

Chapter 1

The Calamity

THE thunder was so deafening that he couldn't hear anything else. It was not raining, but the lights were sweeping over his face from time to time, brightening up the thing he was doing in the vastness of the wilderness – alone and anxious.

Fardad dug into the earth with his bare hands. His nails were filled with dirt, and some even stuck on his fingers. The ground under his knees was soft, and his knees sank into the ground. He could feel the moisture of the soil seep up through the breathable linen of his clothes and onto the rough skin of his knees. Sometimes he looked up, beseeching Yazdan not to pour rain over him. Fardad didn't know what he was digging for, and he just knew why he was desperate. He felt that this was his calling, and something un-

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derneath was beckoning him, and he just had to dig deep.

His breath was fast and uneven. He was panting, and sweat dripped from his head. There was stress all over his face, and it was like he was in a race against time. He realized only a moment later that he was crying, too. The tears dropped on his hands, made the soil stick on them even more. Fardad realized how gross his hands looked and felt it too, but he had other matters, urgent matters, to take care of—what those matters were, he did not know. He just had to take care of those matters one step at a time. His heart was beating fast, and he tried to calm himself, but he couldn't. There was so much at stake, and it seemed like this was just the calm before the storm.

He knew he was looking for someone in his heart, but he didn't know who it was. Maybe he knew who it was but didn't want to acknowledge it. Perhaps the act of looking for someone, anyone, by digging the earth, especially in a place like this, scared him.

There are only hills and wind-sculpted rocks in the distance. Nobody here to witness his actions. The ground is soft and sandy, but he will feel it when he digs. The ground is still loose in places, and in others, it's firm.

Was it a graveyard? There was nothing but the flat ground around him, covered with a mixture of dirt and sand. Fardad hadn't looked at it at all, but he knew that was the case. His concern was only restricted to what lay six feet under. He was getting close.

The fear became too real for a moment. He felt as though a silhouette had moved in the distance. Fardad was scared to look up and look at it. He knew there was nobody around him. There couldn't be anyone around him, but he was sure there was someone there now. He didn't want to be distracted, but his mind kept wandering away from excavation to curiosity. Was there someone out there? Was he also here for the same thing that Fardad was? His mind kept asking a million questions but came up with zero answers. He just wanted to get this done and over with, but the silhouette was there quietly haunting him. He could feel the presence of someone or something near.

Fardad jolted from his sleep as a silhouette moved across the room.

“Who's there?” he asked, sitting upright.

There was a blur in his memory. The dream and the reality seemed not to have a boundary. They all became a whole, and nothing was left to the imagination when he heard a familiar voice. It was a voice that shook him to the core, and he shivered, surprised, and realized that it was none other than. . . “It's me, Son,” said Kanisha, her voice breaking from all the sobbing.

“Are you weeping for Father?” asked Fardad.

He wanted to cry for his father, too.

“Yes. . .,” she replied, her voice trailing off.

“Please don't cry, Mother,” said Fardad. “I'm sure Father is fine and that he will be back soon. I can feel it in my heart that he is still alive.” Kanisha held up the oil lamp in her hand. Fardad saw tears running

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down her cheeks as rivulets moved over the dunes in a desert. His father's disappearance had been quite disturbing, leaving him and his mother anxious. They both were hoping he was alive and perhaps captured or lost somewhere—anything but death. Fardad kept telling himself that they just had to see his father alive and on two feet.

“He has never been so late in returning,” Kanisha said, sitting beside Fardad and putting the lamp beside his bed. “I can't help but worry about him, and I can't stop worrying about what we will eat tomorrow. We have sold what we could already. Son, what will we do now? Your father is missing, and we have nothing to eat!” “Are you sure, Mother? Is there nothing we can sell off? There must be something. Let's look back at the house after this, and I am sure we can find something,” said Fardad. He became worried too.

“No, there's nothing except that silver cover, remember? What will get that us!” answered Kanisha.

“What silver cover?” asked Fardad.

“The one over the book that's placed on the niche close to the roof? You know about that, son, but that's the only thing we can sell, or we stay hungry.” Kanisha explained.

“I don't know about that at all. You never told me before,” said Fardad.

“I haven't seen it in a long time either. Whenever I try to take it, a black cobra comes out. I can never figure out what that means or why this happens. Something your father may know better. Either way,

we need to do something about the snake before we could sell it,” Kanisha further explained.

“I’ll ask Ukund to come, and we will kill the snake. That should be no problem, Mother. I am here for you!” Fardad reassured his mother.

Kanisha smiled and replied, “My dear Fardad, that would be dangerous. Please be careful, and it means so much to know that you would risk your life for us to take out the snake!”

Fardad then looked up at her with his innocent eyes and said, “Mother, you mean everything to me. You are my world, and I would sacrifice my life without hesitation for you. We’ll get the snake out and then can sell the silver cover. Even if I don’t eat, I can’t bear to see you hungry. Just take it easy!” “My Son, thank you so much. I just hope we find your father too, or at least he comes home. Don’t you worry; my heart tells me he is still alive!” said Kanisha with blurred optimism.

“I feel the same way, Mother. I just hope we both are right. Our house is no home without him! I miss him so much!”

In the morning, Kanisha showed Fardad where the book was placed.

“Your Father placed it here,” she told him as she pointed toward it.

Ukund arrived just then, a friend of Fardad and an apprentice of Fardad’s father. Though Ukund was

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three years older than Fardad, the two were close friends. Ukund would not even think twice when asked by Fardad to help in any matter. Fardad's request was his command, and such was their friendship and loyalty to each other. It was so profound that none could ever break their bond.

Ukund was a friend's friend and will put his life on the line for them. To him, serving Fardad was an honor that he had always upheld. He had a long-standing history with Fardad's family that went back to generations; their grandparents and fathers were best friends. It was about protecting and honoring their bloodlines for both friends. This was why Ukund always considered Fardad's family as his own. Ukund would come to his aid at a moment's notice, and this time, he was there to help Fardad kill a snake that had come between them and the silver cover, which meant their livelihood.

Ukund saw the snake was there for protection and deciphered another exciting discovery. "Maybe your father put it here so nobody can steal his prized possession," commented Ukund.

Fardad's father, Aardburzin, was the only astrologer in the small town they lived in. The town was toward the southeastern shore of the Kamrod Sea but was surrounded by golden sands. He was a wise old man with a powerful personality. He was pretty distinguishable by his white beard and implausible knowledge sources. He was truly a man of honor, owning a truthful, impartial life. Tales of his adventures and his astrological

knowledge were known throughout the lands of Persia. He was known as a living legend, and Fardad hoped to emulate his father someday. Aardbuzin's most prized possession was a silver-covered book, and this book's cover was going to get Fardad's family food on the table.

"I'll climb the ladder. Once I see the snake, I will clamp him and put him in this jute bag." Ukund explained his plan to Fardad. "If it attacks, then I will swing on my side and push it down. You'll have to be ready to smash its head then."

It seemed like a doable plan, but they were nervous. Fardad was relaxed to have his best friend by his side, even though it was not an effortless task for them, but it wouldn't be too hard for them not to accomplish.

Fardad held the hammer bolt in his hand, Ukund climbed the ladder. A black cobra came out as soon as Ukund tried to pick the book. The snake did exactly as Ukund had suspected; he moved on his side and pushed the snake out of the niche through his staff. As soon as the snake dropped on the floor, Fardad smashed its head with the hammer bolt. Kanisha screamed with joy. Finally, the snake was dead, and the silver cover became theirs to sell in the market. Ukund took the book and climbed down the ladder. He removed the dust, and the cobwebs stuck to it. He handed the book to Fardad, who broke the seal on the silver cover. However, the cover wasn't as important as the book's contents. There must have been something there that required protection, but from whom!

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That was the mystery Fardad was thinking about all this time.

They opened the book and found it a compendium of astrological knowledge and secrets. Being Fardad's father's student, Ukund was also well-versed in astrology and astronomy. The two boys spent a long time looking at different pages in the book. They both forgot they needed the food by selling the cover, but the knowledge inside fascinated them, and they wanted to uncover its secrets.

Also, Ukund had brought some food for Fardad and Kanisha. He didn't know they required food. For him, it was only a goodwill gesture toward his beloved master's family and his dear friend. Had he known that they needed food and the reason behind killing the snake was to sell the silver cover, he would have brought more food for them.

As Ukund was leaving, Fardad stepped out too. The two young men started walking toward Ukund's home.

"Ukund, I wanted to ask you something...", said Fardad, his voice trailing off in embarrassment. Ukund was bewildered, as Fardad was usually straightforward with questions and didn't ask like this. Something must be on his mind. They had gotten rid of the snake, but was something else bothering him? That was what Ukund kept thinking about.

"What is it?" Ukund asked, stopping in his tracks.

Fardad stopped too and looked around to see if there was anyone around. He needed to make sure no one listened to their conversation, and there was already too much going on in his mind.

Ukund could tell that Fardad was worried the minute they met this morning. Ukund was good at reading his friend's face, and this time, his expression was more than enough.

"How much would the silver cover on that book sell for?" said Fardad with a sigh.

"I don't know, really, but I'm sure it would bring a good amount. It's much heavy," replied Ukund, matter-of-factly. Ukund was shocked as the book's cover was precious and would make the book incomplete.

Fardad nodded his head understandingly.

"Okay," Fardad said in a small voice.

"What do you need, Fardad?" Ukund asked with much kindness, and he figured Fardad wasn't in the mood to sell it for food.

"Food," said Fardad and gulped.

"You don't need to worry about food," he replied.

"It would be too much Ukund...", said Fardad. The embarrassment in his voice had increased.

"It's just food, Fardad," Ukund reassured. "I'll tell my uncle to provide grains, meat, and fruits regularly. You and your mother will be taken care of. Listen, Fardad, your father was my mentor, and I am his protg. I want to honor him by serving you and your family the best way I can. Your family is my own, so I am

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happy to help. Don't worry about it, dear brother."

Ukund patted Fardad's shoulder.

"Thank you," said Fardad.

"You don't have to thank me. I just want a favor in return, though," Ukund replied.

"What is it?" asked Fardad, his voice filled with confusion now.

"You need to promise me one thing, old friend. And you have to honor this promise till death. You remember that a friend's promise is sacred in our lands, and you are aware of that, aren't you?" Ukund asked politely and as humble as he ever could.

Fardad knew he couldn't turn that request down. Therefore, he nodded his head and shook Ukund's hand.

"I don't want you ever to sell that silver cover," Ukund explained his deal. "I know that whatever your father owns belongs to you, but I don't want you to sell anything that belongs to my master; ever, please."

"I won't, ever. Promise," said Fardad.

"Thank you so much for this. He means a lot to me, and you are his son. I have sworn to protect you all my life, and today, I am shaking your hand, intending to keep this promise. I told your father that nothing will ever happen to his son as long as I am alive. I will never let even a scratch come onto you," said Ukund, smiling. Fardad smiled too. The two parted ways, and each walked back to his home. Fardad walked back with heavy sighs of relief that they didn't need to worry about food and that he had to keep his promise.

He would never sell the book or let anyone touch it without his permission.

That night, Fardad dreamed of his father; he was near the ancient ruins and in much agony. Fardad saw him in pain and crying for help, and there was nothing but dry sand around him. Fardad woke up from the disturbing dream, sweating all over.

His thoughts went to the dream he had dreamed of a night before. Could they be connected? He couldn't help but think and wish that wasn't the case. "No, they can't be connected," he whispered to himself in a barely audible voice. The ground in my first dream was covered with wet soil while Father seemed to be stranded in a deserted area with nothing but sand around, he thought. He kept thinking if that was a sign or a calling to find his father. Fardad knew that the ancient ruins were on the western shore of the Kamrod Sea, much further than that. The land was barren in that area, and nothing but pointy, prickly desert plants grew there. It would not be a peaceful journey by the slightest margin. He reiterated his dream to his mother in the morning—the one he had dreamed that night only and not the one before that. He didn't want to make his mother worried until he knew for sure that there was a need; even then, he wished he didn't have to make his poor mother worried. Fardad also told her he meant to look for his father. With his whereabouts

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unknown, something had to be done. He had to find his father and make sure he was alive.

Kanisha's heart felt as if being clutched in a tight fist, but she helped Fardad prepare for his journey. She packed some dried apricots and candied orange peels for him in a wrap made of wheat straws. She poured some water for his journey in a bottle made of sheepskin. She gave him a long and warm embrace while trying hard to hold back her tears.

She gave her son an important message: "Son, I understand you are traveling distances to seek your father and ensure he's alive. I don't know whether he is alive, but I want you back in one piece. I can't lose any more of my family. If your father has gone forever, and you disappear, whom will I have with me? Please, my boy, return to your mother. I love you so much; I will wait for you right here and pray for your well-being. I trust you will not engage with anyone. Keep a low profile, and I hope you find what you seek."

Fardad was also in tears because he felt it might be the last time he would see his mother. He was venturing a journey he may never return from, so he embraced her tightly and kept saying that he loved her. He had entrusted Ukund to stay and look after his mother in his absence. Fardad promised his mother. "Dear Mother, I promise you I will not disappoint you, and we will meet again. It may take some time, but I assure you I will return to you in one piece. Your prayers will help me and guide me through all the obstacles ahead. Ukund here will help you with whatever

you require. He wanted to come with me, but I can't leave you alone. Our enemies could reach out to you if they have my father. At least, Ukund will make sure you're safe. I will see you soon, Mother, and I love you so much."

Ukund and Fardad exchanged a few words between them before the latter headed out searching for his father and whatever other truths he wanted to discover. Ukund said, "My brother, why don't you let me come with you. I will have one of my friends look after your mother. Otherwise, out there, you will be all alone with no one to watch your back. I want to come with you, and your mother will not be left alone to fend for herself. Please, let me come with you!"

Ukund's pleas weren't enough to convince his friend. Fardad said, "Ukund, my dear brother, you know I don't trust anyone but you with my mother. I understand you will worry about me, but her prayers will protect me. You know her prayers are powerful. They will never leave me, and I will meet all challenges. She can only keep praying for me if she is safe and looks after me. You are like her son, and my father would want no one but you by her side in my absence. Do it for him, if not for me. Do not worry about me. I will return here safe and sound."

Ukund was in tears and said, "I will miss you so much, my friend. You have mentioned your father's name and entrusted me with this responsibility, and I will uphold it and see she remains unharmed and looked after. Take care, my brother, and may you

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succeed!”

Both Fardad and Ukund embraced each other and shook each other’s hands. Fardad gathered supplies for his expedition and ensured that he was well-stocked with everything he needed. He was feeling goosebumps the entire time because this would be the most arduous trip of his life. In every inch of his bones, he thought danger awaited him, but he also felt capable of handling the challenge. After all, his father’s life was at stake. He knew his father would sacrifice his life for him, so he would do the same as his son if needed.

Fardad prepared his horse and left the same day.

Fardad headed toward the Alburz Mountains, a mountain range running at a distance of some kilometers away but along the entire length of the southern shore of the Kamrod (Caspian) Sea. Fardad rode his horse between the water’s body and the mountain range. As the horse needed rest, he took a few breaks but quickly moved on ahead. There was no time to waste because he was very concerned about his father. He could feel the inner strength from his mother’s prayers gushing through his veins. He would place his hand on his heart and could feel her mother praying for him. It was surreal for him, as he thought she was always with him in spirit. At night, he stopped close to the sea and dipped his toes in the water as he stood watching the reflection of the moon in the sea. It was a night of the half-moon. For a moment, Fardad

felt he saw a reflection in the water of a giant bird. But as soon as he looked up at the sky, there was nothing but emptiness and a half-moon. There weren't even any stars that night. If it weren't for that half-moon, it would have been pitch black, almost as dark as his dreams of late. He knew he was getting very close to his destination. So far, he had been safe and faced no problems. He was ready to take on everything because he knew many prayers were with him. For the time being, it might just be the calm before the storm.

Later that following day, Fardad arrived at his destination. As he moved closer to the ancient ruins, he found himself at the same spot where his father was present in his dream. With every step he took toward the ruins, he felt an unearthly presence. Could it be his father sending some telepathic message? He couldn't guess but followed his instincts.

Once again, there was a blur in his memory. The dream and the reality seemed not to have a boundary.

Fardad found the ground exceptionally soft at that spot. His heart skipped a beat as he looked down and saw a specific area covered with dirt.

This time, there was a blur in his vision. Tears had welled his eyes, making it difficult for him to see. He knew something or someone was down there, and he was hoping it wasn't the dead body of his father. He would die the minute he saw that. He constantly prayed that his father was safe. He knew his mother would break down if she found out that her husband was no longer alive. Nonetheless, Fardad had to take

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his chances.

He had no shovel, so he got down on his knees and started digging with his bare hands. The dirt filled his nails and stuck to his hands, but Fardad carried on. He felt the moist soil beneath his knees. The moisture seeped up through the ground and onto the rough skin of his knees. As he dug deeper, he was getting more nervous. He was trying to hide negative thoughts and hoped to see his father alive and waiting to be rescued from wherever he had been left. Even if he were within an inch between life and death, Fardad would give his life for his father. He had not come this far for the bad news. The intensity of fear could be seen on his face, and he wished this was just a nightmare and not a reality. Unfortunately for him, he had seen all this before in his dream and now lived it. This was the moment of truth, and it beckoned him to dig deeper.

Fardad's heart was pounding. His thoughts rushed toward what the worst scenario could be, what it was. "No, no, it cannot be," Fardad told himself. But he couldn't help but remember his dreams—mixed images from both dreams. It was frightening and exciting at the same time. He was living his dream and perhaps minutes from making a discovery that might change his life as he knew it.

Fardad focused on digging the earth and pushed away all the unwanted thoughts with the hope he had in his heart, hoping he had carried with him from home and had survived on during all the time he had spent being away from his village and in search of his father.

He had come here on a mission, and he would not even think of going back without finding the truth about his father's whereabouts. Even if his father was potentially dead, he should know the truth, so he could find out who was responsible. He didn't even want to think that was a real possibility, but he kept digging for the truth. The time had arrived, and whatever he was searching for would finally be revealed. His dream didn't show him what he was supposed to find, but he knew something was there, and it was calling to him. He realized a moment later that he was screaming as he was digging. His eyes were red, and tears streamed down his face and on his hands, making the dirt stick on them even more. His screams echoed in ruins ahead and the surrounding emptiness. There was not a single being there beside him. Something inside told him he might just be digging out his father's lifeless body, but he didn't have the guts to feel that for sure. He knew he could be surprised, but he just wanted answers, and the more he would discover, the more he would be shocked.

Fardad's scream halted in a shock when he had come upon a torn piece of clothing. It was apparent that there was more of it underneath. Fardad dug further and faster. He had already recognized the piece of cloth as that of his father's tunic. Now he could also smell the rotten flesh. Fardad's hands began shaking, and his breath grew heavy and uneven. His heart was trembling with fear, and he had to get a hold of himself because his father might be buried underneath the

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rubble. To his shock, his eyes finally saw what he had wanted to see for a long time. There it was, the lifeless body of his father left like it was nobody's business. He broke down and screamed out so loud after seeing it. He could feel his mother crying, and he felt helpless. He wished he had never come there because this was too much for him to handle. He kept staring at it, hoping it was someone else, but it was his famed astrologer father, Aardbuzin. He was left to rot six feet under, and someone had to pay for it. He knew he would not return unless he found out what happened to his father and why. After staring at the body and crying for several minutes, he removed him from his apparent grave.

He finally dug out his father's body. The world revolved around him in circles as he dragged the body out of the mixture of dirt and sand.

After Fardad had cried and grieved by his father's side for a while, he noticed that the body was still recognizable because of the cold weather. He finally put the pieces together of how his father was killed. It was brutal, and it seemed like he had been buried only two nights ago. His father's neck was slit, and crusts of dried blood stuck to the wound. As he continued to examine the body, Fardad also noticed that his father's right hand was clenched in a fist. It seemed like he was hiding something within his fists. Fardad unclenched his father's fist and found a ring of

gold. The ring looked expensive, but Fardad spent little time looking at it. He put it in his pocket and, after somehow placing his father's stiff body over his horse, pondered over the arduous journey that lay ahead of him. The trip wasn't over yet, and the road ahead had even more challenges. He wasn't returning home without answers. He thought about his mother and was satisfied that Ukund was there.

Those people who killed his father mercilessly could come after his mother and Ukund had been warned of this rare possibility. Hopefully, he was prepared to take any action if that happened and protected his mother. He was instructed to take his mother far if there was even a sense of danger. He was even thinking of how Ukund would react, knowing about his mentor's demise. He would break down just like Fardad did because they were very close. He wondered how he could send a message but knew it would not be possible. He had to move further to unravel the mystery behind his father's murder. Whoever was responsible had to pay for it, and he would make sure that the culprit paid it with their blood. Fardad would never forgive murderers because it took a lot inside you to take a life, and this was unacceptable beyond a measure. The ring might have meant something, and it was probably calling out to Fardad in his dream. That must be something his father wanted to protect, and now he made it his duty to protect it with his life.

The sun was setting in the distance. It was getting cold and dark, and Fardad wasn't feeling his best af-

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ter discovering that his beloved father was now dead. His father's body was dry, stiff, and cold and looked like a wooden log on the horse's back. This was too much to handle, and he never imagined not being able to say goodbye to his father but only saw him lying lifeless in a dirty grave. There was work to be done, and Fardad moved ahead. He searched the area for clues and spent a couple of hours surveying the ruins. He didn't know where else to go until he knew why his father was out here and what he was looking for. He didn't leave any stone unturned until he tired of looking for clues. Nothing was to be found, and he knew he couldn't go back home with any answers, but he decided that there was no point staying near the ruins. He wanted to share his findings with Ukund, no matter how heartbreaking it would be for him. His mother would be shocked beyond belief to see his father slain on his horse. Perhaps he was at peace but didn't leave behind any of that with his family. There was no point going elsewhere without figuring out his father's activities, and for that, he needed to talk to Ukund. Hence, he mounted his horse and made the trip home, knowing he was not bringing back good news. The truth needed to be told. He had to face the grief of his mother and best friend and let them process everything, just as he had.

Fardad galloped as fast as possible and reached back to his village by the following evening. His mother was waiting by the door as he rode his horse closer to it every moment. Her heart kept beating faster as he

saw her son riding toward her. She was happy to see him alive, but what was he carrying with him? She pondered over this dilemma quite a lot.

She did not see anyone besides him, which meant that his father had not been found. If he was, then he might be captured or just missing. She kept hoping it was of the possibilities and intensified her praying. Soon, she realized that her deepest and darkest fears were being realized. The concerned face was dwelling into shock as she recognized the lifeless body strapped to the horse. Kanisha screamed a silent scream as she figured the dead body from afar. She broke down into tears. Fardad climbed down from the horse as soon as he got to his home and put the finger on his mother's lips. Fardad wasn't ready for everyone to know of the calamity that had befallen them. He whispered in his mother's ears, requesting her not to scream. She could grieve in silence because something was wrong. His father was murdered for a reason, and he needed to find answers. At this point, all that remained was putting more pieces of this puzzle together. For that, he needed his best friend Ukund, and he had to break the bad news to him.

Fardad visited Ukund later in the night. Ukund came back with Fardad to his home.

“We need to put his body in Dakhma (Tower of Silence) where vultures come,” Kanisha said. Fardad

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was silent for a while, and then he looked at his mother and friend and said: “No, we can’t do this.”

“What are you talking about? Don’t lose your mind.” Ukund said cryingly. “I am fine. Don’t worry.” Fardad said.

“Murderers are out there. We do not know yet who had murdered whether he was alone or with a gang, whether he was a serial killer, a psychopath, or a friend. If we send the body to Dakhma, many questions would be asked by priests and people. Maybe, the people think we had committed the murder. We do not have any proof yet, and the murderer could be living in our village.” Fardad said further.

“He is right!” Ukund endorsed.

“We need to inform the Satrap; only he has the resources to investigate the murder and get the culprit. Until then, we hide father in our house. We can decide what to do with the body later; once we get the answers, we need to put the pieces of the puzzle together.”

Therefore, Ukund and Fardad buried Aardburzin in the house’s corner. The tears would not stop falling from Ukund’s eyes as he buried his beloved master with his best friend. However, he had to respect his friend’s request and keep the death and subsequent burial a secret. Ukund, too, requested Kanisha not to reveal the death of her husband to anyone in the town. They all had to stay quiet until the mystery behind the astrologer’s death was solved. He also needed to know the ring’s purpose clenched in his father’s fists.

Fardad showed Ukund the ring he had found clenched in his father's hand. Ukund examined it. It was a gold ring with a thick band and a large emerald stone fixed in its crown. There were also some numbers engraved on the inner side of the band.

Fardad looked closely and jotted down the numbers on a paper, and Ukund recognized them as a magic square sequence of Planet Saturn. They exchanged a look. They both knew the ring did not belong to Aardburzin. The things were getting muddled, and it seemed as if his father was on to something deeper and darker than he could imagine. There was a reason he was murdered in cold blood—he knew things that could not be let out in the open. It seemed like a web of lies was to be unfolded in front of Ukund and Fardad.

Fardad had never felt so lost before in his seventeen years of life. That night, the night he buried his father, he visited the local temple. Fardad sat in front of the sacred fire of Ahura Mazda. He asked for guidance to solve the mystery of his father's death. He also asked God to take care of his mother and help her as she grieved for her husband. This was a tough time for the family as they had lost the family's patriarch. Fardad looked up to his father and knew that he loved him and his mother very much. Did he give his life to protect his family? Fardad kept on wondering to

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himself. His father was someone who would go to any lengths to save them, and Fardad knew it.

Fardad took a stroll on the outskirts of the village afterward. He looked around and wondered what his purpose in life was. All his life, he had never asked about it before. He had expected his father to take him under his apprenticeship, but that was out of the question now. Instead of making him skilled in one specific field, his father had made sure that Fardad learned a bit of everything. Nobody had understood his father's thought behind the method he had applied to Fardad's schooling, and some had even criticized it, but Fardad knew his father saw for him. He trusted his father, but it was unfortunate that the man with the vision was now gone, and Fardad was left to his own devices with no guidance. No one better could mentor and guide him after his father had gone. Even Ukund didn't know everything from his father because he was also a student and an apprentice. Ukund was disappointed because his hero had gone, and there was so much more he desired to learn from him.

Fardad's father was a successor in a family that had given birth to some of the best astrologers of Persian history. Fardad, on the other hand, possessed no desire at all to dwell in the mystical realm of astrology as his father did. One of the major reasons to support this desire of Fardad was the simple fact that he had absolutely no inclination towards transcendental art.

However, a deeper reason behind it was that he did not want the stars to have any type of influence on his life whatsoever. He wanted to be the sole master of his life such that only his actions and decisions would decide upon the outcomes of his life. He was the last among his family, and he had married the daughter of one of the most excellent clairvoyants of his times. So Fardad's paternal family were all gifted astrologers, and his maternal family was expert clairvoyants. Fardad considered himself none of those, as he had not even reached the level of either of his parents. They were gifted individuals, and now he took care of his mother. He would die for her and make sure she lived on. His mission was to make sure she stayed protected at all costs.

Fardad went home late at night. His mother had fallen asleep already. He looked at her and felt immense sympathy for her in his heart. She was still young, and she was only fifteen years old when she married his father. She had her whole life ahead of her, but sadly, she would spend it all alone now. For this very reason, Fardad took an oath with himself that he would do whatever it took to keep his mother happy and ensure his father's legacy was secured for generations.

Fardad kissed her forehead and went to lie down on his bed. Sleep didn't come to him until late. As he tossed and turned in his bed, he wondered what he would do for the coming day. So much was going on in his mind, and he couldn't be comfortable. Even

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though he was lying in the comfort of his bed, he was very uncomfortable knowing that his father's killer was out there. He knew he had to find out what had happened to his father. His father deserved justice, and revenge was a dish best served cold. Vengeance was on his mind, but he also worried about his mother. Both thoughts had left him very restless. Visions of his father's lifeless body kept haunting him. There was a purpose behind that dream and had more to do with recovering his father's body. Something was wrong, and he desperately wanted to understand it. He could not just let it slide and move on. The entity that took his father's life could also come after him and his mother. Both of them couldn't be on the run for the rest of their lives, so he wanted to face the enemy and make sure he got answers from him. There was a lot of work to be done, and time was running out.

In the morning, Fardad woke up with the decision to inform the region's Satrap of his father's death.

In the Persian region, Satraps were like governors responsible for looking over the everyday matters of their region's people. Darazdast, the Satrap of Persia's northeastern province, was a man who was very welcoming toward all the people in his region, or so Fardad had heard. Fardad hoped Darazdast would help him too. He could use all the help he could get.

Aardburzin was an important man, and the news of his death or at least that of his disappearance would

spread, eventually. Fardad didn't want that news to reach the authorities through gossip, and he found it best to inform them himself and that too in person.

Fardad also wanted to catch his father's murderer by surprise. The murderer could be anyone from the village, even his neighbor or relative. As the villagers traded a lot, it was hard to keep a tab of everyone's movements. There was a lot of mystery surrounding the murder; someone must have answers. Fardad had to talk to the Satrap, hoping that he could reveal clues about the man who took his father's life.

Aardburzin wasn't the most famous man either; being honest with his work had earned him quite a few enemies. With great power comes great responsibility. And, with great responsibility comes great power and enemies. Fardad wanted to catch that one enemy of his father, who had gone above and beyond in his revenge, by surprise by involving the authorities.

Though Fardad knew his decision was for the best, he felt an uneasiness toward it in his heart. He made his way to the villa of Darazdast after a couple of days, at least. Maybe I'll dream a dream where it would become clear to me if I should go there or not, he thought. Doubts and fear were clouding up his mind as he kept searching for answers. Whoever wanted his father dead was hiding a dangerous secret. What that secret was, Fardad was very curious to find out. Fardad didn't consider himself a clairvoyant even though

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he had always had dreams that seemed to come true. He could see the future even though it was always very muddy, just like the one that led him to the ruins where his father lay buried. He never shared his dreams with anyone else either, and they were always too complex for him to decipher and understand. They never seemed about anything important either. If he couldn't understand them, it would be tough for anyone else to do the same.

As a kid, most of Fardad's dreams had been about the deaths of the pets of people he knew. He never explicitly saw anyone's pet die in his dream, but he would see them flying in the air, above the clouds. They'd be flying even if they weren't a bird. After seeing many dogs, cats, and sheep fly in the air, Fardad started ignoring his dreams after ruling them out as nothing but an absurd phenomenon. Even though he saw ruins in his dream, he never dreamed of his father buried under the dirt.

He dreamed of many structures too. One of these structures was a castle with eight gates. The gates were all black. These gates led to the same massive hall with an empty throne. The throne waited for Fardad. Though Fardad knew well in his heart that the throne was waiting for him to sit on it, he was always too scared to do it. Every time in his dream, he would look for his father to seek his approval to sit on the throne but never found his father to be there, or even anywhere. His father could become a ghost, and he never knew. As an astrologer, his father knew

too much of things, and perhaps quite a lot of that knowledge might have been deemed too knowledgeable by one of his enemies, and that meant that his father had to pay the price for knowing a little too much. He dreamed of other tall structures too. One of these was a city as a tall tower. Arches as windows, one upon the other, were built upon as a tall tower. It seemed like a city carved inside a mountain.

Other structures seemed to be three-pointed when seen from a side or any of its four sides. These were three and varied in their heights. Fardad never understood that dream, and he had never seen such structures anywhere, nor had he heard of them.

The relatives on his mother's side of the family seemed to predict all sorts of future happenings, and that too so clearly. Fardad had only met them once or twice when he was a child. They were so confident in themselves, and it had much inspired Fardad. They talked too freely and with much conviction that so-and-so in the family would become rich or that so-and-so needs to sacrifice some lambs to Angra Mainyu to ward off the calamity that would strike them. However, his mother could not predict his father's demise despite having the ability to see the future. Despite having a clairvoyant mother, Fardad could not see it coming. This was a bit too uncomfortable for Fardad if he could see it. "Who knew what the future held?" he always asked himself. That would be too scary for him to comprehend, and that was why he decided not to overthink it. However, sometimes, he wished he

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could see the future in his dreams to stay prepared for all challenges that he would face in his life.

He remembered asking them how they knew what would happen, and they often replied, “We saw it in a dream.”

“I want to see the future in my dreams too.” Fardad had excitedly expressed his wish.

“If You will, you will,” one of his mother’s uncles had replied.

“How would I know its future and not something from the past?” Fardad had further probed to satisfy his curiosity.

“When you will, you’ll know,” that same uncle had answered with a smile.

Yet, Fardad had never known it. He had continued to dream absurd dreams but had never known if they were in the future or if it was something his mind made up on its own. Even when he had understood his dreams about the dying pets, he had not paid them much heed as he never wanted to appear a clairvoyant who gave grave information of pets dying instead of critical news. It wasn’t an excellent quality to have, and Fardad had given up the whole idea and even his wish to become a clairvoyant. The dreams in which he had seen his father in pain and himself digging a grave were the only dreams Fardad had ever taken seriously, and they were also the only dreams he had paid the attention they deserved. He was in no mood to see visions of more people dying, except if the individual was responsible for his father’s demise. Those dreams had

brought discomfort to Fardad's heart. He had once wanted to be a clairvoyant, and he had tried to be one too, but his clairvoyance seemed to have only worked for something that had brought him an unexplainable amount of pain.

Fardad regretted having those dreams. He hadn't had them on purpose, but he wished he didn't have them at all.

If he hadn't had those dreams, then he would still be hopeful that his father lived, and he would still be optimistic about his father's return too. He wouldn't have to see his mother grieve, and he wouldn't be suffering himself, either.

Fardad sighed. This wasn't the time to indulge in what could have been or what should have been, he thought. What had happened had happened already, and it was time to decide what he should do now. He couldn't change the past, but he still had time to change the future.

Fardad waited to dream of any dreams that could guide him toward his course of action, but his sleep was as dark as his dreams of late. Maybe my heart is uneasy because I'm going to search for my father's murderer. Could it be that I'm scared for my own life? Fardad questioned himself. No matter what, I need to do what's right, and since I haven't had a bad dream about it, maybe this is the right thing to do, Fardad decided. He decided to leave the following day. He had to find answers as he had waited too long.

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Fardad made his way to the villa of Darazdast, the Satrap. It was located near the southern shores of the Kamrod Sea, between the Sea and Alburz mountain range. Fardad had passed by the nearby city on his way to the ancient ruins just a few days back. He reached the villa the same day he set out on his new journey. The villa was built on the hills. Fardad wondered when it was erected since he didn't remember it being there when he had visited the nearby city a couple of years back with his father. It didn't seem like an old villa, anyway.

It had huge wooden doors fastened by iron claddings. Two guards stood on each side of the gate, and there were guards stationed at every corner of the villa as well. As he reached the gate, which was at least three times as tall as Fardad was, he found them open for his welcome. Though the guards didn't ask him anything, Fardad still told them he was there to see Darazdast. The guards didn't seem to hear him, and they seemed to know already, though.

Fardad's jaw dropped, and his eyes bulged out of wonder as he set his sights on the majestic garden right at the entrance from the tall gates. Flowers of every color on the heavens and earth bloomed inside it. A narrow stream of water flowed through the garden over a path made up of glittering stones. An arrangement of trees and statues added another layer of glamour to the garden. The garden seemed to be constructed by

Parinaaz; it was too beautiful to be made by humans. The magnificence and beauty had engulfed him, and he was completely mesmerized by them.

The fragrance from the burning incense added a beautiful mistiness to the air over the garden. The fragrances from the incense mixed in with those of the flowers and created an overlap of fragrances that had the power to stun one's senses. Fardad's heart was jolted with the pleasing and intoxicating ambiance, so much so that for a moment, he forgot his purpose of traveling to Darazdast's villa. He would love to have a villa like this someday, he thought to himself. As soon as Fardad remembered his business in that place, he also realized that his purpose was, in fact, much bigger than he had initially thought. It wasn't just about his father's brutal murder; it was about the fact that a murderer was on the loose in the region and could harm other people too. He had been distracted by the beauty surrounding him, but he knew that this wasn't an ordinary visit. He was there to find answers and felt that the man he was about to meet knew them better than anyone else. He could lead him to the killer of his father and allow him to gain justice, even if it was bloody.

He looked at the garden longingly one more time, as if trying to take in all its beauty in his eyes, and walked toward the passage on the right side of the gate. He entered a narrow passage that led toward a big hall that Fardad thought could fit his entire village. The hall roof was covered in glittering mirrors and gems,

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with an enormous chandelier hanging from its center. The chandelier is more significant than my house for sure, Fardad thought. This man was living a life of luxury and perhaps deserved it. At that point, if this Satrap could provide him with the answers, he would be indebted to him. He wanted nothing more right now, and he hoped this visit would be very fruitful.

The Satrap, Darazdast, sat on the other side of the room on a throne. On both his left and right sides, bureaucrats sat on chairs of less grandeur with guards standing by behind them. Everyone's eyes were set on Fardad. They all waited anxiously to know what this young man was here for. They wondered what questions he was seeking answers for. There was an etiquette that Fardad had to follow as the Satrap was a well-respected individual of the land. Therefore, he had to be treated with the proper respect, and Fardad would do precisely that.

Fardad walked close to Darazdast and bowed to him. He had never been so close to someone so high in authority before, but Fardad was a man of manners. "May the glory of the Satrap, Darazdast, be high and his loftiness prevailing," he said. Darazdast smiled. He nodded his head ever so slightly.

Darazdast was a middle-aged man with a sturdy build and much of his face covered with a big mustache and a thick beard. Finally, words were spoken after the greetings were out of the way.

“What brings you here? What ails you? What pains you?” asked the man sitting to the left of Darazdast.

“Satrap Darazdast, my father has been murdered,” Fardad stated.

Darazdast’s expressions changed to that of somberness. He leaned forward while sitting on his throne. At that point, he turned into a sympathetic father figure to Fardad as he wanted to comfort him and help him find the answers.

“What happened, son?” he asked.

“My father was traveling on state duty. When he didn’t return home for many days and didn’t write to inform of his delay, I began my search for him. . . .” Fardad’s voice trailed off as his eyes scanned the room. He wanted to make sure nobody caught the harmless lie, and he had to reveal just enough so that he could get the answers he came for. He didn’t want to appear someone who dreamed of actual events, and it was the first time it had happened to him. Nevertheless, all eyes were still on him. Darazdast brought his attention to Darazdast again.

“Go on.” The man to the left of Darazdast urged him. “Continue your story. Tell us how we can help you.”

“I found my father’s dead body buried near the ancient ruins,” added Fardad. “His throat was slit.”

“Is there anyone you suspect?” asked Darazdast, leaning back on his throne again.

“No,” replied Fardad, plainly. “However, I’m afraid

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that there is a murderer on the loose who can harm others too. This is why I came to warn you because I don't want more of us to get hurt."

Darazdast seemed to understand and think over Fardad's words.

"Don't worry, son." He assured Fardad. "We will find that murderer and crucify him in the middle of the town center. Thanks for bringing this to our attention, and we will be on high alert from now on." The bureaucrats all nodded upon listening to Darazdast's words.

"What was your father's name, if I may ask?" asked Darazdast.

"He was Aardburzin, the famous astrologer," replied Fardad, lowering his gaze as he remembered his father.

He couldn't see the shadow that passed over Darazdast's face upon hearing Aardburzin's name, but Fardad didn't fail to notice as Darazdast's voice became heavier right afterward. His father was a widely known personality, and his loss would affect anyone, and someone of Darazdast's stature was feeling his loss too. His father was a man important to several people.

"Don't worry...son," said Darazdast.

He dismissed Fardad with a signal of his hand. Fardad took a seat in the area specified for civilians present in the court. From his seat, Fardad saw and heard the man on the left of Darazdast call the Pasbaans and ordered them to investigate the murder and look for the murderer. He also gave them some other instructions that Fardad couldn't hear.

The man on the left then got up from his chair and walked toward Fardad, and Fardad stood from his seat out of respect.

“Son, you’re to stay here until the mystery around your father’s death is resolved and the murderer caught,” he said.

“But—” Fardad began but got interrupted.

“No buts. You’re a guest of the Satrap himself, and his orders have to be obeyed. Your life could be in danger, young man, so it’s best to accept his offer,” the man added. Fardad wanted to speak again. He wanted to tell this man that his mother was all alone in the village, and her safety was more important than his, and he would feel more at peace if she was here too.

“It might take a while, but it doesn’t matter. You’re to stay here, and that’s the Satrap’s wish and order,” said the man.

He briefly smiled and left without giving Fardad any chance to speak.

Fardad sighed. He had no other choice, it seemed. His mind kept wandering off to his mother because he didn’t want to lose his only remaining parent.

