

For She Is Wrath



Emily Varga



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One



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 mutton 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.”

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 lay 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

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

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 to look around the room.

Two



“What are you?” I whispered as a girl about my age lifted herself from the dark hole where the floor had once been. “Are you a ghoul? Finally come to devour me?”

“I’m not a very cunning ghoul if I had to get imprisoned myself to steal your soul.” Her eyes roved over me, a frown deepening her face. “And you look awful. You’d think I’d find healthier humans to feast on.”

She was shorter than me, with curly dark hair that hung wildly about her shoulders, dirty and matted like an animal. I pet my own and wondered what I looked like after so many months. In the early days of my imprisonment I’d braided it down my back to keep it manageable, but now I’d given up trying to look presentable. Caring about my appearance meant I had someone to look presentable for, instead of four vacant gray walls.

The girl’s cheeks hung from her, like the flesh had been sucked from her bones. But if the rest of her looked dead and ghoulish, her eyes were like a crackling fire.

“I really thought I was close this time.” She raked her filthy hands over her face.

I glanced at her fingernails, thick with dirt. “You’re digging out of prison,” I said slowly.

The girl stopped pacing and turned to look at me. “Quick one, aren’t you?”

My face twisted into a scowl. “Forgive me if the sight of another prisoner breaking through the floor was startling.” I was surprised I still had the capacity for sarcasm. “It’s been a year since I’ve talked to someone other than Thohfsa or the guards.”

I wondered if I’d finally lost my mind and was sitting here talking to myself, imagining another person.

She looked at me, assessing. “Try three.”

Three years. I exhaled through my teeth. Three years was a long time to be alone, surrounded by stone walls and the smell of human filth.

But soon enough, that would be me.

I glanced up at her through my tangled hair. This girl had managed to get beyond her prison door, something I had only done once and it ended in utter failure.

“How did you manage it? Escape?” I gestured to the mess she’d made of the floor.

“Well, I didn’t quite do it, did I? I ended up here instead of outside. A year of digging and I’m in an even worse cell than the one I started in.” She sniffed the air. “With a worse smell too.”

I laughed, the sound cackling out of me and going so unnaturally long I was sure I appeared unhinged. I cleared my throat and gestured to my wounds. “I wasn’t expecting visitors. Otherwise, I would have cleaned up.”

The girl grimaced. “Thohfsa do that to you?”

“I didn’t do it to myself, did I?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’re the one that tried to escape, aren’t you? You nearly got me caught! The guards searched all other prisoners for weapons after they recaptured you.” She tilted her head. “Did you really think you could just run out of this place in the middle of broad daylight?”

“Just like you thought you could dig your way out, but instead you ended up here?” I shot back.

“Fair enough.” She stretched her arms up and looked around again. “Your cell is much smaller than mine. What did you do? Kill someone you shouldn’t have?”

I grimaced. “Something like that.”

More like he was already dead at my feet.

Footsteps echoed down the hall—a guard on his usual patrol. I sat up, ignoring the ache in my shoulders as I did so.

“Be quiet, or they’ll find you,” I snapped at her, my voice low.

We sat in silence as the echo of his booted feet sounded between us. When he had moved past, the girl raised her brows.

“Another prisoner would give me away instantly,” she whispered back. “Why don’t you call out to them? Collect the extra rations they provide to turn in escapees?”

I returned her astute gaze. She was right that I could get rewarded for turning her in—that’s exactly what happened with me. But I would be damned if I subjected another person to Thohfsa’s punishments, no matter how much my stomach growled.

But more than that, an idea was percolating in my head, one that grew stronger with every passing moment she was sitting here.

“I’m not interested in betraying another prisoner,” I said honestly. “Not after my last escape. You want to try to get out of here? Be my guest.” I gestured to my fresh injuries. “They’ll do the same to you.”

She smiled, but it was more of a suggestion on her face, as if she didn’t really know how to smile anymore and was trying it on. I understood that—I’d forgotten how to smile too.

“What is your name?”

I straightened. No one had asked for my name in the past year.

Names had meaning. Names were power. I knew that if my name had been different, if my family had been different, I might not be in this prison at all. But *here*, we were all the same.

We were all nothing.

And my name had no meaning behind these stone walls.

“Dania,” I answered. “My friends call me Dani.”

Not that I had any anymore.

“I’m Noor.” She sat cross-legged on the ground. I glanced at the small opening in my door. There wasn’t another guard patrol for a few hours, but I didn’t know if Thohfsa was keeping a closer eye on me after my escape attempt.

“And they won’t catch me,” she continued. “I *will* dig my way out of here. I am going to escape.”

Her words were so sure, so *bold* in the middle of my dark chamber, that a startled laugh escaped me.

The idea that had begun to take over screamed louder as I looked at the gaping hole she had made in the floor.

“It would be faster to dig with two people.” I said the words slowly, as if they were just coming to me, as if I didn’t plan them.

This girl had dug here, and if she had dug here, she could dig out as well.

We could dig out.

Her eyes narrowed on me, so shrewd I felt as if my very bones were being examined.

“Yes, it would be.” She cocked her head. “I’ve been digging for a year. By my estimation, your cell is on the other side of the prison. I must have gotten turned around when they brought me in. I’ve been digging the wrong way.”

“Ah.” I leaned toward her, keeping my face a mask of calm, as if I casually welcomed visitors to my dingy cell all the time.

“Don’t they notice you digging?”

She shook her head. “I’m always back to put my waste and food bucket out. I’m never gone more than a day—I don’t really have enough candle left for the light.” She waved her hand over the bag of supplies she had dumped on the floor. A small stub of wax and a dented tin cup spilled out from the opening.

My eyes widened at the two foreign objects. I’d never been given so much as a spoon to eat my lentils.

“How did you get those?” I never thought I’d have wonder in my

voice as I looked at a rusted tin cup, but it was funny the things I missed when they were taken away.

The girl grinned, but no humor lit in her eyes. “You really want all my secrets, don’t you? The guards are very interested in why I’m here and what I have to offer them. Sometimes they give me things in exchange for information, or with the expectation that one day I will return the favor.”

“Well, they certainly don’t offer me any kind of favor.”

“Didn’t you just kill one of them?”

I scowled. “What did you do that was so special?”

Noor leaned back on her hands. “I was an assistant to a chieftain who cultivated Emperor Vahid’s crops of zoraat.”

I sucked in the air against my teeth, surprised she’d said the words so simply.

As if she hadn’t just admitted that she helped grow the entire source of the emperor’s power—the coveted seeds he’d bargained for with a djinn to take over the empire. Djinn were powerful magical beings who did not part with their gifts lightly and with whom you did not want to bargain if you could help it. They didn’t even exist in our world, but in the world of the unseen.

“My chieftain stole a large amount of zoraat and hid it, along with a small fortune,” she continued.

I whistled low. Ever since Vahid struck a bargain with a djinn for those first magical seeds, they had been guarded intensely—after all, they were how he had forcibly annexed the five kingdoms and the northern tribes under his new rule. Zoraat had given him healing magic, an endless food supply, and an indestructible army. But Emperor Vahid solely controlled that power, and he wasn’t willing to share.

“I can’t imagine the emperor took kindly to *that*.”

“No.” She looked away, her eyes shadowed. It was a moment before she spoke again. “The emperor killed my chieftain for his betrayal.” She swallowed, a harsh smile twisting her lips. “And Emperor Vahid

didn't believe I knew nothing about where he had hidden the seeds, so he had me tortured and thrown in here."

I grew still. "And did you? Know where he had hidden them?"

Another shadow of a smile passed her lips. Instead of answering me, she swept her gaze around the room again, lighting her eyes on the tally of days I had etched into the wall, a macabre countdown to my death.

"Comfortable lodgings, don't you think? This is the ends of the earth, a barren island where they throw those they don't want others to find."

I sat up straighter at my unanswered question. Access to the emperor's stash of djinn magic was considerable power.

If Noor possessed it, she could control anything.

The kingdom. The emperor. The world.

As if Noor could read my machinations, she focused those sharp eyes on me once more. "Why are you here, Dania? What did *you* do?"

I swallowed. The truth felt hard to say out loud, even though it repeated through my mind on a daily basis. Saying it out loud meant it was real, and that I hadn't just imagined it. The lump in my throat grew thick.

"I was tricked. Accused of murdering a chief from the northern tribes." I kept my eyes down, studying my hands, trying not to think of the burned husk of a body that had sat at my feet the day they arrested me, devoured from the inside out.

"Murder and treason."

Noor whistled. "And did you do it?"

An echo of my own question. Two could play this game. "As soon as you start telling me the truth, I'll start telling you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "If you're going to join me, I need to know whether you're likely to stab me in the back."

"After a year in here, I would do anything to escape. But to answer your question, no, I didn't kill him."

I clenched my fists. I wasn't the one who'd killed him. I knew exactly who had, and why.

I repeated their names nightly.

Especially the one person I never saw coming.

“I was . . . betrayed. Framed. I thought I could trust someone, but it turns out he wasn’t on my side.”

Those words stung the most.

More than admitting I’d been outwitted.

It was the sheer fact that I’d been betrayed by my best friend, my first love, and that was the reason I was rotting alone in a dark cell, on a forgotten island.

Mazin had been the one to put me here.

Even just thinking his name had anger thrumming through my blood like the gathering of water behind a dam threatening to break loose. Soon, it would. But today, a slow exhale calmed the rage simmering beneath my skin.

“I can’t do much about it, not when I’m in here, and they out there.”

Noor toyed with the edge of her filthy kurta, the dirt coloring the garment so that it was crusted and gray. “And what if you weren’t in here anymore?”

I closed my eyes at her words, at how they latched on to my heart with sharp hooks and refused to let go. “If I wasn’t imprisoned anymore, I . . .”

I thought of my family, of my father who must be worrying about me. Then I thought of those who’d framed me.

Mazin to whom I’d entrusted my whole heart, for him to skewer it beneath his scimitar. Darbaran, the head of the palace guard who’d arrested me. Emperor Vahid who’d used me to get rid of a powerful political opponent without a thought about my life or my family. I curled my bruised and bloodied hands into tight fists.

If I were free, I would make them all pay the price for what they had done.

They would feel every bruise, every moment of humiliation and betrayal.

But somehow, I couldn't say it. Not yet. Not when I'd only repeated these words to myself for the past year.

"I'm not sure."

Noor gave me a look as though she didn't believe me, as if she could see every thought I'd had for the past three hundred and sixty-five days and was aware I knew exactly what I would do as soon as I broke out of here.

She chewed the inside of her cheek.

"I want freedom," she said finally. "I want it so badly I can taste it. But I also want retribution. Emperor Vahid stole my entire life from me. And I want it back."

Her words were vehement, and suddenly we weren't just two girls sitting in a prison cell together with no hope of a future. For a moment it felt like we might have the power to actually do something.

"And you're right," she said finally. "Digging on my own takes an awful long time."

I stilled, afraid to move.

"It would be much faster with a partner." She glanced over at me. "Though you'd need to recover first." She reached forward, as if to touch me, and I shrivelled back in surprise. I hadn't been touched by another human in kindness since before my arrest.

But instead, she extended her hand. I glanced at it warily, before reaching out in return. Her fingers curled in mine and we shook hands, sealing our bargain.

"Together, it won't take us another year to get out of here," I said, my voice as hopeful as the rising pressure of possibility in my chest.

She nodded, and that spark of hope spread through me.

"But you didn't answer my question. If you were free, Dania, what would you do?"

Mazin's face filtered through my mind, the one who had thrown me in this hell and left me here to suffer. Who had abandoned me to the royal guard, and served the emperor above all else.

But there was someone more important than revenge.

Holding my baba's newest blade in my hand.

Sparring with him in the practice yard.

Hearing his low chuckle when I bested all the other students.

Sharing a meal with him in the low light of his smith.

All the things I had longed to do came rushing forward, as if the dam inside me had broken loose and it wasn't anger that released, but pure longing.

“If I were free, I would find my father.”

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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