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The light was good for escape today.

It filtered through the iron bars like golden paint splashed across a dirty canvas, and if I stretched high enough, I could feel its warmth on my fingers. I could close my eyes and imagine that I was outside, face in the sun, free.

But I wasn't.

Instead, I was encased in crumbling gray granite and cold stone floors.

If it was up to the prison warden, I'd never feel the sun on my face again.

If.

I picked up my rock that I had spent weeks sharpening to a point and etched a single line in the stone above my head. *Three hundred and sixty-four.*

I'd been here almost one year.

One year since I'd heard voices different from the guards who took my waste bucket every evening, the other prisoners' sobs as they dwelled on their unfortunate fate, or the warden's endless painful interrogations. One year since I'd tasted my grandmother's earthy mut-ton karahi and felt the heat of those spices on my tongue. One year

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since I'd embraced my father and told him that everything would be okay, that I would be coming home.

And when I thought of the boy who had stolen all that, I wanted to tear down every stone that surrounded me and bury him beneath them. Let him feel the crushing weight. Let him feel the shame that shouldn't have been mine to bear. Three hundred and sixty-four days of rage brewing inside my veins.

Three hundred and sixty-four days of plotting my escape.

I gauged the position of the sun through the iron bars, calculating the hour—noon. It was almost time. I pressed the tip of my finger into the sharp point of the rock, a huff of relief spilling out when it broke the skin and a thin bead of blood trickled down. It was ready.

I was ready.

Weeks of planning, of listening to the whispers of the guards, of knowing the warden would be away—now was my chance.

My empty food pan waited below the open slot in the metal door to be refilled. I crouched low beside it, the rock poised in my hand.

Today, I would be free. I would reunite with baba.

And then I would wreak hell upon the ones who put me here.

Steps thudded down the hall, bouncing off the walls of the prison. The rusty squeak of a door flap opening. The bang of the ladle against a corroded metal dish. The greedy slurps of other prisoners receiving their rations.

Thump, thump.

I could measure how close the guard was to my door by the sound of his footsteps. I closed my eyes, imagining I was on the training field, sword in my hand, my opponent drawing closer.

Thump, thump.

With each pause as he doled out the prison rations, I exhaled.

I bit my lip hard to distract myself from the dread coursing through my body. If I focused on being afraid, I would never leave this place, and all my plans and plotting would come to nothing.

He stopped. The crack in his knees echoed like thunder as he

crouched down. Then his arm shot through the opening and the battered metal ladle upended the foul slop into my bowl with a slap.

I nearly cried out with surprise and pressed my hand to my mouth. He was quick, but I was quicker. At the last second I grabbed his rough sleeve, yanked it back through the gap, and smashed his face into the door.

His head hit the metal with a satisfying smack, and he wrenched against my grasp. I struggled to hold him, pressing my feet against the door for leverage and fumbling with the sharpened rock. I managed to push his sleeve up and stabbed the point into the fleshy part of his forearm, dragging downward to his hand. The guard let out a choked scream and thrashed, desperately trying to jerk free. I wrapped my fingers tight and pulled his arm with all I had, slamming his face back into the door.

Again.

And again.

His sounds grew more garbled, a suffocated whimper. My arms shook as I continued, sweat dripping down my neck from the exertion. I focused only on the singular violence of what I was doing, of what I needed to do to get out of here. Blood dribbled from the small square opening like crimson rain.

Soon, he grew silent, and stopped completely. My fingers trembled as I released him. His body flopped down, lifeless, hitting the floor with a wet thud. The metallic tang of fresh blood nearly overwhelmed me, and for a minute I pressed my face to the cool stone floor, letting the stale air of my cell flow through my lungs.

But soon the other guards would notice his absence.

I sat up and pushed my arms through the opening of the door, running my hands along his torso, feeling his blood-soaked uniform until I found the metal loop of keys attached at his waist. I unhooked them, ready to combust from elation. Finally, *finally*, one of my plans was succeeding.

I was going to get out of here. I was going to see my father again.

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The rusty keyhole took a few tries before it unlocked, the door snapping open with a click. I deliberately looked away from the bloody body as I grabbed his legs and dragged him back into my cell.

Looking at him meant I might feel regret.

The number of times the guards had hauled me out of my cell to be tortured meant I had no room left in my heart for regret. Not for them.

Not for anyone.

This time, I was walking out of my cell on my own terms, with my own two feet, stained with the blood of the guard I had just killed.

I glanced down the hall, making sure it was empty before stepping out and heading toward the door at the end. It was eerily silent. As if all the prisoners on my wing had collectively held their breath at my audacity in killing a guard.

I glanced up to find a pair of dark eyes staring at me from the barred window on one of the doors.

It would only be a matter of time before the alarm was raised.

I had to move.

I ran blindly, my bare feet slapping against the cold floors, sharp spikes of pain running up my thighs from the impact.

I could nearly taste the fresh breeze on my tongue, smell the salty scent of the ocean on the wind. Possibility buoyed my steps—that I would actually make it out of here alive, that I would see my family again.

That I would make *him* pay for what he did to me.

Cells flanked my sides and prisoners pressed their faces against the iron bars at the top of their door. They shouted and banged with empty ration pans. Soon it was as if a hundred of them were yelling at once, and I couldn't tell if they were jeering or celebrating that one of their own had made it out.

If the warden were here, I might be more concerned, but with warden Thohfsa gone, security would be more relaxed, the guards lazier.

This time, I was going to get out.

I unlocked the door to the outside, scrambling with the keys in my hand, the metal clanging like a terrible wind chime.

Nothing could have stopped me as I stepped into the open air of the prison yard, and into my freedom.

Nothing, except the row of guards waiting outside with the prison warden, their blades pointed straight at me.



“How fortunate that I returned early,” came Thohfsa’s nasal drawl as she walked toward me.

She wore her usual plum sherwani, the long coat billowing behind her, her thick hair braided in a crown on top of her head. Her mouth was a menacing slash across her face, and the deep lines on her cheeks stood out in the midday sun.

The bottom dropped out of my stomach.

I couldn’t turn around—all that awaited me in that direction was my cell. But I couldn’t fight my way out, not when I had a meager pebble as a weapon, and they six sharp scimitar blades.

I wished I had one of my old throwing daggers, so I could at least put up a decent resistance, but they’d taken those from me when I was arrested. I stared at the scimitars pointed in my direction and my heart pounded against my chest. Normally, I welcomed the thrill of battle and swordplay.

But Thohfsa’s smile was worse than any sword.

The acidic sting of bile hit my throat. At another prison, I might have been executed for this attempt. Here, I would pray for death.

Because Thohfsa wanted her prisoners to live. She wanted to make them suffer.

I knew that after three hundred and sixty-four days.

“Looks like I will be executing the first-floor guard for letting your poor attempt at escape proceed.”

“Too late,” I retorted, calling across the yard. “I already did it for you.”

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Thohfsa huffed out a surprised snort and a few of the guards gasped at my audacity, but I didn't spare them a glance. I focused all my anger on Thohfsa, rolling the sharp stone in my hand and running over my slim options.

Thohfsa turned to the men around her. "Give the prisoners on the first floor an extra ration. They deserve it after alerting us to Dania's escape. And prepare the interrogation room for her."

"No need for interrogation, I'd hate to spend more time with you than necessary." My voice was so hoarse from disuse, it sounded like a sad wheeze, but it didn't stop my retort. "I'd rather keep company with the fleas in my cell."

Thohfsa laughed, a cruel bark she often gave before enacting a punishment.

I could trace the marks she had made on my skin—as if the scars on my body created a map of my own disobedience. Just the thought of them flooded me with renewed rage. I wasn't going to just stand here and let her arrest me again without putting up a fight. I gripped the sharpened stone so hard my fingers felt numb. Thohfsa tilted her chin up, looking at me like I was a slug underneath the heel of her boot.

Fuck it. If I was going down, I would take the bitch with me.

I rushed at her, stone in hand, scream ripping from my throat.

She didn't move, except to flutter her hand at the guards flanking her.

A sharp pain exploded in the back of my skull, and blackness consumed me.



My skin burned from the fresh welts coating it. Every attempt to move brought renewed waves of agony so strong I threw up the non-existent contents of my stomach. After retching I tried to push my body up from my cell floor.

I could barely drag myself, not when the worst of Thohfsa's torture

centered around my limbs. The smell was sharp and acrid—there was nothing like the scent of your own charred flesh to remind you of your position in life.

They had dumped me here after Thohfsa was done beating me, and I laid facedown on the cold stone, wishing I could turn to stone myself. Then I wouldn't have the constant companion of this pain. I wouldn't have the familiar ache of not knowing what became of my family after I left.

Of not knowing what happened to my father, my grandmother, even my cat.

I had been accused of murder. Treason. That would have tainted them all. I rolled my tongue across my teeth, tasting the bitter anger that had lived with me every day since I had been charged.

Since I had been framed for a crime that had never been mine.

Now, because of that, I had a family with no honor. My father likely couldn't operate his smith anymore, and my grandmother's friends would have turned away from her in disgust. I wanted to tear out my hair at the thought of them going through all that without me, and there was nothing I could do to help.

Why hadn't the emperor just executed me? I exhaled slowly, stopping myself from spiraling. I needed to focus on surviving. Just being alive, one more day, despite the pain, despite the darkness.

Escaping. Seeing my family again.

Revenge.

A soft scratching jolted me from my thoughts.

I turned my head, pain splintering through my brain at the movement. I looked around my cell for the source of the sound, the moonlight pouring through the bars in the window above, creating shadows on the floor.

But nothing was there. My cell was empty except for a few loose bits of straw and my waste bucket.

Could it have been a rat?

My belly had a loud reaction to that, and I eyed my empty food

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bowl. A rat for dinner would be something different, at least, though I wasn't sure I could catch one in the state I was in.

I heard it again and stiffened. It was undeniable, a scraping against the stone.

It bounced off the granite walls and surrounded me as if it were echoing inside my head. I pressed my hands to my ears, wondering if I'd finally gone mad from all this.

But the sound was still there, insistent.

Louder.

I forced myself to sit up, even as blackness crept into the edges of my vision. A wave of nausea hit me and I struggled to stand, my legs giving way beneath me. Bracing myself against the floor instead, I held my breath trying to listen.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

It was coming from underneath me, a relentless tapping. I pressed my cheek to the cool granite and a slight vibration rippled across my face. I jerked back.

Scratch, scratch.

It seemed to be coming from the opposite corner of the room, near the window—a sliver of space in the stone that was no more a window than a cat was a lion. I crept slowly toward that corner, the vibration intensifying with every inch I moved.

The noise went from a soft tap to an all-out thud, a cracking against rock. I yelped and scrambled back, every cut and burn along my thighs screaming in torment.

The ground burst open, fragments of the floor flinging every which way, the sound like splintering earth.

I cried out and wrapped my arms around my head as debris flew in my direction, and small shards of stone peppered my skin. A large piece of rock bounced off my shoulder and I picked it up, arming myself.

This was clearly no rat.

Like the squeezing of mango flesh out of its skin, a human head

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erupted from the ground. I suffocated a surprised scream and hurled my rock, every thought emptying from my brain as I stared at the face of another person staring back at me from the floor of my cell.

“Ah, shit,” the girl said as she lifted her eyes around the room.

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