest for several days, the canopy so thick that only mottled sunlight reached the forest floor. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and unknown blossoms. It was Qi who first sensed we were not alone.

"There's someone nearby," she murmured one afternoon, her hand resting on the hilt of her hunting knife. "Or something. The forest feels... watchful."

We pressed on cautiously, and soon the trees thinned, opening into a hidden clearing. In the center stood a dwelling unlike any I had seen, seemingly woven from the living trees themselves, its roof a tapestry of leaves and moss. Before it sat an Al-Raq-Shar, but one of immense age. His green skin was the color of old jade, wrinkled and etched like the bark of the ancient trees surrounding him. His tusks, though still formidable, were yellowed with time. He wore simple robes of woven grasses, and his eyes, when he lifted them to regard us, held a depth of wisdom that seemed as old as the forest itself. This, I felt instinctively, was Bharath the Green.

He showed no surprise at our arrival, merely a calm, appraising look.

"You travel far, seekers," he said, his voice a low rumble, like stones shifting in a riverbed.

"We seek Qamdan," I replied, stepping forward. "Do you know the way?"

Bharath's ancient eyes fixed on me, a strange light flickering within their depths. He studied me for a long, unnerving moment, his gaze seeming to pierce through my skin, through the fog of my lost memories.

"You..." he said slowly, his voice filled with a dawning recognition. "You have returned."

I frowned, confused. "Returned? I do not believe I have ever been to this place."

Qi stepped beside me, her hand on my arm. "He has lost his memories, Elder."

Bharath nodded slowly, his eyes still on me. "The currents of fate are strong with this one. Yes, the mind may forget, but the soul remembers the echoes of its journey." He then looked past me, at Los, and a flicker of something unreadable crossed his face before returning to me.

"The last time your path crossed mine, Al-Raq-Shar," Bharath continued, his gaze unwavering, "you were not alone. An Al-Insan walked with you. A true partner, he was to you, his spirit bright and keen."

My confusion deepened. An Al-Insan partner? I had no memory of such a companion, save for the brief, tragic encounter in the ruins of Hemmad.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It was many seasons ago," Bharath said, his voice taking on a distant quality as if recounting a half-forgotten dream. "This forest was besieged by a blight, a creeping corruption that poisoned the trees and drove the creatures mad. I fought it, but its tendrils were strong, sapping my own life force as I tried to heal the land." He paused, a shadow passing over his features. "I was failing. Death was a cold breath on my neck. Then, you two arrived. You, with your immense strength and warrior's heart, and your Al-Insan friend, whose knowledge of ancient lore and healing arts was unlike any I had witnessed. Together, you fought back the blight, your combined powers a beacon against the darkness. You saved not only my life but the life of this forest."

He looked at me, a deep gratitude in his ancient eyes. "I never had the chance to truly know your names, nor to thank you as you deserved. You departed as swiftly as you had come, once the balance was restored, leaving only the forest's renewed life as a testament to your passage."

A profound silence settled over our group. I searched my mind, desperately trying to grasp at the threads of this revealed past, but found only emptiness. An Al-Insan partner... a healer, a lore-master? It felt like a description of someone from the very book I carried, but not of me. Yet, Bharath's conviction was undeniable.

"I... I do not remember this, Elder," I admitted, the words heavy with the familiar frustration of my amnesia.

Los spoke then, his voice quiet. "Sometimes, Captain... Nasibar... the mind shields itself from

what it cannot bear, or what it is not yet ready to understand.” His own recent experience with returning memories seemed to lend weight to his words.

Bharath nodded sagely. “The path of remembrance is often as winding as any forest trail. Your book,” he gestured towards the iron-bound volume at my side, “it holds many keys. And the heart holds echoes that even a lost mind cannot entirely silence.”

He rose then, a figure of immense dignity despite his age. “Qamdan lies three days’ ride to the east, beyond the whispering peaks. Follow the sun’s descent. But know this, Nasibar of the Al-Raq-Shar: your past is not only behind you, it walks beside you, and it waits before you. What was once whole can be again, but the pieces may not fit as you expect.”

With those cryptic words, he turned and retreated into his living dwelling, leaving us in the clearing with more questions than answers, and a powerful new hint that the Al-Raq-Shar I believed myself to be was perhaps only one part of a much larger, forgotten story. The identity of this Al-Insan partner, and his connection to my lost past, now loomed as another vital piece of the puzzle I had to solve.

## PART 2: UNRAVELING IDENTITIES AND DESTINIES

### Chapter 9: The Journey to Qamdan – The Tree Triplets

"Family is not always of the blood. It is forged in shared hardship, in loyalty given and received, in the quiet understanding that passes between souls bound by a common path. Qudra has shown me many forms of family, some born of lineage, others of choice and circumstance."

– Excerpt from The Book of Nasibar

We left Bharath the Green's living dwelling with his cryptic words echoing in our minds, the ancient Al-Raq-Shar's blessing a tangible warmth despite the uncertainties that lay ahead. He had replenished our supplies and given us clearer directions towards the Whispering Peaks, beyond which lay Qamdan. As we were about to depart the clearing, Bharath raised a hand.

"One moment more, Nasibar," he rumbled. "The path to Qamdan can be treacherous for those unfamiliar with the shifting ways of the borderlands. And your quest... it may require skills beyond those of a warrior, a scout, or even a repentant captain."

He let out a low, resonant call, a sound that seemed to blend with the sighing of the wind through the leaves. From the deeper shadows of the forest, three figures emerged, moving with a fluid grace that spoke of long familiarity with the wild. They were Al-Insan, boys on the cusp of manhood, identical in their lean builds and sharp, intelligent eyes, yet distinct in their bearing.

"These are Yaseen, Yazeed, and Yaseer," Bharath announced, a fond pride in his voice. "The Tree Triplets, as they are known in the hidden folds of this forest. I raised them as my own after they were left orphaned at the edge of my woods many years ago. They know no other family but me, and this forest no other protectors quite like them."

He gestured to each in turn. "Yaseen," the first boy, who had a calm, watchful air and carried a finely crafted bow, nodded respectfully. "His eyes see farther than any eagle, and his arrows find their mark with the whisper of fate."

"Yazeed," the second, whose hands were stained with pigments and who carried a satchel that seemed to bulge with herbs and tools, offered a shy smile. He possessed an aura of quiet knowledge. "His skill with herbs and healing arts is a gift from the earth itself, and he understands the balance of all living things."

"And Yaseer," the third triplet, who moved with a restless energy, his fingers idly tracing patterns on the hilt of a short, curved blade at his belt, grinned openly. "His feet are swift, his mind is

sharp, and he can navigate the most tangled paths, both seen and unseen.”

The triplets, though Al-Insan, showed no fear of me or Qi, likely due to their upbringing by Bharath. Los, however, drew a wary, curious glance from Yaseer, though the Salamandar remained impassive.

“They have never ventured far from this sanctuary,” Bharath continued, his gaze sweeping over the three boys. “But the whispers of the earth tell me their skills will be needed on the path you tread, Nasibar. They have longed for a world beyond these trees, and perhaps your journey is the purpose they have been waiting for.” He looked at the triplets. “Will you guide and aid these travelers on their way to Qamdan, and perhaps beyond?”

Yaseen, the archer, spoke for them, his voice clear and steady. “We are honored by your trust, Elder. We will accompany them and offer what skills we possess.” Yazeed nodded in quiet agreement, while Yaseer’s eyes sparkled with unconcealed excitement.

And so, our party grew. The initial days with the triplets were a period of adjustment. Yaseer, true to Bharath’s description, was full of questions, his curiosity about the world beyond his forest boundless. He peppered Qi with queries about Al-Raq-Shar customs and Los with surprisingly direct questions about Salamandars, which Los answered with a stoic patience that impressed me. Yazeed often wandered off the trail, returning with unfamiliar plants he would meticulously study, sometimes offering them to Qi or me if we sustained minor injuries, his poultices surprisingly effective. Yaseen remained mostly silent, his eyes constantly scanning our surroundings, his movements economical and precise.

Their worth was proven three days out from Bharath’s clearing. We were navigating a narrow gorge when a sudden rockslide, triggered by recent rains, blocked our path completely. The passage was too narrow for me to clear with brute strength without risking bringing more of the unstable cliff face down upon us. Los, for all his regained memories as a captain, had no solution.

It was Yaseer who found the way. After scouting for less than an hour, he returned, grinning. “There’s an old goat track, barely visible, that bypasses the slide. It’s treacherous, but it will take us through.” He led the way, his steps light and sure, guiding our mounts through a path I would have never found on my own.

Later that same day, as we made camp, a shadow passed overhead. Yaseen, almost before any of us had registered it, had an arrow nocked, his gaze fixed on the sky. “Sky-Wyrm,” he breathed. “Young, but hungry. Best we douse the fire until it passes.” His warning came just in time; a lean, serpentine creature with leathery wings circled once, then, finding no easy prey,

flew on. His keen sight had averted a potentially dangerous encounter.

The triplets, orphaned Al-Insan boys raised by an ancient Al-Raq-Shar, each skilled in their own unique way, were now part of our strange fellowship. They spoke little of their origins, knowing only Bharath as family. Their loyalty to the old hermit was absolute, and by extension, they offered it to us, his chosen charges. As we drew closer to the formidable silhouette of the Whispering Peaks, Qamdan, the last known bastion of the Al-Raq-Shar, felt less like a destination and more like another step into a destiny that grew more complex with each new companion who joined my path. The book chained to my wrist felt heavier than ever, its secrets still tightly bound.

(End of Book Sample)