

DESERT GHOST

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Fire in the Sand.....	3
Chapter 2: Breath of the Desert	16
Chapter 3: Ashes Under Neon	29
Chapter 4: Echoes of a Camel.....	39
Chapter 5: Sandstorm Deals.....	51
Chapter 6: Running with Shadows.....	67
Chapter 7: Prayer and Betrayal	81
Chapter 8: Hunted and Hunter.....	93
Chapter 9: Dunes of Betrayal	106
Chapter 10: Mirage of the Ghost.....	119
Chapter 11: Tower of the Dead.....	131
Chapter 12: Honor Among Dust.....	152
Chapter 13: Whispers in the Wind.....	172

Chapter 1: Fire in the Sand

Suhail walked alone through the city of Al Waha. The night was warm, and neon lights made the streets look alive. He wore an old brown jacket, dusty at the sleeves. His black hair was short, and his beard was trimmed neat but rough. His eyes were dark and always looked tired, like he was carrying something heavy in his chest.

He passed shops selling sweet bread and tea. Some boys laughed near a fruit stall, throwing dates at stray cats. Suhail looked at them for a moment and felt a small smile on his lips, but it left fast. His boots made a soft sound on the road.

His home was in the old quarter. He liked to walk at night because the city felt softer when most people slept. He often spoke to himself on these walks.

“You will eat, you will sleep, and tomorrow you will find work,” he whispered. “One good thing must happen. Just one.”

Then he smelled smoke. At first, he thought maybe someone was burning trash. He turned his head and saw red light

dancing in the sky behind him. He felt it in his bones — this was not trash, this was a real fire.

He ran back the way he came. His boots hit the ground hard. His heart beat faster than his feet. He pushed past two men arguing over tea cups and heard one shout, “That’s Suhail! He was there!”

The alley opened into a wide street where a building was burning. Flames climbed up broken windows. Ash flew in the air like black snow. People were shouting. Some pointed at Suhail. One woman cried that her brother was inside.

Suhail looked at the fire, eyes wide, chest tight. He had never seen a fire so big up close. He stepped forward but a man grabbed his arm.

“You! Why did you do this?” the man yelled. His breath smelled of old meat.

“I didn’t! I just came back! Let me help!” Suhail shouted back, pulling away.

But the crowd was growing. A boy screamed, “It’s him! I saw him before the fire!”

“No, boy, you didn’t!” Suhail shouted, but no one listened.

Behind him, he heard sirens. Bright blue lights bounced off the walls. Three police cars screeched to a stop. Heavy boots ran on the road.

A young officer with short hair and wide eyes pointed a gun at Suhail. "Hands up! On the ground!"

"I didn't do this! Listen to me! I can help!" Suhail said, but hands grabbed him. Hard hands pushed his face to the ground. Gravel bit his cheek. He felt cold metal close around his wrists.

He tasted dirt in his mouth and spit it out. Over his head, the sky was red and black from the flames.

"Stay down! Stay down!" a voice barked in his ear.

They pulled him up and pushed him to a car. His heart pounded so loud he thought it would break his ribs. As they drove away, he saw the burning building in the side mirror. People still pointed at him, some with fear, some with hate.

He leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes.

"Why, God? Why now?" he whispered to himself.

The car smelled of sweat and plastic. The young officer beside him kept staring like Suhail was a beast. Suhail wanted

to scream that he was innocent but his throat felt dry, as if the fire had burned his voice too.

They reached the police station fast. Big cement walls, grey paint peeling near the doors. They dragged him inside. The cuffs cut into his skin. A bright lamp above a metal table hurt his eyes. They pushed him into a chair.

A fat officer with a crooked nose came in. He dropped a folder on the table and sat across from Suhail. His breath smelled of old coffee.

“Suhail bin Rashid,” the officer said slow, like tasting each word. “Good man from the dunes, they say. Yet here you are.”

“I didn’t do it,” Suhail said. His voice cracked but he kept his eyes strong.

“Always the same words. We have you on camera.” The officer opened the folder and pulled out photos. He flipped one toward Suhail. It was blurry. Just a shape near a building entrance. Flames at the corner.

“That’s not proof. That’s just me walking,” Suhail said. He tried to keep his voice calm but inside he was screaming.

“You were near the fire. You left and came back. Many eyes saw you,” the officer said. He pushed another photo closer, but it was no clearer. Just a ghost in a jacket under street lights.

Suhail looked at the photos and then at the man. His heart hurt. He thought of his mother’s face. Her dry hands on his forehead when he was sick as a boy. She always said, *Fire keeps us warm but never trust it too much*. She died when he was twelve, deep in the desert, because they had no doctor. He had buried her with his father under a lone tree, far from any road.

He looked at the walls of this cold room. He smelled stale sweat and cheap soap. He closed his eyes for a moment and spoke to himself inside his head.

Mother, look at your son now. They say I burn houses. But I never lit a single match.

The fat officer snapped his fingers. “Stay awake, desert boy. You will sign this paper. Confess, and maybe your jail cell has a fan.”

Suhail’s mouth felt sour. He shook his head. “No paper. No lie. I will not sign.”

The officer leaned back and laughed, short and hard. He motioned to a guard. Two guards came in and pulled Suhail to his feet. They dragged him to a cell down a tight hall.

Inside, a metal bunk and a toilet waited for him. The bars locked shut behind him with a loud click.

Suhail touched the cold bars and pressed his forehead against them. His wrists were sore. He whispered so only he could hear, "The desert heat follows me even here. I escaped it once. I will escape it again."

He lay on the hard bed, staring at the ceiling. He tried not to think of the burning building. He forced his mind to remember dunes, wind, and his mother's singing voice. Outside, the city lights of Al Waha shone bright, but inside, Suhail felt buried in darkness hotter than any sun.

A small bug crawled near the drain in the corner of his cell. He watched it move and said softly, "Little bug, you can go anywhere. Maybe carry my wish outside. Tell the wind Suhail is not guilty. Tell the sand to wait for me."

His eyelids grew heavy but he did not sleep. The fire's glow danced behind his eyes each time he blinked. Somewhere

deep inside, a voice kept whispering, You will not break. You are Bedouin blood. You are your mother's son.

He turned on his side and stared at the wall. The cement was rough under his fingers. He pressed his palm flat and breathed slow. He thought of the dunes outside the city, how they moved and changed shape but never died. He missed the way the desert smelled after a short rain. Here, the air smelled like sweat and old metal.

He whispered to himself, "Al Waha was just tents once. My father told me how old men tied goats to sticks and prayed for rain. Now they build towers of glass and call it a city. But sand is under every street. It waits. It remembers."

Suhail sat up and rubbed his eyes. The bed was too short. His feet touched the cold floor. He looked at the door and wondered if anyone believed he was innocent. Probably not. He had no lawyer, no brother to come shouting for him. He was alone but that did not scare him. He was used to fighting alone.

From the hall, he heard soft footsteps. Two guards were talking in low voices. Suhail held his breath and leaned close to the bars. He could hear just enough.

One guard said, “They say it was Al-Shabah. He paid boys to set the fire.”

The other guard answered, “Don’t say his name here. He has ears in the wind.”

Suhail’s back went stiff. Al-Shabah. The ghost. Many talked about him in tea shops. Nobody saw him, but everyone feared him. Some said he could vanish in a sandstorm. Others said he bought police and judges with gold coins and sweet promises.

Suhail clenched his jaw. So this was bigger than him. He was just a tool to cover someone’s crime. He spoke inside his head, *So you hide behind your shadows, Al-Shabah. But I will find you. Even the ghost leaves footprints.*

The guards walked away. Their keys jingled and doors squeaked open and shut. Quiet returned. Suhail lay back down but sleep stayed far. He talked to himself again, low and slow, so the walls would not echo.

“Mother, I wish you were here to hold my head in your lap. You would say ‘Patience is better than anger, my son.’ But I don’t want patience now. I want my name clean. I want to stand in the sun and not hide my face.”

Hours passed. The small window above him showed nothing but a grey wall. He counted his own breaths to keep calm. He thought about the goat he once had as a boy. It used to follow him around, chewing his sleeves. Simple days, simple heart. This city turned simple things into lies.

His stomach growled. They gave him cold bread and old water. He chewed it anyway, thinking, *A hungry man cannot fight*. He pushed the tin plate aside and wiped crumbs off his beard.

His mind ran wild again. He remembered sitting with old Bedouins by a fire, hearing tales of Al Waha's birth. How tribes moved from dune to dune, fighting heat and hunger. Then oil came, towers rose, and everyone wore shiny watches but still feared sand in their shoes.

A laugh slipped from his mouth, quiet but real. He thought, *We think we build strong walls but the desert always finds a crack. Sand and secrets always slip through.*

A rat squeaked under the bed. Suhail lifted his legs and let it pass. He sighed and spoke to the rat's shadow, "Run fast, my friend. You have no chains. I envy you."

He heard the night guards changing shifts. Boots scuffed the floor, metal doors groaned. Someone coughed near his door. Suhail sat up. Through the small window in the iron bars, he saw a young guard, no more than twenty, thin face, big eyes like a goat startled at dawn.

They stared at each other. The guard shifted on his feet, looking left and right. He had a bruise on his cheek, maybe from an older officer's fist. Suhail raised his chin a little, silently asking, *What do you want?*

The boy guard pressed a finger to his lips. He pulled something from his pocket, wrapped in cloth. He held it up to the bars. Suhail moved closer, slow so the cameras wouldn't catch him moving too fast.

Inside the cloth was a small iron key. Simple, rough edges. Suhail's heart jumped in his chest but he kept his face calm. He whispered, "Why?"

The boy's lips trembled. He whispered back, "I have a sister. I know you did not light that fire. He... the Ghost... he pays good men to burn bad places. I heard them. I swear."

Suhail nodded once. His throat felt dry again. He took the key without touching the boy's skin. If anyone saw, the boy would lose more than his job. He might lose his tongue.

The boy stepped back, eyes wide, breathing fast. He whispered, "When you run, run far. You never saw me."

Suhail closed his hand around the key. It felt heavier than a stone. He wanted to thank the boy but words felt useless. He only said, "Go now. May your sister always be safe."

The boy ran off. Suhail sat on his bed, key hidden in his fist. He looked at the cracked ceiling and let out a shaky laugh. He thought, *Mother, you said God sends help in strange ways. I guess tonight help wears a young guard's scared eyes.*

He tucked the key inside his waistband. He lay back but sleep was useless now. His mind raced ahead, planning, counting, measuring steps to the door. He whispered old desert prayers, the kind his mother used when storms came without warning.

He remembered once getting lost in a sandstorm as a child. He thought he would die. He closed his eyes then and let the wind push him. When he woke, he was under his father's cloak, warm, safe. His father told him, "A man who knows sand knows his way home."

Now the storm was made of lies and police walls, but he knew his way home was through truth. And maybe a little luck. He laughed at that thought, a real laugh that startled the rat back under the bed.

The cell felt smaller now because hope made it tight. He wanted to punch the wall, to shout, but he forced his breath slow. One wrong noise, and the plan was dead. He listened for every sound — the guard's radio crackle, the keys of the sleeping sergeant down the hall, the buzz of the old bulb above his bed.

He counted heartbeats. He flexed his fingers. He hummed an old tune his mother used to sing while washing clothes by the well. It calmed him enough to stop shaking.

He whispered, "Soon I will stand in the street again. The city will see I am not the fire. I am the storm that puts it out."

He thought about Layla Khalil, the rich man's daughter. He had never met her but knew her face from the news. Now she was caught in this too, somewhere out there in the city's tall buildings and dark corners. He promised himself he would find her. If he saved her, maybe he could save himself too.

He turned on his side again, curled around the key like a snake guarding its egg. He closed his eyes and for the first time in days, he felt a bit of sleep come to his bones. The darkness inside his head was softer than the cell walls.

Outside, dawn touched Al Waha's roofs with light pink and soft gold. Inside, Suhail dreamed of dunes and wind and the taste of freedom waiting just beyond the next locked door.

Chapter 2: Breath of the Desert

A loud clang broke Suhail's thin sleep. His eyes shot open. The door of his cell moved just a hair, enough to make the lock rattle. He pressed his back to the wall, listening. At first, there was silence, then voices shouting far down the hall. He heard a bell ringing fast and a guard yelling for backup. He felt the key hidden under his shirt dig into his skin.

He took a deep breath and spoke to himself, "Now or never, Suhail. You are Bedouin, you know how to run." He pulled the key out, fingers trembling just once before he forced them steady. He pushed it into the rusty lock and twisted. It turned stiff, making a soft click. He pushed the door, and it opened enough to squeeze through. His heart was loud in his ears.

In the hallway, red alarm lights blinked. He saw no guards near his cell, but footsteps thudded from somewhere close. He walked fast first, then ran when he reached the end of the corridor. His bare feet slapped the cold floor. Each step pulled a prayer from his chest, but his eyes stayed clear.

He turned a corner and saw a back door with an old sign above it. He pushed the door open and stepped outside into the early dawn. Cold air slapped his face and woke every cell in his body. He didn't stop to feel relief. He looked right, then left, and picked the path behind the station where the shadow of the big wall gave him cover.

A high fence blocked the way but Suhail didn't slow. He grabbed the rough metal, pulled himself up fast, and threw one leg over. He felt metal dig into his calf, but he didn't care. He jumped down the other side and landed on his side, rolling on hard dirt and sharp stones. The dry riverbed caught him like an old enemy. Dust filled his mouth. He spat once, pushed himself up on hands and knees, and crawled behind a broken concrete pipe.

He checked his arms. Small cuts and scrapes but nothing deep. He pressed his palm to his side where the fence tore his shirt. Warm blood touched his fingers but not too much. He whispered, "Good enough. Keep moving, desert boy."

He rose to his feet and peeked over the pipe. Behind him, he heard men shouting at the fence. A dog barked, angry and hungry for his neck. He crouched low, feeling the riverbed curve behind old stores. He followed the dry channel, stepping over empty plastic bottles and an old shoe half

buried in mud. His chest burned from running but he smiled to himself. The air tasted like dust, and to him, that meant freedom.

Ahead, the dry riverbed ended near a bridge. He climbed out on his stomach, pushing through dry weeds. His clothes were dirty, his hair stuck with sweat. He knew he looked like a stray dog, but that was good. Nobody sees a stray dog in Al Waha.

He crossed under the bridge and reached the edge of the city's heart. He smelled fried bread and old spices carried by the morning wind. The souk was waking up. Shopkeepers opened metal doors, kids swept dust off front steps, and old men argued over tea and card games. He pulled his torn shirt tighter to hide his chest and wiped sweat from his brow.

He joined the moving people like a drop of water in a river. Nobody noticed him. He walked behind a woman balancing baskets of herbs on her head. Her baby slept on her back, mouth open, tiny hand curled in her scarf. Suhail breathed in the noise and smell, telling himself to stay calm.

His eyes jumped from face to face. He watched for uniforms, for eyes that looked too sharp. Once he thought he saw a policeman at the far end, so he turned quickly into a row of

stalls selling cheap toys and old books. A boy selling mint tea tried to offer him a glass but Suhail just shook his head and kept walking.

He moved deeper into the souk where the shadows were thicker. A butcher lifted bloody knives behind a counter full of goat meat. A tailor sat cross-legged, mending a long dress with red thread. Two cats fought over a fish bone by a garbage can. For a moment, Suhail felt almost normal, like a man running errands, not a man running for his life.

He paused near a fabric stall to catch his breath. He leaned against the wooden post and let the crowd push around him. He spoke low so no one heard, "I need shoes. And water. And a place to hide my face. One thing at a time, Suhail."

As if the city heard him, an old woman in a dirty black dress appeared beside him. She smelled like old bread and smoke. Her eyes were sharp, hidden under heavy eyebrows that met in the middle. She grabbed his sleeve. Her grip was stronger than he expected.

"Son, son," she hissed close to his ear. Her breath made him flinch. "You run from something big, yes?"

Suhail stared at her cracked lips and wrinkled cheeks. He wanted to pull back but something in her eyes held him still. “Leave me, old mother. I have no coins for you,” he whispered.

She laughed, dry and quick. Her missing teeth showed. She squeezed his arm harder. “The sand knows secrets, boy. The sand watches you now. The Ghost wants your head but the desert wants you free.”

Suhail’s heartbeat stumbled at the word Ghost. He tried to pull away but her nails dug into his skin. “How do you know my trouble, old woman?”

She leaned closer, her nose almost touching his cheek. Her eyes flicked around, sharp as a bird’s. “Go east, past the spice men. Turn left at the olives. Find the man with no nose. He sells shoes. He owes the dunes a favor.”

Before he could ask more, she let him go and stepped back. In one blink, she was gone, swallowed by the moving people. Suhail turned left, right, then left again. She was nowhere. He ran a hand over his face and muttered, “Crazy witch. Or maybe a wise one.”

He moved the way she said, weaving through sacks of cinnamon and baskets of green olives. He spotted a short man with a wide belly and a flat space where his nose should be. The man barked prices to two young girls who giggled at him.

Suhail walked up, eyes down, and said in a soft voice, “I need shoes, uncle. I have no coin but the sand asks you.”

The man’s head snapped up. His nose hole flared like he sniffed a hidden wind. He looked Suhail up and down, saw the dirt and blood, and nodded once. He pulled a pair of old sandals from under his stall and shoved them at Suhail’s chest.

“Walk fast, boy. The Ghost’s dogs sniff the market today,” the man muttered. He pushed Suhail away without another word.

Suhail slipped the sandals on, feeling the soft leather bite into his scraped feet. He mumbled thanks to the man but did not stop. He melted back into the souk crowd, feeling stronger with each step that didn’t burn his skin.

He turned corners without thinking. His hands brushed hanging carpets and fresh dates. His ears caught curses,

songs, and prayers all mixed in the city's breath. He liked it. He felt alive again.

Inside, he spoke to himself in his head, soft but firm. "I have feet, I have a heart, I have my mother's strength. The fire did not eat me. The city will not break me. I will find the truth. I will find her. I will find him."

He saw a clear water jug outside a small café. He stepped up, took a clay cup, and drank deep. The water washed dust from his throat and some fear from his mind. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and forced himself not to look back down the street.

His eyes stayed ahead, past the lanterns and the tangled ropes of the souk stalls. He knew the city wanted him lost, wanted him crushed under lies. But he had sand in his blood, and the sand was patient. It did not forget. And neither would he.

He turned down a quieter lane, pretending to admire baskets of oranges piled high. He needed to hide his face. He spotted an old brick house with laundry hanging above a narrow yard. Shirts and long robes danced on ropes tied to wooden poles. He looked around. No one was watching too close. A cat slept on the warm stone steps. Suhail walked under the line and tugged down a dark brown jacket, rough but clean. He

pulled it over his shoulders fast. He felt safer with the dirt on his old shirt hidden under new cloth.

Next, he needed something for his face. He bent to pick up a thin scarf that fell from the same line. He wrapped it around his neck then pulled it up over his nose. He glanced at his shadow on the wall and nodded to himself. Now he looked like any trader or driver. Not like a man wanted for flames and lies.

He walked back into the busy lane. His eyes kept moving. He saw two policemen near the bread stand. Their radios buzzed with voices barking orders. He heard his own name once, clear as a slap. Suhail froze for a second, then forced his feet to move slow. He kept his head down, acting like he studied the ground for lost coins.

He slipped behind a line of crates stacked with dry spices. He could smell strong cumin and sharp pepper. His nose burned but he stayed hidden. He pressed his back against a wooden door and counted the sounds. Boots on stones. Radio static. Men's low voices. He whispered in his mind, stay calm, old fox, they see noise, not truth.

When the footsteps faded down the other side of the market, he let his breath out. He pushed the door behind him and

found it open. Inside was a storeroom full of cloth bags and broken baskets. He sat on a bag of cardamom pods and let his heartbeat slow. He rubbed his fingers together. They smelled like desert dust and now like the rich spice in the air.

His thoughts jumped like wild goats in his head. He asked himself silent questions. Who burned that house? Why him? Why the name Al-Shabah? He remembered stories from when he was a boy, old men warning children not to say that name at night. He shook his head, angry at the fear crawling up his spine.

He touched the wall beside him. Cold and rough. He pushed his forehead to it and whispered, "You fool, Suhail. You trusted city men. Now see where trust brings you. You must think like sand now. Move quiet. Cut sharp. Find truth under all these pretty lies."

He stayed in the dark store a little longer, listening to market life outside. A man shouted about fresh fish. A woman laughed with her friend. A donkey brayed and someone cursed it. The normal city noise gave him strange courage. He was not alone in the desert anymore. This city was a maze but he had feet and eyes. He would not die here like a fly on sticky paper.

He stood up and pulled the scarf tighter over his face. He pushed the door open again and stepped into the sunlight. His eyes squinted at first but adjusted quick. He moved away from the main street, slipping through an alley behind old spice shops. Shadows covered him from the sun. Flies danced over rotting peels tossed behind the stores.

He kicked a stone with his toe and watched it skip ahead. He whispered, "I should find a safe corner to think. Maybe a man I trust. If any left." He touched his chest where his mother's old silver charm lay under his shirt. He hadn't prayed in weeks but now he muttered a soft plea. Not to be saved. Just to see the next sunrise free.

A rat darted across his path. He laughed without sound and kept moving. This alley turned sharp left then right, a winding vein through the belly of the souk. He stopped at an old wooden door with paint peeling off. He pressed his ear to it. Nothing inside. No voices. No footsteps. Good.

He stepped back and sat on an empty crate by the door. He rested his elbows on his knees. The scarf hid half his face but he could feel sweat drip down his neck. He closed his eyes for a second and spoke inside again, calm and low.

“You will not run forever, Suhail. You will run toward the snake, not away. You will bite back. You will find the one who laughs while your name burns in every tea shop. You are no man’s puppet.”

He opened his eyes when he heard faint music drift from somewhere above. A radio crackled an old song. He hummed along, just a little, letting it fill his bones with warmth that the city always tried to steal. He knew he needed food but for now, air and hope were enough.

Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder. He jerked his head to see an old beggar woman. Her back was bent, and her eyes hid under a mess of gray hair. She leaned close, close enough that he smelled dried figs on her breath.

She pointed a crooked finger at him and whispered, “Desert boy in city skin. The sand talks to old bones like mine. You want truth? Dig where snakes sleep.”

Before he could ask her to explain, she smiled, showing yellow teeth, and waddled away down the alley, giggling like a child who stole sweets.

He stood frozen, watching her vanish behind a curtain of hanging rugs. He whispered after her, “Old mother, you speak in riddles but maybe you speak true.”

He looked around. A young boy watched him from the corner, wide-eyed. Suhail pressed a finger to his lips. The boy grinned and ran off, barefoot and wild.

He rubbed his palms together, pushing away tiredness. He walked back toward the souk’s open side, where more people and noise would hide him better than shadows. He felt each heartbeat as a promise: he would not die unknown, blamed for a crime he did not do.

He passed a man roasting nuts on a small fire. The smell made his stomach growl. He wanted to stop but forced his legs to keep walking. Food could wait. Freedom first.

He moved back into the sun. He blended into the swirl of city life again. Around him, Al Waha breathed like a giant — hot, busy, hungry, loud. He was just another man in a scarf, but inside, he held storms no one could cage. He touched his mother’s charm again, pressed it tight.

He thought of the young guard who gave him the key. He thought of the ghost who played games with fire and gold.

He thought of Layla Khalil, locked away somewhere while fools blamed him.

He clenched his fists and felt strength crawl back into his bones. He would not run forever. He would hunt in the cracks of this shiny city. He would dig until Al-Shabah had no shadows left to hide behind. And when he found him, the sand would remember who was real and who was ash.

He lifted his head high enough to taste the sun on his face, then disappeared deeper into the living maze of Al Waha.

Chapter 3: Ashes Under Neon

Suhail kept walking through the maze of Al Waha until the sun dipped behind the taller buildings. He felt sweat dry on his back and under his scarf. The streets grew busier again as night lights woke up all over the city. Cars honked and loud music spilled from corner shops. He wanted a place to breathe, to sit, to think without fear wrapping around his throat.

He remembered an old café on Shariq Street. Years ago, before all this mess, he would meet Kareem there — a friend since boyhood. Kareem used to pour tea and gossip about rich men cheating at cards. Now, Suhail hoped Kareem still worked there and still had a good heart.

He pulled the scarf tighter to cover more of his face. He cut through back alleys behind a row of noisy shops, then slipped behind two dumpsters that smelled of rotting onions. A cracked door with peeling green paint led to the café's back steps. He checked the street once more and knocked soft three times.

No answer. He pushed the door open and slid inside like a stray cat. The back room smelled of old frying oil and mint leaves. He paused, listening. A radio hummed somewhere near the sink.

Suhail crept forward and peeked through a curtain that separated the kitchen from the small dining area. The café looked the same: chipped tables, crooked fans spinning lazy circles, and one old man asleep with his head on a table corner. At the far end behind the counter stood Kareem, wiping glasses with a cloth too dirty to help much.

Kareem still looked thin but stronger than before. His hair was shaved on the sides but long on top, combed with too much oil. A gold tooth flashed every time he grinned at the few customers.

Suhail stayed hidden behind the curtain. He let out a slow breath and whispered inside his chest, *Don't scare him. Don't drag him into this, but you need answers.* He waited until Kareem bent to pick something off the floor. Then Suhail stepped out quick and slipped behind the counter.

When Kareem turned around, he nearly dropped the glass. His eyes widened as big as ripe figs.

“Suhail? Sand take me — what are you doing here? You should be dead or locked!” Kareem hissed under his breath, grabbing Suhail’s elbow and pulling him into the kitchen.

Inside the kitchen, pots clanged. A small gas burner hissed blue flame. Suhail let Kareem push him to sit on a wooden crate near the sink. Kareem stood over him, breathing heavy.

“You look like you crawled through a goat pen. You want tea or a miracle first?” Kareem asked, half whisper, half laugh.

“Tea first,” Suhail said. He peeled the scarf off his mouth. His lips were dry, cracked at the edges.

Kareem poured hot tea into a chipped cup and passed it over. He added sugar without asking. He knew Suhail’s taste — always two spoons, never more.

Suhail sipped and felt warmth fill his chest. He closed his eyes a moment. “Bless you, Kareem. I thought I’d drink sand forever.”

Kareem grabbed a half loaf of bread from a shelf and tore it in two. He handed the bigger piece to Suhail. “Eat. Then talk. But keep your voice low. Some ears are loyal to coins, not friends.”

They sat close in the steam of the tiny kitchen. Outside, plates clinked and the old man snored deeper.

Suhail chewed slow, careful not to choke. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve and looked at Kareem's eyes. Same eyes, same friend — but now shadowed with worry.

“I need the truth about the fire, Kareem. Someone used my name like dirty water. They say it's the Ghost — Al-Shabah.”

At the sound of that name, Kareem's jaw twitched. He sucked air through his teeth and leaned his back to the stained wall.

“Brother, we all know that name. No face to match it. No soul brave enough to say where he hides. Some say he wears gold rings and sits in the city's tallest towers. Others swear he sits cross-legged in the desert, laughing with snakes. Me? I say he is both sand and smoke — never caught, always watching.”

Suhail let Kareem's words settle. He hated riddles but knew Kareem wasn't lying. He rubbed his thumb along the cup's edge.

“You hear anything else? Who talks to him? Who lights fires for him?”

Kareem glanced at the kitchen door. He lowered his voice until it was softer than the kettle's hiss. "Listen, Suhail. Men talk. Drunks talk more. They say he pays young boys, pays gangs, pays even police captains. He buys silence like you buy bread — easy, cheap. But his eyes? No one claims to see them. Only fools say they did. Those fools? They vanish."

Suhail felt old anger stir inside his ribs. He finished the last sip of tea and set the cup down gentle. He didn't want to scare Kareem more than he already had.

"Kareem, help me. I can't trust police. I can't hide forever. I need to breathe free air tomorrow. I need a pair of eyes in the street. A boy, maybe two. Quiet boys. Sharp ears."

Kareem scratched his cheek. "I know one kid. Street fox. Name's Bilal. Small hands, big eyes, honest as a crow can be. He runs errands for shopkeepers and old ladies. He can watch corners for plainclothes pigs. He won't ask questions if I pay him double."

Suhail almost smiled at the thought of a boy running circles around big city men with guns. "Good. Call him. Give him some coins from my pocket later. Tell him to whistle once if he sees blue coats or men with clean shoes standing too long near the café."

Kareem nodded, pulling a wrinkled ten-dinar note from his apron pocket. "I'll find him after you leave. For now, stay behind the oven if any stranger comes inside. And wipe that fire from your eyes, brother. You look like a man ready to burn the whole souk down."

Suhail laughed, soft but true. "Not the souk, Kareem. Just the lies choking it."

Kareem flicked his towel at Suhail's shoulder, like when they were boys wrestling in the sand. "Then eat more bread. Truth needs strong bones."

They sat in silence for a breath or two. The kitchen heat mixed with the night buzz outside. Suhail's ears caught bits of a love song drifting in through the cracked window. For a moment he let the music calm the noise in his head. He chewed the last bit of dry bread slowly, tasting each grain like it might be the last good thing to touch his tongue tonight. Kareem busied himself wiping the counter that never stayed clean anyway. Now and then he peeked over his shoulder at Suhail, worry hanging behind his eyes.

Suhail was about to ask for more tea when the back door creaked open without a knock. Kareem stiffened. He gave Suhail a quick nod to stay quiet. Heavy boots stepped in and

a big man ducked under the low doorframe. He wore a short leather jacket and smelled like cheap perfume mixed with old tobacco. His hair was shaved on the sides and longer on top, slicked back with too much oil. A thick silver chain peeked out from under his collar. His right hand twirled a small black phone like it was a coin.

He didn't greet Kareem. He didn't look at Suhail at first. He walked to the sink, poured himself half a glass of water, gulped it down in two big swallows, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Finally he turned his eyes on Suhail. Those eyes were small and mean, like he enjoyed seeing people squirm.

"You the famous desert dog, huh?" he said, voice low but sharp. Kareem stepped closer, trying to look calm. Suhail said nothing. He just stared back, not giving the man a nod or a word.

The big man chuckled. He tossed the small black phone in the air once, caught it, then threw it gently onto Suhail's lap. "For you. From a ghost who likes fire more than water."

Suhail did not touch it right away. He looked at Kareem, whose shoulders dropped helplessly. Suhail picked up the phone. It was cheap plastic, already warm in his palm. He

didn't press any button. It rang by itself — loud, a shrill buzz that made the small kitchen feel smaller.

He put it to his ear. At first, just a crackle, like someone breathing through a dry cloth. Then a laugh. A slow, smooth laugh that didn't match the grime of the kitchen. It chilled Suhail's back but he forced his spine straight.

"Hello, son of the sand," said a voice slick as oil. "Did you enjoy my little gift to your city? Smoke always cleans old sins."

Suhail gripped the edge of the table with his free hand. He kept his tone flat. "You talk like you know me. But you hide like a worm."

The voice laughed again, softer this time, mocking. "I know you, Suhail. I know the dry cracks in your throat, the way you cry your mother's name when no one listens. I know how the city chews brave men and spits bones into the dunes. You want another truth?"

Suhail's teeth pressed together. "Speak it or end this game."

"Oh, brave. Good. Here is my secret tonight: Layla Khalil does not like small rooms. But she looks very pretty in one."

She cries in silk, handcuffed to a camel that cannot run. Do you see it in your head? Do you smell the salt in her tears?"

Something in Suhail's ribs snapped in half. His voice dropped to a whisper darker than a locked cell. "I swear I will find you. And I will break every bone that hides behind your gold rings."

The voice sighed, sweet and slow, as if praising a child's promise. "So noisy. So honest. Run fast, desert boy. Or your lady's cries will be the last song you hear." Then silence — the call cut. Just dead air in Suhail's ear.

He lowered the phone and stared at it. His breath came fast. The big man who brought it leaned back against the door, arms folded, smirking like a dog watching scraps fall. Suhail looked at Kareem, who couldn't meet his eyes.

Without warning, Suhail slammed the phone onto the counter. It cracked but did not shatter. He grabbed it and smashed it again, harder, until the cheap plastic split and the pieces scattered over the greasy floor tiles.

The big man pushed off the door, laughed once, and left without a word. His heavy boots faded into the night beyond the back steps.

Kareem bent to pick up broken bits but Suhail stopped him with a gentle hand. His voice was calm now but the calm was sharp as fresh-cut glass. "Let it lie, Kareem. Ghosts speak through toys. I want no toys."

Kareem swallowed hard. He looked at the broken pieces then back at Suhail. "What will you do now?"

Suhail wiped sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. He straightened his back, feeling every cut and bruise on his skin but not caring. "I will hunt him like he hunts me. I will free Layla. The sand will not hide him forever."

Kareem opened his mouth to protest but saw something in Suhail's eyes that stopped him. He shut his mouth, nodded once, and pressed another cup of tea into Suhail's shaking hand. They stood there together, breathing the steam, two friends from the dunes standing knee-deep in neon lies.

In his heart, Suhail repeated the same vow he made when he buried his mother under the desert sun: No fear, no shame, no surrender. Tonight, that promise felt warm again. Like fire he could trust. Like fire that would not burn him but would burn every lie until only truth stood in its ashes.

Chapter 4: Echoes of a Camel

Suhail left the broken phone pieces on Kareem's greasy kitchen floor. He did not look back at the café's warm lights once he stepped outside into the deep city night. His heart felt like hot stone under his ribs, but his mind stayed clear. He pulled his scarf tighter and moved through back streets where the road was cracked and cats ruled the corners. He asked himself with each step, *Where would a rich man hide his only daughter if he feared losing her?* Only one name came every time—Mazen Khalil, Layla's father.

He knew where Mazen lived. Everyone in Al Waha did. The man owned more land than most old tribes. He built a house that looked like a hotel, half palace, half fortress. Suhail had never walked that street. He had never needed to. But tonight, he walked it barefoot inside his borrowed sandals.

At the far end of the city's rich lane, two iron gates guarded Mazen's stone walls. White spotlights circled the front yard like hunting dogs. Suhail stayed hidden behind a hedge across the street, his eyes sharp as he studied the grounds. Guards moved in slow lines. Their rifles caught the moonlight each

time they turned. One smoked a cigarette near the gate. Another scratched his ear and yawned. To Suhail, they looked tough but lazy. He told himself, *Good. A sleepy guard is a good guard for a thief like me.*

He crouched behind the hedge for a long minute, counting heartbeats, timing the lights. The fence stretched far on each side but Suhail knew walls were not smarter than a man willing to crawl in dirt. He waited until the nearest guard flicked his cigarette butt and turned to joke with his friend. In that thin moment, Suhail slipped from the hedge and ran low along the side road. He pressed himself against the cold stone wall until he found a spot where thorn bushes grew thick around an old fence corner. He pulled at the thorns, ignoring cuts on his palms. He pushed his shoulder through the gap he made, hissed once when a branch scratched his neck, then rolled over the other side, landing on soft grass.

He stayed flat on his belly. He smelled fresh-cut lawn mixed with wet soil. Somewhere closer to the house, a water fountain bubbled like a mother humming to a restless child. He crawled like he once did as a boy hunting lizards in the dunes. One elbow, then a knee, then a belly slide through the shadows.

He reached the back garden where a row of big glass windows lined the mansion wall. Each window shone with warm yellow light. He saw no movement inside the first two rooms. At the third, he pushed himself up on his knees and peered through a slit where the curtain didn't meet the frame.

He sucked in air through his teeth. There on the far wall hung framed photos of Layla Khalil. A big one showed her in a blue dress, turning her face over her shoulder, laughing at someone behind the camera. Another showed her reading in a library, lips pressed tight as if she hated to be disturbed. In a smaller frame by a shelf, she sat beside a piano, head bent, fingers caught mid-song.

Suhail pressed his palm to the cold glass. He spoke inside himself, *You deserve more than this cage, Layla. I will not let that ghost break you.*

He lowered himself when he heard voices near the back door. Heavy shoes. Two men talking about what meat the cook burned tonight. Suhail waited until their noise faded into the kitchen. He moved left, following the wall until he reached a side door half hidden behind a fat potted tree. He tested the handle. Locked. He pulled out a thin metal pin he found earlier near the café's trash can. He bent it straight and

pushed it into the old lock. He worked it slow. A tiny click told him it was enough. He slipped inside like a whisper.

The air inside smelled of roses and spice wood. A long hallway spread ahead of him, lined with gold lamps that painted soft pools of light on a marble floor. His sandals made no sound. He kept to the edge, ready to melt back into shadow if anyone appeared.

He passed more pictures of Layla along the hall. In every photo she smiled or read or played or stood next to Mazen in stiff family poses. The farther he moved, the clearer it became—she was loved and protected here, but now she was a stolen trophy to someone who thought fear was power.

He rounded a corner, heading deeper toward where he guessed Mazen's office would be. He planned to beg or demand. He didn't care which anymore. He needed Mazen's truth, not his guards or gifts.

He reached a wide wooden door cracked open just enough for him to see a lamp burning on a wide desk. Papers lay scattered. A glass of dark tea steamed half finished. A tall man stood near the window, talking on a phone pressed to his ear. His back was to the door but Suhail knew Mazen by

his white hair and stiff shoulders under a dark robe. His hand squeezed the curtain edge like he wanted to rip it down.

Suhail pushed the door slowly. It didn't creak. He stepped in and closed it behind him with a soft thud. He did not hide. He stood clear, arms at his side.

Mazen turned sharp, phone still to his ear, eyes wide and hard. He dropped the phone without ending the call. His right hand went inside his robe and pulled out a short pistol, shiny silver and angry in the light.

"Who are you? Who let you in?" Mazen barked, voice rough but not trembling.

Suhail raised both hands a little, palms open. He stared straight into Mazen's lined face, catching the dark rings under the older man's eyes. He looked older up close—less lion, more tired fox.

"My name is Suhail bin Rashid," he said, voice calm. "I didn't come for your money. I came for your daughter."

Mazen stepped closer, gun pointed at Suhail's chest. His eyes burned with a father's fear. "You? You filthy—my men should kill you for breathing near her name. You burned my building—"

“No!” Suhail shouted, louder than he meant. He stepped forward too, closing the space between muzzle and ribs. He didn’t flinch. “I never burned anything. I never touched her. I’m not your enemy. I want Layla safe as much as you do.”

The old man’s hand shook just a hair. “Say her name again, liar. Say it and I blow your chest open.”

Suhail lowered his voice so low Mazen had to lean in to hear. “Layla Khalil is alive. I know where she is. I can get her back. But not with your guards or your gold. Only with truth and speed. Shoot me now and you bury your only child in pieces.”

Mazen’s eyes flinched then darted to the broken phone still buzzing weakly on the floor. He looked back at Suhail. His lips moved without sound before he spoke out loud. “You swear by the sand you did not take her?”

Suhail put his hand on his own chest, where his mother’s charm pressed his skin through his shirt. “By my mother’s grave in the dunes—I did not touch her. But I will bring her home. If you don’t waste bullets on me tonight.”

The silence between them felt heavy as stone. Then Mazen lowered the gun. Not far—just enough that Suhail could breathe again.

“You have ten breaths to explain before I call my men to drag you out back and bury you next to my dog,” Mazen said through clenched teeth.

Suhail didn’t waste a single breath. He spoke fast but clear, each word pushed out like a stone from his chest. “Your girl is not lost by mistake. Al-Shabah holds her. He set the fire and pointed the blame at my head. He wanted the city to see a fool burning buildings. He wanted you broken too, to squeeze you for more money.”

Mazen’s jaw tightened. His grip on the gun wavered, then steadied again. He barked a bitter laugh but there was no smile behind it. “Money. You think this is about coins? I already gave him enough to build ten more towers. He asked for ransom before, I paid it. My girl never came home. My guards found only an empty scarf tied to a fence. And that coward sends whispers in the dark, laughing at me behind closed doors.”

Suhail stepped closer. Mazen didn’t stop him. They stood now only an arm’s reach apart, one man smelling of old desert sweat, the other wrapped in cologne that couldn’t hide the rot underneath.

“You buy protection with gold,” Suhail said, softer now but hard at the edges, “but gold cannot buy a shadow’s fear. Men like Al-Shabah laugh at locked gates. He feeds on city men who think fences are stronger than truth.”

Mazen’s eyes flickered to the portraits of Layla on the wall. His free hand trembled for half a second. His voice cracked but returned cold. “You come here, filthy and hunted, telling me my money is dust. What do you have that I don’t, Suhail bin Rashid?”

Suhail didn’t step back. He lifted his chin, steady as the dunes that raised him. “I have dirt in my blood, not just under my nails. I know how to crawl where your polished shoes won’t go. I know how to listen to dogs and beggars. And I am not afraid to dig up the garbage your clean city buries at night.”

Mazen’s nostrils flared. He lowered the gun to his side but didn’t holster it. He turned sharply, pacing under a gold chandelier that spilled soft yellow light over silk rugs and polished wood floors. Suhail’s eyes caught how the light danced off marble columns and glass cabinets filled with tiny statues from Europe and India — all shiny things but not one could guard a daughter against the city’s real wolves.

“You stand here and preach loyalty like some holy goat,” Mazen said, voice rising again, “but your Bedouin pride feeds no one. This city respects gold, not grit. You have no coins, no badge, no army. What makes you think you can touch this ghost when my own men fear his name?”

Suhail shrugged one shoulder, eyes never leaving Mazen’s. “Because I don’t fear my own death. He fears truth. I don’t care if my sandals break under his tower. I will still climb his walls. You and your city men don’t have that sickness in your bones. That’s why you lose.”

Mazen stopped pacing. He pointed the gun again, then dropped it to his side with a growl. He called over his shoulder in a sharp bark. A door swung open and a tall thin man in a dark suit stepped in. His face was pale, lips dry, eyes cold as a hawk’s. This was no servant — this was Mazen’s trusted snake.

“Fathi,” Mazen said, not looking at the man, “give this desert rat what you found last week. The bank trail, the hidden payments. Maybe he wants to drown in numbers since he has no coins of his own.”

Fathi moved like a ghost across the room. From an inside pocket, he pulled a small black flash drive. He didn’t hand it

kindly. He tossed it at Suhail's chest so it bounced off his jacket and landed near his foot. Suhail bent, picked it up, and turned it over in his fingers. Such a small thing, but heavier than all the gold on Mazen's wrists.

Fathi's voice was dry like his face. "That holds records, secret transfers, payments to shell companies in Oman and Bahrain. Some wires loop back to Al Waha under fake family names. Good luck finding which shadow holds your princess."

Suhail slipped the flash into his pocket, eyes boring into Fathi's. "Better luck than your expensive lawyers who drink your tea but bring no daughter home."

Mazen made a short noise, half laugh, half choke. He rubbed his eyes, looking old in the gold light. "Get out, Suhail. You stink of sweat and trouble. Use my back exit. I want no reporters seeing you slip through my front gates like a stray dog. And if you fail, pray I don't see your bones in my yard."

Suhail did not bow. He did not spit either. He just said quietly, "Next time you see her, she'll tell you who stood still and who ran into the dirt for her."

He turned before Mazen's anger could wake up again. Fathi stepped aside, lips curled in disgust but his tongue stayed still.

Suhail walked out past a marble hallway that smelled of rose oil and old secrets. He saw more photos of Layla — one at a garden party, one in a lab coat, one with her arms around a small white dog.

In that perfect house full of pictures and silk rugs, Suhail only felt colder the deeper he walked. No warmth in gold walls. No comfort in fine curtains. Just a rich cage holding the ghost of a daughter gone behind a snake's grin.

A short maid in a black dress opened a wooden side door with trembling hands. She could not meet his eyes. He stepped past her into a narrow back alley that smelled of car oil and dry flowers tossed out by the gardeners.

He breathed deep. The night slapped his face, fresh and sharp. He liked it better than the roses inside. He spoke to himself, voice low but strong enough for the moon to hear.

“The palace is just another grave. The desert is my road. The truth is my water. And Layla, if you breathe tonight, wait for me. I am coming, chains or no chains.”

With the flash drive hidden near his heart and the city stretching its neon veins ahead, Suhail faded into the dark like he was made for it, steps steady, mind burning clear, heart

heavy with grit instead of gold. He would not sleep. He would not bend. Al-Shabah would taste fear, even if he wore a thousand shadows to hide his laughter.

Chapter 5: Sandstorm Deals

Suhail kept walking until the mansion was far behind him. The weight of the flash drive in his pocket kept pulling at his thoughts. He didn't stop to eat. He didn't stop to drink. His feet moved through the late hours of the night, over cracked pavements and broken alleys, until the sharp towers of downtown Al Waha glowed around him like cold fire.

He crossed a narrow bridge that hung above dry canals, and his eyes searched the skyline for a familiar rooftop with a broken neon light shaped like a hookah. That place hadn't changed. It sat crooked above a phone repair shop, halfway hidden behind faded signs and tangled wires. Inside was where he needed to be.

The stairs to the rooftop café creaked. Each one groaned like it didn't want company. At the top, the door was open just enough to let the smell of burned charcoal and strong apple tobacco slip out. The space was dark, warm, and full of shadows. Only a few red lights blinked inside broken ceiling fans, and the glow of laptops lit small corners of the room like dying lanterns.

Suhail walked in and spotted him immediately. Marwan. His friend from a hundred mistakes ago. Skinny as always, bones sharp under a dirty grey hoodie. His hair was buzzed short, his fingers stained with ink and something darker. He sat at a booth where broken knives were taped to the wall like decorations. Two phones buzzed on the table, next to an old keyboard missing four letters.

Marwan didn't look up. He was deep in something, eyes locked on a screen. His lips moved, talking to himself or to the code crawling across the glass.

Suhail slid into the seat across from him. "Still talking to ghosts, Marwan?"

Marwan blinked once, then again, then his eyes focused. "No. Just demons with passwords." He finally smiled. It was crooked, and a little tired. "Didn't think I'd see your face again unless it was on the news. Or a poster."

Suhail nodded. "You'll see it soon. But not the way they hope."

Marwan leaned forward and sniffed. "You smell like fear and dirt."

“I’ve had better weeks,” Suhail said. He pulled the flash drive from his pocket and slid it across the table. “Can you crack it?”

Marwan raised an eyebrow. “You bring me food? Or just fire?”

Suhail leaned back. “Depends on what you find.”

Marwan wiped his hands on his pants, plugged the flash into a black laptop already running hot, and started typing with quick fingers. “You still don’t lock your phone. You still don’t carry backup. But now you walk in with a gift wrapped in secrets. What are you really hunting, Suhail?”

Suhail looked at the hookah pipe on the table. Smoke curled up like a warning. “I’m hunting a ghost with a name. Al-Shabah.”

Marwan paused. His fingers stopped. He stared at Suhail. “You say that name here and rats will leave the building.”

“I want rats to hear it. I want the walls to hear it,” Suhail said. “He has Layla Khalil. I saw the money trail. I need proof.”

Marwan shook his head and kept typing. “You and your desert heart. You always go for things no one else dares to touch.”

The screen filled with folders, one after another. Passwords cracked, files spilled open like broken locks. Marwan’s eyes scanned fast. He whistled under his breath. “This is not just money. This is the kind of money that speaks ten languages and never leaves fingerprints.”

Suhail leaned forward. “Tell me where it goes.”

Marwan tapped a file and turned the screen. “Here. Building name is The Zenith. Floor 51. Listed as a private residence, but there’s no legal owner. Cameras are disabled. Elevators require full keycard access. Inside? Men like to forget who they are. Women are bought. Cards are played. Pills passed like candy. Your ghost lives there when he gets bored of watching the world burn.”

Suhail’s jaw clenched. “And Layla?”

Marwan shook his head. “No mention. But if he wants to keep her close and hidden, this is the place. You don’t need cameras when your walls don’t speak.”

Suhail looked down at the screen. It was just lines. Numbers. Names. But it all screamed of dirt hiding under gold. “How do I get in?”

Marwan opened a drawer below the table and pulled out a torn map of the tower’s layout. “You won’t get through the front. Not with your face. But every tower has cleaners. Staff who mop and scrub. And not all of them are loyal to their paycheck.”

Suhail nodded. “Then I need one.”

“Go to the service gate behind the laundry district,” Marwan said. “There’s a man named Ayub. He sweeps the lobby every third night. He’s tired, underpaid, and hates rich people more than you do.”

Suhail stood. “What does he want?”

Marwan smiled. “Money. Or stories. Depends on your luck.”

Suhail dropped two folded notes on the table. “Tell him it’s a story this time. One that ends with a ghost falling.”

Marwan leaned back and exhaled long. “Be careful, brother. That tower swallows men. You’re going in alone?”

Suhail nodded once. “Always have.”

He left the hookah bar behind. The air outside smelled sharp again. Cold wind moved through narrow streets. He followed Marwan’s directions until the city changed shape. The laundry district was quiet now, only soft machines rumbling in the back rooms of closed shops. The service gate stood behind a pile of trash bags and rusted pipes.

Ayub sat on a broken stool, smoking a clove cigarette. He wore a janitor’s uniform that hung loose off his frame. His eyes were yellowed, and his beard grey and patchy. He looked like a man who had nothing left to lose.

Suhail didn’t waste time. “Marwan sent me.”

Ayub blinked. “He said story or cash.”

“I have both.”

Ayub lit another cigarette. “Tell me the end of your story.”

“Al-Shabah dies,” Suhail said.

Ayub smiled slowly. “Then I’ll give you the key.”

He reached into his pocket and handed over a keycard with no name, no logo. Just a small red dot on one corner. “This

will take you to any floor. Don't speak. Don't make noise. And don't press the wrong button."

Suhail took it with a nod. "I owe you."

Ayub shook his head. "You'll owe me when I hear how the story ends."

Suhail entered through the back gate, following dark hallways that smelled of bleach and machine oil. He climbed narrow stairs two at a time until he reached the bottom floor of the elevator shaft.

He looked up. The shaft stretched above like a deep throat ready to swallow anything. The walls were lined with cables and bars. The elevator sat at the top, waiting.

Suhail pulled out his knife and checked the blade. It was small, plain, and old. But it was sharp. He ran a thumb over the edge. It had cut through ropes before. It had cut through lies. Tonight it might need to do both again.

He breathed in once. Twice. Third time slower. He slipped the knife back into its strap on his belt, then pulled the card from his pocket.

One floor at a time. One breath at a time. He pressed the keycard to the reader and watched the red dot blink once, then turn green.

The elevator opened. Inside, mirrors on all sides. He didn't look at his reflection. He didn't want to see the tired lines on his face, the fire in his eyes, the silence in his shoulders. He pressed 51.

The button glowed beneath his finger. The elevator moved slowly, smoother than he expected. There was no music, no hum, just silence pressing against the metal walls. The numbers blinked quietly as the floors ticked by. His hand rested near his knife, his thoughts too loud to ignore.

When it reached the top, the elevator stopped with a soft sound. The doors slid open like a secret being shared. The hallway before him was wide and clean. The floor was black stone, polished so bright it shined under his feet. A golden light came from the ceiling, warm but strange, like it was trying too hard to be soft.

He stepped out and walked slowly toward the end of the hall. His shoes made no sound. At the end, two tall glass doors stood shut. Beyond the doors, the room opened like a private

lounge. And in the center, under a glowing chandelier shaped like a tree, he saw her.

Layla Khalil sat on a red couch, her hands cuffed to the neck of a taxidermied camel standing beside her. Its glass eyes stared ahead with no life. Her dark hair was messy, falling over her shoulders. Her dress was wrinkled, and her feet were bare. Her eyes were red but not dull. She was tired, but she was still fighting.

She didn't scream when she saw him. She didn't cry louder. She just lifted her chin, slow and steady. Her eyes met his through the glass, and she gave the smallest nod, the kind only a person ready for a plan would give.

He moved quickly to the door, checking both sides of the hallway. There was no one around. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small tool he used back in the old days, back when he still broke into storerooms just to survive. He inserted it into the lock and worked fast.

Inside the room, Layla sat still. She didn't speak, didn't move. She only watched him with eyes that didn't blink. She trusted him, somehow. She had never met him, but she knew who he was.

The lock clicked. The door opened without a sound. He stepped inside and closed it behind him with care. The room smelled like perfume and old smoke. Bottles of half-finished drinks stood on side tables. A deck of playing cards lay on the floor. Music played faintly from a speaker in the wall. Jazz, the slow kind rich people liked when they wanted to feel important.

Layla's voice was dry but strong. "Took you long enough."

Suhail knelt in front of her. "I had to stop by your father's palace first. Fancy house, no heart."

She gave a weak smile. "He still polishing that gun of his?"

"Still threatening to shoot people with it, yes," Suhail said, already working the cuffs. They were old-style. Thick and ugly. He pulled a wire pin from his belt and got to work.

Behind the wall, laughter echoed from another room. Men's voices, drunk and loud. Someone cursed. A glass broke. Another man roared with laughter. They hadn't heard him enter. They were too busy drinking other people's pain.

Layla's wrist trembled once as the cuff loosened. Suhail caught her hand before it dropped.

“Can you walk?” he whispered.

She nodded. “I’ve been waiting for this moment. I’ve already walked it in my head ten times.”

The other cuff came loose. She rubbed her wrists as she stood. Her knees shook once. He steadied her with a hand on her back.

“We’ll take the stairs,” he said. “Elevator is too loud.”

“I figured,” she said. “They only use it to bring up the wine.”

He helped her to the side door. It opened into a hallway with carpet so thick it swallowed their steps. At the end of the hall was a steel door marked with a red emergency sign. He pushed it open and saw the stairwell drop into shadows below.

They stepped inside and let the door shut behind them. The noise of the world above disappeared. It was quiet, and the air was cooler. Concrete stairs curved around the inside of the tower like a spine. Dim lights flickered on every landing.

Layla took the first step slowly. Suhail followed right behind, his hand near her elbow. She didn’t ask for help, but she didn’t push him away either.

Each floor they passed felt like a weight. Her breath came harder. His knees ached. The tower seemed taller than before.

At floor forty-five, she leaned against the wall. “How many more?”

“Too many,” he said. “But less than when we started.”

She smiled again, tired but proud. “You sound like someone who’s climbed worse things.”

“I’ve lived through worse. This is just tall and stupid,” Suhail replied. He handed her a bottle of water from his belt pouch. She drank without stopping.

They started again. Floor forty-four. Then forty-three. On thirty-nine, a door creaked above them. They froze. Suhail pulled her close, his knife already in hand.

A voice echoed faintly, “Where’s that girl gone? You check the hallway. I’ll check the bathroom.”

Another voice answered, “She can’t go far. Her feet are like jelly.”

Suhail pressed his finger to his lips. Layla nodded. They slipped down another flight, faster now.

When they reached thirty-five, Suhail spotted a janitor's closet. He opened it with a twist of his knife. It was empty. Just a mop and a few boxes.

"Hide here if they get close," he told her.

"I'm not hiding," she said.

"I didn't ask," he said back. But his voice was soft.

She gave him a look but stepped inside with him anyway. They stood close, barely breathing. Footsteps echoed above, then faded. When it was quiet again, they opened the door and moved again.

On floor twenty-eight, she stumbled. Her knees gave for a second, but Suhail caught her.

"Hey," he said gently, "we're almost halfway."

She panted. "That's the worst thing anyone's ever said to me."

"You'll hear worse. But not tonight," he said.

They climbed again.

On twenty, her pace picked up. On fifteen, they started laughing between breaths. Not loud, not wild. Just little broken laughs that cracked between their teeth and felt good. Laughs that said they were still alive.

Suhail didn't say it, but in his head, he was already planning the next move. Getting out of the tower was only step one. Getting her out of the city would be step two. Then came the hard part—bringing the truth to light.

When they hit floor five, Layla looked at him and said, "What if there are more guards downstairs?"

"Then we run. And if we can't run, we fight."

"You say that like you've done it before."

"I have," Suhail said. "But this time, it's for someone who doesn't deserve to be locked to a fake camel."

She rolled her eyes but smiled. "That thing smelled worse than the real ones."

At last, they reached the bottom. Suhail pushed open the exit door. The hallway was empty. He peeked around the corner. Two guards stood near the main desk, talking with their backs turned.

He held her hand. "When I say go, we run."

She nodded, no fear in her face now.

He whispered, "Go."

They ran. Silent steps over marble floor. Past the fountain.
Past the doors.

One guard turned too late. He shouted. Suhail didn't stop.

The main doors opened and the street swallowed them whole. They turned down an alley. Then another. The sound of chasing boots faded behind them.

Suhail and Layla didn't speak until they reached a quiet corner behind a shuttered bakery. They leaned against the wall, both catching breath, both soaked in sweat and city dust.

She looked at him. "You really are a storm, aren't you?"

"No," Suhail said, looking up at the black sky. "I'm just the wind before it."

And for the first time in many nights, they both felt the ground beneath their feet belong to them. Just a little. Just enough to keep going.

Chapter 6: Running with Shadows

They stood behind the closed bakery, both catching their breath, both trying not to drop to the ground from exhaustion. Layla leaned her back against the wall, eyes closed for a second before opening them slowly. Her wrists were red, the skin broken where the metal cuffs had pressed too hard and too long. Dried blood clung to her skin like stubborn dust.

She looked at Suhail and gave a small smirk. “You know,” she said, lifting one wrist weakly, “I always thought my rescuer would be taller. Maybe with better shoes.”

Suhail glanced down at his worn sandals and back up at her. “I’m sorry, the tall ones were busy. You get me.”

Layla let out a tired laugh and shook her head. “You’ll do.”

Suhail pulled a scarf from his bag and handed it to her. She wrapped it around her wrists gently, wincing as she tied it. He didn’t ask if she was okay. Her eyes said she wasn’t, but they also said she’d keep going.

They left the alley and moved through the backstreets, staying low and quiet. Suhail kept his eyes on the rooftops. The city was still alive, still loud, but their part of it was quieter now. Fewer people. Fewer streetlights. The type of places where secrets liked to hide.

They reached an old shopping center with rusted gates and smashed glass signs. The front entrance was chained shut, but Suhail knew the side gate near the delivery zone. He had hidden there once before. He pushed the loose panel aside, and they slipped into the darkness.

Inside, the mall was dead. No music. No lights. Just a long hall lined with closed shops and dust that curled in the air when they walked. A toy store still had its plastic animals lined up in the window, but their faces were cracked and faded. Escalators stood frozen in the middle, stairs rusted, handrails torn.

Suhail led Layla to a bench near a broken fountain where plastic plants had long since turned grey. She sat slowly, rubbing her arms to stop the shaking. He dropped his bag to the floor and pulled out a roll of thread, a needle, and a cloth bundle.

“I stopped at a tailor last week,” he said, kneeling in front of her. “Didn’t know I’d need it for something like this.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You carry thread and a knife? What kind of man are you?”

Suhail didn’t smile. “A man who has no one to carry it for him.”

He opened a small bottle of water, tore a piece of cloth from his own shirt, and cleaned her wrists. She didn’t cry, but she flinched once.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Don’t stop,” she answered. “If it stings, that means I’m still here.”

Suhail began stitching slowly. His fingers weren’t fast, but they were steady. He didn’t look up while he worked.

“You can talk, you know,” Layla said softly. “I don’t like sitting in silence with strangers, even if they save my life.”

Suhail gave a slow nod. “Alright. You first. Tell me something I don’t know.”

She leaned her head back against the dirty wall and looked at the ceiling as she spoke. “He smelled like cinnamon. Al-Shabah, I mean. The room was always too cold when he came in. He wore expensive suits but no tie. Always had tattoos running up his neck, black and sharp. Looked old, but also new, like they meant something only he understood.”

Suhail didn’t stop working. “You saw his face?”

“Not fully. He kept it in shadow, always just enough light to scare you but not enough to see him properly. But his voice...” she paused, swallowed hard. “His voice didn’t match his body. It was smooth. Too calm. Like nothing in the world could touch him.”

Suhail tied off the last stitch and tore the thread with his teeth. He wrapped her wrist gently in a fresh strip of cloth. “He ever say anything strange? Something that didn’t feel like it was about you?”

Layla looked at him, eyes sharp now. “Yes. One time, I asked him why he did this. Why me. And he said, ‘It’s not about you. It’s about the man whose blood tastes like the desert. His father went missing because he looked too deep. Now his son crawls through the same sand.’ Then he walked away.”

Suhail froze. His hands dropped to his knees. “He said that?”

She nodded slowly. “He said your name the next day. He laughed when he said it. Like he had been waiting for you.”

Suhail looked at the floor. His heart pounded slower now, but heavier. The name of his father had not been spoken in years. Not by anyone who knew what it meant. Not even by him. He had buried it deep, like an old map no longer needed.

“He knows more than I thought,” Suhail said finally. “More than anyone has a right to know.”

“Who was your father?” Layla asked.

“Someone who never came back from a meeting in the dunes. He left for trade, for talks, for promises, and never returned. No body, no word. My mother said he chased shadows and became one.”

Layla leaned forward. “Then Al-Shabah knows where he went?”

“I don’t know,” Suhail said. “But I know this now—I’m not just chasing him for what he did to me. I’m chasing him for what he took before I even understood what was mine.”

Layla touched his hand, light but firm. “Then we find him together.”

Suhail looked at her and saw strength, not weakness. Her wrists were bleeding just an hour ago, but her voice was clearer than his.

They sat in the dead mall a while longer. The broken fountain no longer flowed, but the silence gave them room to breathe. Somewhere above them, a rat ran along a pipe. They didn’t care.

“We need rest,” Suhail said. “But not here. Too quiet. Too easy to find.”

“There’s an old house behind the flower market,” Layla said. “My driver used to stop there when traffic was bad. It’s empty now. The walls are cracked but the locks still work.”

“Good,” Suhail said. “You lead the way. I’ll follow.”

Layla stood, her body stiff but her face calm. Suhail grabbed his things, checked the hallway, and they slipped back into the shadows of the city.

The streets were quieter now. The heat had left the pavement, and only the dim lights above the alleys were still awake.

Layla moved like someone who had memorized the city from the back seat of a car, not the sidewalk. Suhail followed close, watching every corner, every rooftop, every man standing too still under a flickering lamp. When they reached the edge of the flower market, the smell of wilted jasmine and sun-dried roses hung in the air. The market was shut down for the night. Baskets and crates leaned empty under tarps, and petals littered the path like forgotten words.

Layla turned into a narrow path that led to a small building with chipped white paint and rust on the hinges. The house stood behind a closed gate. She pulled a loose wire from the gate and pushed it open without force. The door creaked, but not enough to wake the street. Inside, the air was thick and smelled of dust, old wood, and something like cardamom. There were two rooms. One had a broken fan, a shelf with faded books, and a mat rolled in the corner. The other room had a table and two chairs that didn't match. Layla walked in first and sat slowly on one of the chairs.

Suhail placed his bag on the floor and locked the door behind them. "This will work," he said. "It's quiet. Nothing fancy. Just walls and silence."

Layla rested her arms on the table and looked up at him. "That's the most peaceful sentence I've heard in three days."

He poured water from a plastic bottle into a cracked cup and gave it to her. She drank slowly, then handed it back. Suhail sat opposite her, still watching the door, still listening to the sounds outside.

“I don’t trust the police,” Layla said. “Even if we had a clear trail. Even if I went to them with all my father’s power behind me, I know what they’d do. They’d listen, nod, and ask me to be quiet. Or they’d pretend to help, then sell the information to the highest bidder.”

Suhail nodded. “The badge doesn’t protect people anymore. It protects systems. And we’re not part of their system.”

She pulled a small cloth bag from under her dress and opened it. Inside was a slim black laptop, the kind that was easy to hide and easier to steal. She set it on the table and turned it on.

“You stole that?” Suhail asked.

“No,” Layla said. “I borrowed it from someone who was too busy staring at himself in a mirror to notice it was gone.”

The machine started with a quiet buzz. She opened a browser, tapped a few keys, and the screen filled with code and search fields. Suhail watched her fingers move fast.

“I have my own way into my father’s accounts,” she said.

“He gave me access to watch the family business, not because he trusted me, but because he wanted to train me.”

“And now you’re training him,” Suhail said.

She smiled. “Something like that.”

The screen filled with files and transaction records. Layla narrowed her search and focused on a set of accounts marked under different business names. She clicked one folder. Suhail leaned closer. The names were strange—half in English, half in short Arabic codes. But the numbers were clear.

“These accounts don’t belong to us,” Layla said. “They’re shells. Some are linked to fuel companies in the north. Some are tied to desert oil projects that shut down years ago. The money still moves, though. Every month. Quietly. Same dates. Same patterns.”

Suhail pointed to a line near the bottom. “That name — I saw it before. It’s on the flash drive Mazen gave me. It’s one of the firms Al-Shabah uses.”

Layla clicked it open. A chain of payments appeared, moving between banks in Dubai, Muscat, and then Al Waha. The last deposit was made two days ago.

“There’s a lot of oil money being used to pay for something,” Layla said. “And I don’t think it’s fuel.”

Suhail’s jaw tightened. “Weapons. Guards. Rooms like the one you were kept in.”

They both stared at the screen, at the quiet math that proved evil could be clean on paper. Layla closed the laptop and slid it back into the cloth bag.

“We’re sitting on proof,” she said. “It won’t mean anything unless we deliver it the right way.”

Suhail stood and walked to the window. The glass was covered with a thin curtain. He pushed it aside just a little. The alley outside was still. A dog barked in the distance, but no footsteps.

“We’ll go to someone outside the city,” he said. “An old reporter I knew. He got shut down for asking the wrong questions. He’s not scared of stories.”

Layla stood too. “Then we go to him. Tomorrow.”

Suhail nodded. “Tonight, we rest.”

But rest didn’t come.

Somewhere deep into the night, Layla stirred. Suhail sat up from his spot near the door and looked at her. She was wide awake, staring at the ceiling.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I thought I heard something.”

He stood fast and checked the lock. Still shut. He moved to the back room, looked through the cracks. Then he heard it too—soft footsteps. Three. Maybe four pairs. The kind that try to sound casual, but fail.

He moved quickly, grabbed the iron bar resting behind the shelf and gave it to Layla.

“They’re not police,” he said. “They don’t knock. They surround.”

Layla held the bar without hesitation. “How many?”

“Too many to wait around for.”

He grabbed his knife and checked the handle. Then he looked around. The window. The back door. Two exits. Both small. Both close.

The door shook once. A hard thump followed. Then silence.

“Come out,” a voice called. Calm. Too calm. “We don’t want the girl hurt. We just want to talk.”

Layla glanced at Suhail. He gave a short nod. No talking.

They moved to the back door. Suhail opened it slowly. A shadow passed in the alley. He reached for a broken metal pipe by the wall and handed it to her.

They stepped out.

A man stood at the end of the alley, turning fast when he heard the door. He pulled something from his coat. A long stick. Maybe a club. Maybe more.

Suhail didn’t wait. He ran at the man full speed and slammed into him with his shoulder. The man fell back, hitting the ground hard.

Two more figures came around the corner. Suhail grabbed the pipe and swung once, hard, hitting one in the leg. The man shouted and fell to one knee.

Layla backed against the wall, bar raised. One of the men moved toward her, fast and low. She swung the bar and hit him in the arm. He cursed and fell back.

Suhail took on the last one. The man was taller, heavier, but slow. Suhail ducked, kicked him in the knee, and brought the pipe across the man's face. Blood followed.

Then silence.

The men lay groaning or still. Layla dropped the bar. Her hands shook, but she didn't cry.

Suhail grabbed her arm. "We go now. We don't wait to see who else is coming."

They ran, past walls covered in peeling posters, past dark shops and broken lights. They didn't look back.

They stopped only when they reached the old road leading to the highway. Breathless. Dirt on their hands. Blood on Suhail's shirt. But still standing.

Layla looked at him. "I guess I'm not the only one good with a metal pipe."

"You did fine," Suhail said. "Next time, use your left more."

She laughed once, breathless but real. "Noted."

They moved again. The night still watched them. But the shadows no longer scared them.

Now, the shadows were the only things they trusted.

Chapter 7: Prayer and Betrayal

They walked without speaking, letting the weight of the fight settle into their muscles. The road ahead was empty but stretched too far. The wind carried dust across the corners of the old street signs, and every few steps, Suhail looked back. Not in fear—just to be sure they weren't being followed. Layla's face was calm now, but her silence was full of thought.

As they reached a small corner shop that still had power, a group of men stood watching the TV fixed to the wall above the counter. The screen displayed flashing images, with red letters scrolling beneath a serious news anchor's face. Suhail's stomach turned before he even saw what was on it. He stepped closer, Layla behind him.

There it was. His face. Large and grainy, a photo from years ago. His name beneath it, written in bold white.

WANTED: SUHAIL AL-HADI TERROR SUSPECT.
ACCUSED OF ARSON AND ABDUCTION.

The anchor's voice filled the street. "Sources inside the ministry confirm the suspect has ties to old rebel groups and is now traveling with Layla Khalil, daughter of the well-known businessman Mazen Khalil. Officials fear she may be under threat or possibly held against her will."

Layla let out a dry, sharp laugh. The men near the TV turned their heads. One of them leaned closer to the screen.

"We have to move," Suhail said.

Layla didn't move. Her eyes stayed locked on the screen for a second longer. "My own father. He always said truth would protect us. And here he is—buying lies, building walls, feeding the same snake he told me to stay away from."

Suhail pulled her by the elbow gently. "Later. Let's keep moving."

They ducked into an alley that curved toward the mosque district. The city felt louder now, like it was breathing down their necks. Every flashing sign, every guard post, every passing car was suddenly a hand waiting to grab them.

They reached the edge of an old neighborhood where the buildings stood short and wide, with soft lights glowing behind blue curtains. The air smelled of warm bread and

burning oil. Cats curled under benches, and old men played chess in the corners. Here, the city felt slower.

Layla wiped sweat from her forehead. “He really said I was kidnapped.”

“He said what he needed to,” Suhail replied. “Not to protect you, but to protect himself.”

“He doesn’t know me at all,” she muttered.

Suhail looked at her, his voice softer. “That’s not your fault.”

She sat down on a low wall under a fig tree, breathing hard.

“It’s just funny. I used to think my father was this giant. A protector. A builder. But now all I see is a man who lost control and started pointing fingers.”

Suhail crouched next to her. “When a storm hits the desert, the tents that fall first are the ones built with pride, not rope.”

Layla gave him a tired look. “You and these sayings.”

He shrugged. “My mother used them to keep my head on straight. They’re all I’ve got.”

She leaned her head back against the tree. “They help, though. They do.”

They waited until the streets grew even quieter. Then Suhail led her to a small mosque tucked behind a row of carpet shops. The building was old but clean. The walls were cream-colored, and the dome above was chipped at the edges. A single lantern flickered above the entrance, and no one stood guard. It was the kind of place the city had forgotten.

He led her around the side, up a narrow set of stairs that twisted to the rooftop. There was a mat laid out under the stars, and an old radio left behind by some visitor. From up there, the city lights looked far and small. The noise was lower. The sky felt wider.

Layla lay down with her arm over her eyes. “I haven’t seen stars in days.”

Suhail sat beside her, legs crossed. “They’re always there. We just forget to look.”

They stayed quiet for a while. Just the hum of the city below and the gentle wind brushing over their faces. From the corner of the roof, a call to prayer echoed from a distant speaker. It wasn’t loud, not commanding. Just soft, like a memory.

Suhail looked up at the sky. “This is where I feel more like myself. Not the streets. Not the towers. Just this. The wind. The stone. The stillness.”

Layla turned her head toward him. “What was your father like?”

Suhail let out a breath. “Strong. Not with his arms, but with his silence. He listened more than he spoke. People trusted him. He believed in promises, even when they came from dangerous mouths.”

She nodded. “Mine never listened. He only spoke louder until everyone else stopped talking.”

“My father told me one thing before he left,” Suhail said. “He said loyalty is stronger than steel. He said when the ground shakes, you don’t grab your gold—you grab your people.”

Layla closed her eyes. “Do you think he’s still out there?”

Suhail looked down at his hands. “I used to dream he was hiding, building something in the desert. A place where people could live without fear. Then I got older, and I started thinking he was just gone. Like the sand took him back.”

“But now?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Now I think someone took him. Buried his name under lies. Just like they’re trying to do to me.”

Layla reached out and placed her hand on his. “Then we uncover it. One truth at a time.”

Suhail didn’t speak, but he didn’t move his hand either. The stars blinked above them. Below, the mosque remained still, untouched by the noise of the world.

Later, Layla sat up and pulled the laptop from her bag again. She sat cross-legged beside him and tapped quietly.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Checking the news,” she said. “I want to know what else they’re saying.”

The screen lit her face in pale blue. Her fingers scrolled through headlines. Every story showed Suhail’s face next to hers, always with the same message. Danger. Threat. Escape. Each one worse than the last.

“They’re saying I’ve been brainwashed,” she muttered. “That I turned on my family. That I was seen in a stolen car. That you forced me into hiding.”

Suhail's jaw tensed. "That means they're scared."

Layla raised her eyes. "What do we do next?"

"We find the reporter," Suhail said. "We give him the files. The truth. Everything. Let the world see it all. Then they can decide who's been taken."

"And if the world doesn't care?" she asked.

"Then we keep moving. Keep speaking. Even if only one person listens, that's still more than silence."

She nodded slowly. "You believe in things too much."

"You've stopped believing," he said.

"Maybe," she whispered. "But not tonight."

They stayed there, side by side, the night cool around them. The stars above felt endless, and for once, the city below felt far enough away that it couldn't break them. Layla rested her chin on her knees and hugged her legs. Suhail leaned back on his palms, eyes still on the sky.

After a while, he broke the quiet. "My mother's buried near a dune that looks like a sleeping lion. It's not far from the old

caravan trail. No headstone. Just a mound. I piled rocks over it to keep the wind from blowing it away.”

Layla looked at him without saying anything. He didn’t need her to speak. He just needed to keep going.

“She died when I was sixteen. Got sick during the heat season. We had no doctor. Just herbs, prayer, and whatever my hands could do. But it wasn’t enough.”

He blinked slowly, not fighting the tears this time. “I built her grave with my own hands. Dug into the sand while the wind beat against my back. My fingers bled by the end. I didn’t stop until the sun set.”

Layla reached over, touched his face gently. She wiped a tear with her thumb. “She would be proud. You didn’t run. You stayed. You fought.”

Suhail nodded, his voice lower now. “Sometimes I think she’s still with me. In the wind, in the silence. In the way I keep going even when I don’t know how.”

“She is,” Layla said softly. “Because I don’t know who I’d be right now if you hadn’t come.”

They sat like that, both quiet again, the rooftop cool beneath them. Then a sound cut through the stillness. Sirens. Faint at first, then growing louder. Suhail turned his head fast, his eyes scanning the streets below. He stood slowly, careful not to be seen above the edge.

Below them, on the far side of the mosque, three police vans turned into the narrow street. Their blue lights flashed against the walls, painting the alley in sharp color. Officers moved quietly, no shouting, no engines roaring. It was a clean sweep. The kind meant to trap rather than chase.

Layla stood too. “They found us.”

“They’re not rushing,” Suhail said. “They want to corner us.”

She opened her laptop and closed all tabs, wiped the keyboard, and tucked it into her bag. “I can climb down the other side. Get out through the carpet shop.”

Suhail checked the edge again. “No. They’ll be waiting at both ends.”

“Then what?”

He looked toward the minaret, the tallest point of the mosque. A long rope hung from its side. Probably left by someone fixing the lights days ago.

“I’ll go down that way,” he said. “Draw their attention. They’ll follow me.”

“And I do what?”

“You wait two minutes. Then you move fast, stay in the shadows. Head east toward the river. I’ll meet you under the bridge near the old fisherman’s hut.”

Layla grabbed his wrist. “No. We stay together.”

“We won’t win that way,” Suhail said calmly. “You have the laptop. You have the proof. You’re the one they want silent. They’ll catch me first if I let them.”

She stared at him, her grip not letting go. “And what if they don’t let you go?”

Suhail gave her a small, tired smile. “Then you’ll just have to come save me.”

Layla looked down. Her voice shook just once. “I hate this city.”

“I know,” he said. “But it’s not the city. It’s the ones who think they own it.”

They stepped to the base of the minaret. Suhail tested the rope. It held firm. He wrapped it around his hand, then looked at her one more time.

She leaned forward and kissed his forehead. Her voice was barely a whisper. “Come back.”

He nodded once. Then he swung over the edge and slid down into the dark.

Layla waited. Every second stretched like a full breath. She heard the shouts begin. Someone screamed, “There!” Then more footsteps. Tires screeched. The trap was springing—but not on her.

She counted. One minute. Two.

Then she moved. Quiet and fast. She stepped off the roof, down the back steps, through the carpet shop’s rear exit. No one saw her. She didn’t run yet. Not until she cleared the last alley. Then she moved faster than her own thoughts.

Behind her, more shouting. But it was fading now, going in the other direction.

Suhail had done what he promised.

She didn't look back.

She followed the smell of the river, the sound of old pipes beneath the ground, the memories of his words still in her chest like a guide.

And somewhere in that dark, she whispered a promise to herself, not out loud, but clear in her heart.

She would not let him fall alone. Not him. Not this time.

Chapter 8: Hunted and Hunter

Suhail dropped from the last stretch of the rope with a rough thud on the stone below. His feet hit the ground hard, and he winced from the shock in his knees. But he didn't stop. The shouts were behind him already, spreading like fire. Boots thundered on the pavement. Flashlights flicked around, slicing through the dark.

He sprinted toward the alley beside the mosque, turning corners without thinking. The city was waking again, but only in its shadows. Dogs barked, windows slammed shut, and far-off car alarms added to the noise. He didn't look for faces. He didn't stop to breathe. Every second counted.

Behind him, someone yelled, "There! Over the wall!" More footsteps followed.

Suhail grinned without humor. They had swallowed the bait.

He led them east, twisting through narrower paths now, deeper into the older parts of Al Waha where the street lights

flickered and the air smelled of fish and salt. He could hear the water now, the waves brushing against the docks. He had been here many times as a boy, helping traders unload crates and begging old men for bread when food was low.

He reached the fish market just as the first prayer of morning rang from a distant speaker. The market was mostly closed, but the fishermen were already awake. Some were smoking. Some were washing down their tables. Others were swatting away cats that circled their carts.

Suhail darted between stalls, knocking over buckets and slipping past hanging nets. Police sirens screamed behind him. He needed to vanish before they arrived.

A man carrying two baskets of squid shouted at him. “Watch where you’re running! This isn’t your racetrack, boy!”

Suhail didn’t stop. He rushed past crates and tables, past the row of iceboxes where fish glistened under weak bulbs. Then he saw him — an old man, thin as a broomstick, wearing a sweater with holes and sandals too loose for his feet. He sat beside a cart of dead sardines, staring at Suhail like he was watching a ghost.

Suhail ran to him. “Uncle, help me. Just for a moment.”

The old man looked at him. His eyes were sharp but not cruel. “You bring trouble?”

“Only for those chasing me,” Suhail said.

The old man jerked his chin toward the crate of sardines.

“Inside. Don’t breathe like a donkey.”

Suhail didn’t ask again. He lifted the wooden lid, climbed in, and curled into himself. The smell hit him like a slap — sharp, sour, strong enough to burn his throat. Fish slime soaked through his shirt. He closed the lid just as the first officer turned the corner.

“Did you see a man come through here?” a voice barked.

“See a man? I see men every morning,” the old man answered.

“You know who I mean. Thin, dark hair. Running like a thief.”

“I’m a fisherman,” the old man said flatly. “Not a spy.”

Another officer kicked over a basket. “Check the carts!”

Boots stomped closer. Suhail held his breath, trying not to move, trying not to gag. A loud thump landed on the top of the crate. Someone had leaned on it.

“Nothing here,” another officer said after a long pause.

“Move on,” the first one growled. “He won’t get far. The harbor’s a dead end.”

When the boots faded and the curses melted into the distance, Suhail waited a few more seconds. Then the lid creaked open, and the old man’s wrinkled face stared down at him.

“You smell worse than my donkey,” he said.

“I owe you,” Suhail gasped, climbing out, wiping sardine guts from his shirt.

“Then get out of here before the wind changes and they smell you too,” the man said, flicking his hand.

Suhail didn’t need more warning. He slipped behind the stall, ran through a row of boats tied to the docks, and ducked into a dry boathouse with a broken radio. Inside, there was a crate of old nets and a crate of soggy clothes. He searched the pile

and found a jacket. It reeked of salt and oil, but it was better than blood and fish.

He pulled out a stolen phone he had lifted from a guard's belt earlier. It was a simple phone, no camera, no lock screen. One bar of battery.

He dialed the number Layla had written on his arm in ink before they split. It rang once. Twice. Then her voice came, low and shaky.

“Suhail?”

“I’m here.”

Her breath caught. “Are you safe?”

“Safe enough. You?”

“I’m near the river. Under the old bridge. Just like you said.”

“I’ll find you,” he said. “Stay hidden. Don’t move unless you have to.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said, voice steadier now.

“You’re coming to me. That’s final.”

He smiled a little. “Yes, boss.”

There was a long pause, then she said softly, “They’re still looking for us, aren’t they?”

“Yes. Harder than ever.”

Another pause. “They’ll twist the story. Change everything. Soon people won’t know what’s real.”

“We know what’s real,” Suhail said. “That’s enough. For now.”

“Suhail,” she said, “Don’t die before I can slap you for scaring me.”

“I’ll wait for the slap,” he said. “I promise.”

There was quiet again, not heavy—just settled, like the pause between breaths. Then Layla’s voice came through, softer but sharper. “I found something. It was buried in one of the folders you didn’t get to see. Coordinates. No names. Just a list of fuel shipments and a private security pass.”

He frowned, eyes narrowed. “Where does it lead?”

“A camp,” she said. “Outside Al Waha. In the southern dunes. It’s not on maps. No satellite images. But it matches

the patterns of supply drops. Food. Fuel. Night vision equipment. It's big. Hidden."

Suhail looked around the silent dock, then back at the skyline far behind him. "Al-Shabah?"

"I think that's where he is," Layla said. "Where he vanishes when the city sleeps. It fits. No cameras. No neighbors. Just sand and secrets."

He pulled the jacket tighter. "Then that's where I'm going."

"You'll need transport."

"I'll find something."

"You'll need backup."

He smirked. "I have a backup. She'll slap me if I mess this up."

She didn't laugh this time. Just said quietly, "Come back with something real. Or don't come back at all."

"I'll bring his name," Suhail said. "Even if I have to drag it through every grain of sand."

He ended the call and stood still for a few seconds, just breathing, just letting the words settle into his chest. Then he moved fast. He didn't run now—he walked with purpose.

The fishermen were packing up. The crates of fish were loaded. The cats were licking their paws. A few mopeds leaned beside a fence, keys dangling from belts. No one was watching. They were too tired. Too distracted.

Suhail spotted a black motorbike—dusty, scratched, but strong. One of the younger fishermen, maybe eighteen, sat nearby playing a game on his phone. Suhail walked up, nodded once, and held out a folded wad of cash he had found earlier.

“Need a ride,” Suhail said. “Now.”

The boy looked up. Saw the look in Suhail's eyes. Took the money. Handed him the key.

“Don't crash it,” he muttered.

Suhail straddled the bike. The engine roared to life with a stubborn cough. He twisted the throttle once. Twice. The tires spun against the dock before gripping. Then he took off.

The streets flew past. He didn't go toward the center. He cut behind warehouses, past dirt roads, through an industrial lot where trucks were lined like sleeping beasts. The first edge of dawn touched the horizon with the color of bruises. But he didn't slow.

The air changed as he left the last row of buildings behind. The scent of oil and smoke faded. The city lights vanished in the mirror. Ahead of him, nothing but open dunes.

He adjusted his scarf over his nose and bent low over the bike. The wind pushed against him, but he leaned into it like it was a challenge he'd already accepted.

The first dune came fast, and he rode along its base, letting the bike rise and fall with the curves of the land. It was like returning to a forgotten rhythm. The desert didn't scare him. It spoke to him. It reminded him who he was.

He rode until the sun broke the edge of the sky. Pale orange light spilled across the sand. The wind picked up, dry and sharp, blowing grit against his arms and face. Still, he didn't stop. The coordinates Layla gave him pulsed in his head like a second heartbeat.

An hour passed. Maybe two. The fuel gauge dipped. The wind roared louder. But still, he moved forward.

Then, in the distance, he saw it.

Just a sliver at first. A pale line cutting through the dunes. Then shapes. Not natural ones. Tents. Metal fencing. Shadows of watchtowers built from scrap and steel.

He cut the engine and rolled behind a tall ridge. The silence that followed was thick, humming with the pulse in his ears. He laid the bike down and crawled to the top of the dune on his belly.

Below him sat the camp.

It wasn't large, but it was built to vanish. Tents covered in netting that looked like sand. Two jeeps. A radio tower. A small landing pad. Nothing flashy. Everything built to disappear fast.

He pulled out a small monocular and scanned the area. Three guards, two patrol dogs, one generator. But no sign of Al-Shabah. Still, this had his handprint all over it.

Suhail watched for a full hour. Waited. Counted steps. Noted times. The sun climbed higher. The camp began to move—men walking between tents, carrying crates, drinking water.

Still no Al-Shabah.

He crawled back down and circled the camp from the west side. No footprints there. Just hard sand. He spotted a weak point in the fence—where the netting had been patched with rope.

He waited for the shift change. When the guard turned his back, Suhail slipped through, landing silently behind a stack of boxes marked with oil company logos.

He stayed low, moving between crates and tents, listening for voices. Most of the talk was boring—food supplies, wind measurements, faulty radios.

Then he heard it.

A voice. Smooth, slow, confident.

“He’s out there. Looking. Chasing ghosts. Just like his father.”

Suhail froze.

The voice was coming from the largest tent.

He crept closer. Peered through a slit in the fabric.

Inside, a man sat in a leather chair. Clean clothes. Clean shave. Sunglasses. Tattoos curled up his neck. On the table in front of him, a long dagger rested beside a half-eaten peach.

A phone lay beside his hand, still lit. A name on the screen—blurred from Suhail's angle.

Then the man laughed. Not loudly. Just a chuckle. One hand tapped the dagger's hilt. "Desert boys always think loyalty saves them. But loyalty gets you buried."

Suhail's jaw clenched. He had no plan. No backup. No weapon but a small knife in his belt.

But the sight of that man—his calm, his smirk, his voice—it was enough.

Suhail didn't breathe. He backed away. Silent.

He had seen enough.

He had found the snake.

Now he just needed to strike.

Chapter 9: Dunes of Betrayal

Suhail pressed his chest flat against the sand, the grit biting into his arms and sticking to the sweat on his skin. The bike was parked far behind, hidden behind a sloping dune where no tire marks could betray him. From this spot, the view stretched wide, low tents spread across the sand, some tucked between makeshift fences and others flanked by silent, resting camels. The sun above was harsh, burning down without mercy, but the shadows from the tents made strange shapes, curling like secrets that didn't want to be found.

He crept forward slowly, inch by inch, watching every step, careful not to disturb the crust of the sand. His breath stayed shallow, his heart thudding not from fear, but from something tighter — a feeling that something familiar lived inside this place.

He reached the edge of a stack of cargo crates near a water trough. Flies buzzed low, and a camel chewed lazily, not caring who lived or died nearby. Two men stood near a tent flap, holding rifles slung across their chests. Their boots were

too clean to be villagers, and their posture was sharp—trained men, paid to shoot before they asked.

Suhail narrowed his eyes, studying their faces. Then he froze.

On the neck of the man to the left — just above his collar — a tattoo.

Three curved lines like waves, wrapped around a single dot.

That mark. That symbol.

It was old, something only people from his tribe wore. Not popular anymore. The kind of tattoo elders had when he was a child. The kind his uncle wore proudly on his forearm before he vanished years ago.

Suhail's thoughts ran fast. Was it possible? Was this man from the tribe? Could he be tied to the ones who disappeared with Suhail's father?

He waited until the guard moved behind the camel pens, away from the other men. Then, heart pounding, he slid through a gap between crates and met him at the edge of the fence.

Suhail stood tall, but kept his voice low. “Where did you get that tattoo?”

The guard turned sharply, raising his rifle, but his face shifted as he met Suhail’s eyes. He didn’t speak at first, just stared.

“Who are you?” the man asked in a hoarse whisper.

Suhail stepped closer. “Suhail al-Hadi. Son of Faris. Born in the dunes east of Qamar Ridge. That tattoo — only our elders wore it.”

The man’s face went pale under the desert sun. He looked around quickly, then leaned in. “You shouldn’t be here. They’ll kill you if they know.”

“I need answers,” Suhail said, barely able to breathe. “Did you know my father?”

The man’s mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “He was here. A long time ago. But not as a guest. He was brought in. Questioned. Then he... disappeared.”

Suhail’s chest tightened. “Disappeared?”

“They said he left the camp. But no one saw him go. One night he was here, the next morning, gone. No footprints. No goodbyes.”

Suhail swallowed hard. The wind moved between them, carrying dust and silence. “And you? What are you doing with them?”

The man looked away, jaw clenched. “You do what you must when your family is hungry. I keep quiet. I carry my weapon. I look the other way.”

“Do you still believe in the tribe?” Suhail asked.

The man’s eyes flicked back. “I never stopped. I just learned that belief doesn't feed children.”

Suhail took a slow step back. “I’m going in. I need to see what’s inside those tents.”

“You won’t get far,” the guard said. “They’ll spot you. They have eyes even in the sand.”

“Then distract them.”

The man stared at him, torn, then nodded once. “I’ll give you five minutes. If you’re not out by then, I’ll have to turn you in.”

Suhail gave him a tight nod. “Five minutes is enough.”

The guard turned and shouted something about the camels escaping. Two more guards rushed toward the pens to help. That was the moment.

Suhail ducked low and slipped between tents, his steps quick and quiet. He passed one filled with weapons — crates open, bullets lined like silver teeth. Another tent held maps spread across tables, some marked with red pins and strange codes.

Then he reached the largest tent, the one with fans buzzing from inside. He pulled the flap slightly open and looked in.

Three men sat inside. One typed at a laptop. Another cleaned a gun. The third spoke into a headset, giving orders in a soft voice. Behind them, along the back wall, were files. Actual paper files, stacked neatly in locked boxes. Names written in faded ink. Dates. Photos.

He counted breaths. In. Out. Then he slipped inside.

He moved fast, quiet. He reached the back of the tent and pulled out the smallest folder he could fit under his jacket. Just as he turned to leave, someone stood up.

“Hey—!”

Suhail bolted.

He ducked out, the shout rising behind him. The guards by the pens turned. One raised a radio. Another aimed a rifle.

Suhail ran.

He zigzagged between tents. Bullets cracked behind him. He reached the edge of the camp and dove behind a water tank, panting hard.

The guard with the tattoo ran toward him. “They know now. You have to go.”

“Cover me,” Suhail said.

“I’ll slow them down,” the man said. “But after this, I’m finished.”

Suhail placed a hand on his shoulder. “You chose the right side.”

He dashed toward the dunes. Behind him, more shouts. More footsteps. But the sand was his home. He knew how to disappear here.

When he reached the bike, he didn't waste time. He gunned the engine and kicked up a wave of dust.

As he sped away, the camp grew smaller in his mirror. But what he carried under his jacket felt heavy.

Not just paper.

Proof.

Memories.

He didn't slow until the dunes swallowed the last sign of the camp. He rode a wide arc, circling back the long way, toward the place Layla had said to meet. A spot near the edge of a dry orchard where tall palms still stood, roots digging deep even after the old canal had dried. There were no buildings, no guards, no cameras. Just trees and silence.

As the motorbike hissed to a stop beside the largest date palm, Suhail saw a robe shift behind the thick trunk. A hand peeked out and waved him low.

He ducked, crouched, and walked forward quickly. Layla stepped from the shadow, pulling off the scarf that covered her face. Her eyes were wide, alert. Her cheek was scratched, but her jaw was firm.

“You made it,” she whispered.

He nodded and pulled the folder from his jacket. “You?”

“I got here before dawn. Climbed over the dry canal wall. There’s a clear view of the main tent from behind those trees.”

They crouched together behind the tallest tree, leaves rustling above them. Suhail opened the folder between them. The pages inside were dry and full of codes, dates, and black-and-white photos with faces marked in red ink. One of the pictures made his throat tighten. His father, Faris, much younger, standing beside a jeep, arms crossed, with two men behind him Suhail didn’t recognize.

“Look,” Layla pointed at a document near the bottom.

“These are payment logs. Offshore transfers. Huge amounts moved between shell companies. The same names tied to my father’s fake accounts.”

“They’re all connected,” Suhail said. “Mazen. Al-Shabah. The oil contracts. It’s all in here.”

She pulled out a small device from her pocket. “We record it now. We upload it later.”

Suhail stuffed the papers back in and nodded. “But there’s more. Something else. I heard him talking before. He knows I’m close. He mocked my father.”

Layla pointed past the orchard. “He’s there. Just came back from a walk. Sitting in the shade. He’s laughing.”

They crawled forward on elbows, quiet through the sand and dry grass. A row of palm trees blocked them from full view, but between the trunks, they saw him.

Al-Shabah sat on a low wooden bench, legs crossed, robes clean, a glass of tea in his hand. Two guards stood behind him. His voice was calm but cold, rising and falling like he owned the air.

“We do not fear traitors,” he said, smiling. “Traitors are weak. They think truth protects them. But truth has no value if no one listens.”

One of the guards laughed. Al-Shabah kept speaking.

“I give kings their food. I give princes their shadows. I don’t ask for loyalty. I buy it.”

Suhail’s hands clenched in the sand. His fingers found the grip of his small pistol, hidden under his shirt. His thumb brushed the safety switch. He could take the shot now. He had the angle. Al-Shabah’s head was in clear view between the tree trunks.

Layla’s hand gripped his arm, hard.

He turned to her, silent.

She shook her head, slow but firm.

Not yet.

Suhail breathed through his nose, slow and rough. The gun stayed in his hand. He stared at the man, the monster, the voice behind everything.

The one who had stolen his father.

The one who had mocked the tribe.

The one who wore the desert like a costume, not a home.

He wanted to end it here.

But Layla was right.

They didn't just need silence.

They needed sound.

The kind of truth that couldn't be buried. Not in sand. Not under lies.

Suhail tucked the gun back under his shirt. Layla was already pulling out her phone. She switched on the mic, turned the screen dark, and set it near the tree base, pointing it toward the clearing.

They stayed there, still as roots, while the voice continued.

"Do you think Mazen cares about his daughter?" Al-Shabah said with a chuckle. "He sold her out the day she turned eighteen. She was just another deal to him. Just another name to clean up."

Suhail blinked slowly, his stomach turning.

Layla didn't flinch. But her hands had curled into fists.

One of the guards leaned forward. "What about the boy? The Bedouin?"

Al-Shabah sipped his tea. “He’s fire. Stubborn. Loud. But fire can be shaped. Or buried.”

Suhail almost rose again. Layla pulled him down with one hand. “We have enough,” she whispered.

“No,” he said. “He knows more.”

They waited longer. Another ten minutes. Al-Shabah spoke of deals, deliveries, foreign agents, desert wells, and names Suhail didn’t recognize. But every word helped.

At last, Al-Shabah stood. “Keep the girl alive. Let her run. She’ll lead him to us.”

Suhail’s eyes narrowed.

Layla looked sideways. “He never lost us. He’s just playing.”

Suhail picked up the phone slowly, careful not to make a sound.

They crawled back toward the bike, their bodies stiff, the air hotter now. When they reached the tree line, they stood slowly and walked away from the camp. Suhail didn’t speak until they were far enough from any ear.

“He knew we were watching,” he said.

Layla nodded. “He wanted us to hear it. He’s daring us.”

“Then let’s accept.”

They reached the bike, wiped off the sand, and mounted it together. She held tight to the folder. He started the engine.

As they sped away, the camp behind them seemed to shrink, but the storm building inside Suhail did not.

Now, they had words.

Next, they would bring fire.

Chapter 10: Mirage of the Ghost

The night air was thick, and the stars above were sharp and still. The desert had gone quiet except for the soft hum of a generator behind the camp and the hiss of wind brushing past the outer tents. A faint smell of grilled meat and boiled tea lingered as Suhail crouched low behind the edge of a sandbag stack, peeking under the bottom flap of the largest tent in the camp. Lanterns inside threw long shadows across the rugs, walls, and seated figures.

Al-Shabah sat at the head of a short table, a mint tea pot at his elbow, his hands moving slowly as he spoke. His clothes were clean and smooth, but his face was even smoother—emotionless, almost carved. His beard was trimmed sharp. His eyes scanned his guests but gave nothing away. Around him, three men sat in folding chairs. They wore expensive robes and watches that gleamed even in dim light. One of them had the face of a government man Suhail had seen on news screens. The other two looked like merchants or judges, the kind who spoke softly in courtrooms but ordered beatings in alleys.

Layla's small hidden camera sat under the sandbag near Suhail's side. He had adjusted it earlier with care, facing the opening between the lanterns and the main seating area. Its red light blinked once, then held still. It was on. Recording.

Suhail's breath stayed slow but shallow. His heart beat fast. He didn't blink. Not once. Every word counted now.

Al-Shabah raised his glass and sipped the mint tea slowly. "You see, the secret to this city is not fear," he said. "It's noise. Make enough of it, and no one hears the truth."

The men laughed. One clapped the table gently, like it was a stage joke.

A man in blue robes leaned forward. "But the fire last week—it was too loud. Too public."

Al-Shabah tilted his head. "Good. Public is useful. Let people argue. Let them choose sides. That's how you hide the hand that lit the match."

He poured more tea, not spilling a drop.

Another man leaned back, arms crossed. "The boy survived. The Bedouin."

Al-Shabah smiled without warmth. “Yes. He runs. He fights. That makes the story better. People like a hero. He gives them one.”

A long pause followed. The men looked at each other, some worried, some curious. One finally asked, “And Layla?”

Al-Shabah’s lips twitched. “She cries in silk. She will cry again. But next time, with cameras watching. Then I give her back. Let the father smile for the screens. Let him pretend he never sold her in the first place.”

Suhail’s fists clenched in the sand. He wanted to break through the tent, take his knife and press it deep between those cold ribs. But he waited. Still breathing. Still recording.

One of the politicians cleared his throat. “And the judges?”

“Already bought,” Al-Shabah said simply. “Some with threats. Some with gifts. A few with photos.”

A laugh ran around the table again. Al-Shabah poured more tea. “You think I lead with weapons. But no. I lead with mirrors. Let people look at themselves long enough, and they start to believe whatever I show them.”

He leaned forward now, resting his elbows on his knees. “I burned that building not to hurt. I burned it to shine. The smoke carried my name. The flame made it real.”

Suhail’s breath hitched.

A guard’s voice rang nearby. “Go check the sides. Wind’s pulling the tent again.”

Boots thudded close.

Suhail tried to slide back, slowly, but his left foot shifted too far. A small rock clacked under his heel.

The flap of the tent snapped up.

A flashlight beam hit his eyes.

“Here!”

The guard lunged forward, grabbing Suhail’s leg hard. In one pull, he was dragged inside, his arms scraping against the sand. Another guard raised his gun.

The guests stood suddenly, alarmed, their robes flapping. Al-Shabah didn’t move. He just blinked slowly, as if watching a child spill a drink.

Suhail was kicked onto his knees in front of them. The guards held his arms tight. Dust covered his face. His chest rose and fell with fury.

“Well,” Al-Shabah said calmly. “The fire walks in.”

One of the men stepped back, shocked. “That’s him?”

“Yes,” Al-Shabah said. “And now he hears too much.”

Suhail spat blood and looked straight at him. “I heard enough. Enough to bury you.”

Al-Shabah stood slowly, brushing invisible dust from his shoulder. “You don’t bury me, boy. I vanish before the shovel lifts.”

Suhail grinned through the pain. “You vanish because you’re afraid.”

That struck something. Al-Shabah’s eyes flickered. His voice dropped low. “You think fear is weakness? Fear is a tool. You fear what’s real. And I... I make things real.”

One of the guards pressed the barrel of his rifle to Suhail’s head.

Suhail didn't blink. "Do it. Then what? Another fire? Another lie?"

The room went quiet.

Al-Shabah looked to the guard. "Wait."

He turned to the others. "He wants a stage. Let's give him one."

Suhail felt his arms yanked up as two guards pulled him to his feet. Blood dripped from his lip. His knees ached. But he stood.

"You won't walk away from this," he said.

"I already have," Al-Shabah replied, voice soft, almost bored. "Again and again."

Suhail's fingers twitched, but he kept his arms still. He looked at the faces around the table—shadows of power, all silent now. They wanted him dead, but not in the tent. Not yet. Al-Shabah wanted something else. He wasn't done talking.

The Ghost stepped forward, the leather of his shoes soundless on the rug. He smiled and clapped his hands once,

like a man greeting an old friend after a long trip. The sound echoed strangely under the lantern-lit roof.

“You,” he said, looking Suhail up and down. “You walk in with dirt on your skin and fire in your eyes. Just like your father. Brave. Foolish.”

Suhail's mouth tightened.

Al-Shabah leaned in, voice low, almost kind. “He was loyal, you know. Until the very end. He never gave me your name. He never begged.”

Suhail stared into his eyes. “Where is he?”

“Gone,” Al-Shabah said with a shrug. “His bones belong to the dunes now. Maybe the wind moved them. Maybe scorpions sleep in his ribs.”

The room was too quiet. The only sound was the soft whistle of the wind slipping through the flap behind them. The guards didn't laugh. Not this time.

Suhail felt his breath grow short, but he didn't blink. “You're lying.”

“I have no reason to lie,” Al-Shabah said, pulling something from his pocket. It was small, wrapped in cloth. He opened it slowly and showed it to Suhail.

A tooth. Long. Yellow. Cracked at the tip. Worn.

“From his necklace,” Al-Shabah said. “He wore it till the last breath.”

Suhail’s knees nearly buckled. But he didn’t fall. He stared at the tooth, then at the man who held it. His voice came out raw. “You think that breaks me?”

Al-Shabah smiled again. “No. That’s what makes you useful.”

Then, from behind, a crash.

A roar of metal on glass. The nearest lantern exploded into shards. Hot oil splattered. A sheet of canvas lit like dry paper.

All heads turned.

A figure burst through the side of the tent, face covered in cloth, swinging a rod like a sword. Layla.

She hit the second lantern before anyone could react. The flames leapt fast, catching the rugs, licking up the wooden support beam.

Suhail ducked as the guard holding his right arm let go in panic. He kicked backward, twisting out of the other's grip, and grabbed a heavy dish from the table. He slammed it into the nearest man's head. The man dropped with a grunt.

"Run!" Layla shouted, tossing the rod to Suhail.

He caught it and swung at a second guard, cracking his shoulder. The man howled and fell into a chair.

The flames grew louder now, cracking wood, filling the air with black smoke. The fancy men stumbled back, coughing, their silk robes catching sparks.

Suhail grabbed the camera from under his jacket. It was still safe. Still recording. He yanked Layla by the hand and bolted toward the flap.

"Go left!" she shouted over the noise.

They pushed through a line of crates, knocked over a water basin, and rushed out the side. Behind them, the tent roared like a beast, smoke rising high into the sky.

Suhail coughed hard but didn't stop. His legs ached. His ribs burned. But his grip on the camera never loosened.

They reached the edge of the camp. Alarms rang out behind them. Voices shouted, boots pounded on sand. The whole camp was awake now, but the flames lit confusion everywhere.

Layla pulled him toward the trench they'd used before. It was narrow, lined with old pipes, and half-covered by palm fronds.

"In here," she said.

They dropped into the ditch just as two guards ran past above them, yelling into radios. The sand was cold at the bottom. The camera rested between them, still humming softly.

Suhail pressed his head back against the wall, breathing deep.

"You came in swinging," he said.

"I told you I was done waiting," she answered. "They were going to kill you."

"You could've been shot."

"I almost was." She wiped soot from her cheek. "One of the guards tripped over my scarf. His own gun hit his foot."

Suhail snorted, then winced. “Remind me never to argue with you again.”

“You’re too stubborn to listen anyway.”

They rested in the trench a little longer. Overhead, the sound of the fire grew distant, but the camp was still moving, still shouting, still searching.

“We can’t stay long,” Suhail said. “They’ll check everywhere.”

“I know,” Layla whispered. “But we got it. His voice. His face. His words.”

Suhail tapped the camera. “All of it.”

They looked at each other, both covered in sweat, blood, and dust, but smiling now.

“We end this,” she said.

Suhail nodded. “This time, for real.”

They crawled through the trench, low and careful. At the end, they slid behind a broken cart and climbed into a dry irrigation channel. The path took them far from the fire. The sky was still dark, but hints of dawn were coming.

As they walked, Suhail looked down at the small wrapped tooth in his hand.

“Do you think it’s really his?” he asked.

Layla looked at it, then shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. He wanted you to believe it. That’s what counts.”

“He killed him,” Suhail said. “Even if it wasn’t his hand. He gave the order.”

“Then that’s part of what we’ll expose.”

They walked in silence for a while. The desert opened wide around them again, the city a memory far in the distance.

Suhail thought of his father. Of the fire. Of Al-Shabah’s eyes, so calm and cold.

He would not vanish again.

This time, he would burn. In daylight. On every screen.

And Suhail would be the one to light the match.

Chapter 11: Tower of the Dead

The wheels of the stolen truck kicked up more sand than they cleared, but Suhail kept pushing the gas pedal down. The engine cried in protest as dunes shifted under the tires. Layla sat beside him, both hands gripping the dashboard. She was holding the wrapped camera against her chest like a newborn. Suhail didn't speak. His jaw was tight, and his eyes locked on the growing lights in the far distance.

Al Waha rose like a sleeping giant through the haze. Its towers poked at the sky, barely lit through the thick clouds. The storm above had no mercy. Thunder rolled, low and angry, as the wind whipped sand across the road. Somewhere behind them, the fire still burned in the desert. But in front of them—justice waited.

They didn't speak until the first sign of the city walls came into view. Cracked roads turned into broken pavement. A checkpoint blinked red and green with no one inside. It had been abandoned—like many things in Al Waha when the wind picked up.

“We need the tower,” Layla said, shouting over the engine.

“The tallest one. It has the best signal.”

Suhail nodded. “I know a way in. There’s a storm gate near the back loading dock. Used to deliver vegetables when I was younger.”

The truck skidded as it turned, slamming into a side wall. Suhail didn’t slow. He pushed forward, dodging a tipped market stall and weaving past shuttered shops. The city wasn’t empty, but it felt like it. People hid during sandstorms. They shut their doors and windows and whispered old prayers behind locked rooms.

The tower stood straight ahead, its top lost in the clouds. Wind screamed across its steel face, rattling the glass. The power flickered in parts of the city. Streetlamps blinked like warning eyes.

They parked behind a low wall near the tower’s rear entrance. Suhail jumped out first and motioned for Layla to follow. She tied a scarf around her head and ducked behind him. The wind pushed hard against their backs. Trash flew across the parking lot like ghosts.

The storm door wasn't locked. It hung loose, swinging in the wind like it had been waiting for them.

Inside, it was quiet. The hallway was narrow and smelled like wires and dust. Lights above flickered weakly, blinking more than shining.

They climbed two flights of emergency stairs and entered the elevator bay. The normal power was out, but backup systems hummed low through the wall.

"Wait," Layla said. "We can't go to the top yet."

"Why?"

"We need to connect to every news outlet at once. That means we need the fiber hub. It's on the 42nd floor. It links every channel, every feed."

Suhail nodded and scanned the control panel. The elevator lights were off, but the manual crank switch glowed dull orange. He pulled it down. The elevator groaned, then opened like a tired mouth.

They stepped inside. The walls were mirrors, cracked in places, fogged from the humidity. Thunder cracked again,

louder now. Suhail hit the 42 button and held it until it beeped.

As the elevator moved, the storm pressed harder against the tower. Lightning flashed behind the glass, turning their shadows into flickers.

Layla looked at him through the mirrored walls. “You nervous?”

“Yes,” Suhail said. “But not scared.”

“You used to be?”

“I was scared the day I buried my mother.”

Layla reached out and squeezed his hand. “You don’t have to carry all of it alone.”

“I know,” he said. “But some of it’s mine.”

The doors opened.

The 42nd floor was dark. Only emergency lights blinked from the ceiling. The hallway was empty. Dust drifted in the air like floating ash. Suhail led the way, following old memories of rooms and stairs and side offices. He remembered this place. He had delivered boxes here when he was seventeen. Back

then, the tower smelled like coffee and expensive perfume.
Now, it smelled like wires and silence.

They found the server room.

Inside, the machines blinked in blue rows. A glowing wall of quiet lights. Layla moved fast, opening her bag and pulling out a data port, a small USB stick, and a slim laptop. She found the terminal, connected all three, and started typing.

“We have one shot,” she said. “Once this begins, we can’t undo it.”

Suhail placed the camera on the table next to her. “Start.”

She pressed a key.

The camera’s memory began copying to the laptop. Video clips loaded one after another. Al-Shabab’s voice filled the speakers. Talking about fire, power, bribes. Suhail watched the waveform jump with every sentence. Every laugh. Every threat.

Layla didn’t stop typing.

She opened four windows at once—Al Waha News, Desert View TV, Oasis Daily Stream, and the City Broadcast

Authority. Her fingers moved fast, steady. Her eyes never blinked.

Suhail watched the upload bar crawl upward. “Fifty percent,” she said. “Once it hits a hundred, it floods everything.”

Outside, the storm screamed louder. The tower swayed just slightly. Suhail could feel it in the floor. He pressed both hands to the table and waited.

“Ninety percent,” Layla whispered.

Thunder crashed. The lights flickered again.

“One hundred.”

Suhail stepped back. Layla hit ‘enter.’

The video launched.

Every screen connected to the tower’s network switched. Billboards. Phones. TVs in restaurants. Laptops in homes. Monitors in police cars. The feed rolled out like a wave, rolling fast across the city.

Al-Shabah’s voice began to play.

And it did not stop.

Suhail and Layla stared at the screen. The video ran with clear sound. The words hit like stone.

Corruption. Fire. Names. Faces.

The truth, alive and louder than bullets.

Within five minutes, sirens rang across the city. Not fire sirens—police. Real ones. Fast and frantic.

Suhail moved to the window and looked down.

The street below filled with flashing lights. Black cars. Police vans. Armed units in riot armor. They surrounded the tower fast, locking every exit.

But they didn't fire.

The screens on their dashboards still played the video.

The officers didn't move forward.

They watched.

Some pointed.

Some removed their helmets.

Some stared in silence.

Suhail turned back to Layla. “We did it.”

She didn’t smile yet. “We made a spark. Now we need a flame.”

Downstairs, a loudspeaker blared. “You are surrounded. Come down with your hands visible.”

Suhail looked out again. Cameras were pointed at the tower now. News vans had arrived. Civilians had gathered, recording from rooftops and balconies. The whole city was watching.

“No one’s going to shoot,” Layla said.

“Not with the whole country watching,” Suhail agreed.

They packed the laptop, took the backups, and grabbed what little they had left. Layla zipped her bag and slung it over her shoulder. Suhail checked the hallway outside. It was still empty, but something in the air shifted.

The power flickered once more, but not from the storm. This flicker felt... intentional.

Behind them, a sound came—soft, steady, like someone clapping slowly.

They both froze.

Suhail turned around and there he was.

Al-Shabah stepped forward from the stairwell as if he had been part of the shadows the whole time. His white shirt was spotless, a black coat draped across his shoulders like a second skin. His face looked calm, as if nothing had happened outside. Not the fire, not the recording, not the truth spreading like oil across every screen in Al Waha.

“You’ve made quite the mess,” Al-Shabah said, stopping just a few steps away. “But I suppose everyone gets their little hour of fame before they vanish again.”

Suhail said nothing. He only watched his hands, his face, his steps.

Layla didn’t speak either. She stood behind Suhail, still as a statue.

Al-Shabah took one more step and looked around the room like it was his office. “Your father stood here once. Not this

floor. But close. He thought this tower meant something. He thought the city needed saving.”

His voice dropped into a colder tone. “But men like him... they always die wrong. Not like heroes. Like dogs, crawling through sand, coughing on dust, choking on dreams.”

Suhail’s eyes narrowed. “He died loyal.”

Al-Shabah gave a slow nod. “That’s the word people use when someone dies for nothing.”

That was enough.

Suhail launched forward, feet pounding across the carpet. He swung his fist toward the man’s jaw, but Al-Shabah ducked easily, as if expecting it. He stepped to the side, and Suhail’s body carried forward. He turned and came back with another swing.

This one almost hit.

But again, Al-Shabah leaned back, graceful like water, then countered with a sharp jab to Suhail’s ribs. It connected, knocking the air out of him. Suhail stumbled back but didn’t fall. He straightened and went again.

Layla backed away, keeping the laptop safe behind her.

Suhail punched again, this time aiming lower. Al-Shabah caught his wrist midair, twisted it sharply, and brought his elbow down toward Suhail's shoulder. Suhail dropped and rolled out of it, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"You fight like him too," Al-Shabah said. "Anger first. Plans later."

Suhail stood, chest heaving. "Plans are for men hiding behind curtains."

Al-Shabah tilted his head slightly, amused. "I don't hide. I walk through your streets. I shake your Emir's hand. I make speeches in your mosques."

"Lies," Suhail growled.

"Truth wrapped in confidence," Al-Shabah replied. "The people don't care who leads them. They only care that someone does."

Suhail's fists tightened. "They care now."

He rushed again.

This time, he didn't swing. He ducked. Moved low. Caught Al-Shabah off guard and grabbed him by the waist, driving him back into the wall. The impact knocked the breath out of both of them. Suhail hit him once in the gut. Twice in the ribs.

Al-Shabah shoved him off with a snarl and wiped blood from his mouth. "You're better than I thought."

"I'm not done."

They circled each other now, breath loud in the quiet room. Thunder cracked again outside.

"You know what I don't get?" Suhail asked. "Why come back? You had everything. You could've disappeared again."

Al-Shabah smiled. "Because even ghosts need to be remembered."

He charged now. His strikes were sharp, fast, almost too fast. Suhail blocked two, missed the third. A fist landed on his jaw. His head snapped sideways.

But he stayed on his feet.

Layla shouted, "Suhail!"

He blinked, shook his head, and stepped back.

Al-Shabah came again, confident now. Too confident.

That's when Suhail faked left, dropped to one knee, and swung low with all his strength. His arm caught the back of Al-Shabah's knee and brought him down.

They both hit the floor.

Suhail was on him in seconds, fists landing hard. One. Two. Three.

Al-Shabah's hand fumbled for something near his waist. Suhail saw the glint of a blade.

Layla moved fast.

She kicked it across the floor, sending the knife skidding under the server rack.

Al-Shabah growled, twisted, and headbutted Suhail hard enough to shove him off. He rolled, stood, and backed up, now breathing hard too.

"You won't win," he said, wiping more blood from his lip.

"You already lost," Suhail said. "They saw you."

“I’m still standing.”

“For now.”

Al-Shabah looked at him, eyes dark. “You’re not like your father.”

Suhail stepped forward, shoulders square. “I’m exactly like him.”

Then he threw one last punch, not wild, not angry—calm, sharp, and full of purpose.

It hit.

Al-Shabah dropped.

The room didn’t move. Layla didn’t speak. Only the wind outside dared to break the silence, howling louder now, pressing against the glass like it wanted in.

Suhail looked down at the man on the floor. His chest moved—slow, shallow. Still breathing, still alive. Suhail didn’t feel pride or relief. Just weight. The weight of too many days running, fighting, wondering if this moment would come. And now that it had, it felt too quiet.

He turned to Layla, whose eyes were locked on the floor-to-ceiling windows. Behind her, the storm lit the sky in flashes. The tower swayed slightly, nothing dangerous, but enough to feel it in their bones.

“We’re not done,” she said. Her voice was steady, but her hands were clenched. “You saw what he said. The way he moved, like he was never afraid of falling.”

Suhail followed her gaze. The wind outside slapped the windows hard, then harder, then in bursts that made the glass tremble.

They moved toward the exit slowly. Layla had the laptop, the backup drives. Suhail checked for weapons but found nothing new on Al-Shabah’s coat. Just keys. A ring. A small rolled paper that had no words—only an old tribal symbol. Suhail pocketed it.

When they reached the hallway, something shifted again.

A soft cough behind them.

They turned.

Al-Shabah was standing.

Bent slightly. Blood trailing from his mouth. But standing.

He looked up, lips curled—not in pain, not in hate. Just calm. Like someone who had known how the story ended all along.

Suhail stepped forward again, but Al-Shabah didn't move to fight. He turned toward the window instead. He took slow steps, ignoring the blood dripping from his chin to the floor. Layla lifted a piece of broken metal pipe, ready to throw if needed.

Al-Shabah reached the glass wall.

Outside, the storm roared louder than ever. Lightning danced like fire around the spire. The rain was now a wall, slashing sideways.

Suhail spoke. "It's over. You can't disappear again."

Al-Shabah glanced back once. His eyes gleamed.

He smiled.

And then he took one step forward.

The window cracked but did not shatter. A hidden door—glass made to slide—opened by sensor. It had been planned. Maybe always.

The wind burst into the room, stealing Suhail's breath for a second.

Al-Shabah stood on the ledge, coat whipping behind him like a banner of shadows.

"You think the storm ends when I vanish?" he said, voice nearly lost in the wind. "Storms don't end. They just change names."

Suhail reached forward, but he was too far.

And then, with one final nod, Al-Shabah leaned into the wind.

He was gone.

Swept into the storm. Swallowed by the roar. Nothing left but a faint echo and a faint dark shape falling down into the lightless air below.

Layla stepped beside Suhail.

They stared at the empty air, the space where the man had stood. Neither spoke.

After a long breath, Suhail turned away first. "Let's go."

They took the service stairs this time. The elevator no longer felt right. Each step down was slow, heavy with what they had seen. With what the city had heard. What the people had watched.

Below, the tower's base was surrounded. But not in fear now. Police held the line. Reporters shouted questions. Civilians watched screens still replaying Al-Shabah's words.

One officer lifted a megaphone. "Suhail and Layla. We saw the footage. Come down. We're not here to harm you."

Layla looked at Suhail. "You believe them?"

"I don't have to," he said. "The whole city does now."

They reached the lobby, hands raised, and the doors opened.

Lights flashed. Cameras snapped. But no one stepped forward with handcuffs.

Instead, the Emir's guards were already there.

One stepped forward. He wore deep green robes, a curved dagger at his side. He bowed his head once to Suhail. Then again to Layla.

"His Highness requests to see you," he said. "Now."

Suhail nodded.

The ride to the palace was quiet. The car moved through city streets that still trembled with the storm's touch. But people were out now. Peeking from windows. Watching screens on corner shops. They didn't cheer. They didn't clap. They watched.

Suhail leaned his head back, closed his eyes.

He didn't sleep.

He remembered his father's voice in the wind, his mother's hands against his cheeks, Layla's strength when everything around them fell apart.

The palace stood golden and firm, lit up even through the storm's tail. Guards opened the main gate as the car arrived. Inside, wide halls and heavy carpets softened their footsteps.

The Emir waited not in his grand hall but in a quiet study, lined with maps and old swords.

He stood when they entered.

A kind face. Older, wiser, wrapped in desert cloth instead of jewels.

“You brought truth into the storm,” he said.

Layla bowed slightly.

Suhail stood tall.

The Emir stepped forward. “Al-Shabah was once a whisper in our walls. Now he’s a scream in every ear. What you did—it broke something. It cannot be put back.”

“We didn’t do it for thanks,” Suhail said.

“I know,” the Emir said. “But you deserve it.”

He turned to his advisor. “Bring the people in.”

A line of guards entered. One carried a red sash. Another held a scroll. Another placed a medal on a velvet cloth.

The Emir motioned Suhail forward.

“You’ve walked through fire. You’ve faced a ghost. And now, you carry a name heavier than before. But you carry it with honor.”

He placed the medal around Suhail’s neck.

Then he turned to Layla.

“You uncovered secrets meant to stay buried. You showed courage in silence. And strength when chained. You too have a place in this city's story.”

She didn't cry. But her fingers trembled as she nodded.

The ceremony was short. Quiet. Fitting.

Later, on the palace rooftop, under clear skies at last, Suhail stood beside Layla.

Below them, the city shimmered in soft gold. Cars moved again. Life began to breathe.

“I still feel like we're running,” she said.

“Maybe we are,” Suhail said. “But now, we run toward something.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “What now?”

“We wait,” he said. “The Ghost always leaves a trace.”

And somewhere far in the dunes, wind carried a whisper.

Not the end.

Just the next beginning.

Chapter 12: Honor Among Dust

The elevator doors had barely opened when boots thundered across the marble floors of the tower. Shouts echoed. Flashlights cut through the smoke and dust. Uniformed officers moved fast, weapons drawn but eyes cautious. The building still trembled from what it had witnessed.

Suhail stood beside Layla, both of them bruised and tired. His lip was cut. Her sleeve was torn. A deep scratch ran along his arm, but he didn't notice it anymore. They had been through too much to feel pain like before. The fight had already taken what it wanted from their bodies. Now only their will stayed.

The officers surrounded them, but no one shouted. No one shoved. They just looked. The whispers started quickly. "That's him... Suhail... the one who showed the video..." Then more quietly, "Is that Layla Khalil?"

One young officer stepped forward, eyes wide. He looked at Suhail not with suspicion, but with something closer to respect. "Sir," he said carefully, "are you hurt?"

Suhail nodded once, voice low. “Nothing that’ll kill me.”

Layla was leaning against the wall now, catching her breath. An older officer moved toward her, offering a cloth for her shoulder. She took it with a tired nod.

“They said you might be dead,” he told her.

“I was close,” she said. “But not today.”

Before more could be said, the air shifted again. Not from wind this time—but from power. The sound of boots changed. Softer, more measured. And then the elevator opened again.

The Emir stepped out.

No gold cloak. No guards holding flags. Just a white robe, a firm stance, and eyes that saw everything. The officers straightened immediately. Some bowed. Some moved aside.

He walked past them without a word, stopping just before Suhail and Layla.

For a few long seconds, he said nothing. Just looked at them.

Then he nodded—just slightly—and spoke in a voice that held the calm of mountains.

“You brought light where many had only shadows. That takes more than strength. It takes honor.”

Suhail didn’t bow. But he placed a hand on his chest and held the Emir’s gaze. “It wasn’t only me. She stood beside me.”

The Emir turned his eyes to Layla, softer now. “You were taken by force. Held with cruelty. Yet you return not with cries, but with fire in your step.”

Layla wiped her forehead with the cloth. Her voice didn’t shake. “I was not just taken. I escaped. And I helped end it.”

A pause.

Then the Emir smiled, just slightly. “Then you are no prisoner. You are a storm.”

Outside the tower, the noise grew. Crowds had formed in the streets. News crews. Citizens. Phones pointed upward. The people had seen the truth, and they were ready to believe again. Suhail looked out the window, watching the bodies fill the square like waves, not in protest, but in something else—hope.

The Emir turned to Suhail again. “The city will speak of this night for years. But you must decide what voice you give them.”

Suhail’s throat felt dry. “I don’t want statues. I don’t want streets named after me. I just want peace.”

“Peace isn’t given,” the Emir said. “It’s made. And tonight, you’ve built part of it.”

Layla stepped forward now, eyes finding the tall figure waiting just behind the Emir—her father.

Mazen Khalil.

He looked older now. Not just in years, but in weight. His suit was torn near the collar. His eyes were red. He stepped toward his daughter with a strange stiffness.

She didn’t run to him.

But she walked.

When she reached him, she stopped. They stood face to face.

He opened his arms a little, unsure.

Layla looked at him. She didn't cry. She didn't yell. Instead, she stepped in and wrapped her arms around him. Not tightly. Not fully. But enough.

"I needed you to believe me," she said into his shoulder.

"And you didn't."

Mazen's voice was hoarse. "I was afraid. I thought if I showed weakness—"

"You showed me silence," she said.

He held her tighter now, but she stepped back gently.

"I forgive you," she said. "But I walk my own road now."

He nodded slowly. "Then may your road be strong. And safe."

She turned away, back to Suhail.

The Emir stepped forward. "Let the people see you now. They need it."

Suhail and Layla moved with him to the tower's main balcony. The heavy doors opened. Flashlights lit the edge. And beyond them, the square was packed. The storm had passed. The city breathed again.

A single spotlight fell on Suhail.

He didn't speak.

He didn't raise a fist.

He just stood beside Layla and let the people see.

Then, one by one, the crowd began to clap.

It wasn't a wild cheer. It wasn't a roar.

It was steady. Firm. A rhythm from hearts that had waited too long to trust again.

The Emir stepped beside Suhail and raised his hand—not for silence, but to show unity.

And the city answered.

Later that night, back inside the palace, Suhail and Layla sat in a quiet courtyard. Stars glimmered above them. A small pot of tea rested between them, steaming gently.

Suhail looked up. "Feels strange."

"What does?" Layla asked, sipping slowly.

“Not running,” he said. “Not hiding. Not bleeding.”

She smiled. “Give it time. This is still Al Waha. There’s always another storm.”

He laughed quietly, the sound rough but real. “Yeah. But maybe next time we don’t run alone.”

Layla leaned back, arms behind her head. “You think Al-Shabah is really gone?”

Suhail didn’t answer right away. He looked at the stars, then the palms swaying gently in the night breeze.

“No,” he said. “Men like him never vanish. They just slip into other stories.”

“And us?” she asked.

He looked at her. “We don’t vanish either. We build.”

They fell into a calm silence, broken only by the soft bubbling of the tea.

Layla stood and stretched. “I think I need a long shower. And maybe a week of sleep.”

Suhail nodded. “Same.”

She paused at the doorway. “Hey.”

He looked up.

“I meant it,” she said. “We did this together.”

And then she disappeared into the palace halls.

Suhail stayed a while longer, letting the air settle around him. The sky was beginning to soften, not yet morning but no longer night. That deep, quiet hour when the city held its breath. In that stillness, he could hear his own heart clearly. It no longer raced. It simply beat. Even the silence felt different now—less like hiding, more like waiting for something honest to begin.

When he finally stood and left the courtyard, the palace was awake. The guards moved with purpose, servants hurried with trays, and distant voices discussed news that would change Al Waha forever. But Suhail didn’t stop for any of them. He walked with a calm step, eyes ahead. Not rushed. Not lost. Just steady.

As he exited the palace gates, he noticed a crowd still lingering outside. The sky above the city was now painted with the first hints of dawn—gold mixed with gray. The

storm from the night before had cleared, leaving behind puddles and broken wires, but also fresh air and clean skies.

People had gathered in groups. Some held up handmade signs. Some held their phones, filming. And many of them began to chant his name.

“Suhail! Suhail!”

He froze for just a second.

He had been hunted. Blamed. Shouted at. Seen as a ghost in the shadows. But now, people called him a hero.

The sound was strange to his ears.

A young girl broke from the crowd and ran up to him, holding out a folded paper. Her eyes were wide, hopeful. Suhail knelt down and took it gently. The drawing was rough but full of heart—a tall man standing in front of a burning building, shielding people with his arms.

“That’s you,” the girl said.

He smiled softly. “Thank you.”

Cameras flashed again. Reporters stepped closer.

“Mr. Suhail, do you have anything to say about the events in the tower?”

“Will you speak about Al-Shabah’s escape?”

“What about the rumors of corruption inside the palace walls?”

“Did you plan this with Layla Khalil?”

He said nothing. Not because he was afraid, but because not everything needed to be answered. Some truths were bigger than sound bites. Some things were meant to be lived, not explained.

He looked at the young girl again, gave her a wink, then turned and walked past the crowd.

Every street he passed was different now. Walls had been cleaned of wanted posters. Market stalls had begun to open early. Strangers didn’t avoid his gaze. Some nodded. Some whispered. One man even clapped a hand on his shoulder as he passed.

“Glad you made it,” the man said.

Suhail gave a quiet thanks and moved on.

His steps took him far from the palace and the noise. Past the gold-lit towers and the main roads. Past where the buses stopped and the taxis waited. He didn't take a car. He didn't ask for a ride. He walked because some things had to be done alone.

By midday, he had reached the edge of the city. The buildings thinned out. The air felt warmer. The ground beneath his boots changed—from paved to packed dirt, then to fine dust. He took off his scarf, letting the wind touch his face freely.

He kept walking.

Soon the sand met him again.

And then he saw it.

A small stone. A low wooden marker. A scarf tied to a nearby branch. Nothing big. Nothing loud. Just quiet proof that someone had once loved someone enough to return to the middle of nowhere and remember them.

His mother's grave.

He knelt.

The wind picked up a bit, brushing sand against his knees.

He reached into his pocket and took out a small pouch. It was filled with dust from the city. He had taken it from the floor of the tower. Not because it was special. But because it mattered. The dust had seen the truth. Just like her.

He opened the pouch and sprinkled the dust onto the dune.

“I brought the city to you,” he whispered.

His voice didn’t crack. He had no tears left.

He sat for a long time.

The wind didn’t rush him.

He spoke again. “They finally saw who I am. Not the monster they painted. Not the thief they hunted. Just your son.”

His fingers brushed the sand.

“I kept walking. Even when I wanted to stop. I kept breathing. Even when it felt like drowning. Because of you.”

He sat with her through the full turn of the sun, until its heat pressed down on his back and the sky shifted to a quiet orange.

Then he stood.

Before he left, he reached into his coat and pulled out a small folded note. He placed it under the rock. It wasn't for anyone else to read. Just her.

As he turned to walk back toward Al Waha, he noticed his footprints in the sand. A clear trail. No longer running. Just walking forward.

When he reached the edge of the dunes, his phone buzzed.

He checked it.

One message.

From Layla.

Where are you?

He typed back: Visiting someone. I'm coming.

She replied: The Emir wants to meet again. I think it's serious. Not scary serious. Just... important.

Suhail smiled.

Tell him to hold the tea. I'll be there soon.

He slid the phone into his pocket and started walking again. His boots sank lightly into the warm sand. The wind carried the faint scent of dried flowers from far-off desert plants. His shoulders were sore, his hands still marked with small cuts, but there was no heaviness in his steps now. It felt like the ground beneath him had softened, like it knew he had earned his place on it.

The city's edge came into view again, its glass towers shimmering in the sun like teeth. But it didn't scare him. Not anymore. He walked toward the roads that led back to Al Waha, where everything had started, and maybe where something new could begin.

As he reached the first concrete path, he heard a voice.

"I thought I might catch up with you."

He turned.

Layla stood there, scarf tied around her hair, her boots covered in fine dust. She had walked, too. Not out of need, but out of choice.

He raised a brow. "You followed me?"

She shrugged, stepping closer. “I didn’t like the idea of you walking back alone.”

“I’ve been alone before,” he said.

“I know,” she answered, taking his hand. “But not anymore.”

They started walking side by side again. The heat was rising, but it didn’t burn. Their hands stayed joined, not tightly, just enough to know the other was there. Layla looked ahead, toward the towers.

“I used to think the shadows in this city were the scariest thing. Like they were alive. Like they waited to pull you in,” she said.

“They almost did,” Suhail replied.

She nodded. “But I’m not afraid of them now.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because we dragged the worst of them into the light. And what’s left... we can handle.”

Suhail gave her a side glance. “You sure?”

Layla grinned. "I've seen worse things than shadows. Like sardine crates."

He laughed, that warm, deep sound that didn't come often but stayed long when it did.

"You smelled like a sea ghost for two days," she added.

"And you still didn't run."

She looked down at the road beneath them. "No. I didn't."

They passed a few men fixing a broken pipe on the side of the road. One of them looked up, squinted, and whispered something to the other. They didn't call out. They didn't cheer. But their nods were enough. A kind of quiet respect that didn't need loud words.

As they walked into the outer streets of Al Waha, the sounds of the city began to rise. Cars honked. Shopkeepers shouted prices. Kids kicked a ball between two worn-out chairs. Everything looked normal. But Suhail saw the changes. Faces that once turned away now looked straight at him. Doors that once slammed shut were now left open.

A shopkeeper waved him over. Suhail hesitated but walked to him.

The man reached beneath his counter and pulled out a small bag. He handed it over without a word.

Inside was a fresh shirt, a bottle of water, and a single folded date wrapped in paper.

“Thank you,” Suhail said.

The man only nodded and returned to slicing fruit.

Suhail and Layla continued walking. The palace was still far, but the weight between them made the distance seem shorter.

“You think the Emir will ask you to work for him?” Layla asked.

Suhail looked ahead. “I don’t think I’m made for gold chairs and long speeches.”

“Maybe he just wants you close. People trust you now.”

He looked at her. “Do you?”

Layla smiled again. “More than I trust most.”

The sun was higher now. Their shadows stretched behind them. Suhail kicked a small stone with his boot, watching it roll and stop near a palm tree.

“Do you ever wonder how long this peace will last?” he asked.

Layla thought for a moment. “I think peace doesn’t come in forever. It comes in pieces. We collect them. One day, one choice, one fight at a time.”

He looked at her, eyes squinting in the light. “And when it breaks?”

“We build again.”

A pause passed between them. Then Suhail said, “You sound like my mother.”

“She was a smart woman,” Layla replied.

They turned a corner and walked into a small open space. The sound of wings drew Suhail’s eyes up. A lone hawk circled above, gliding in wide loops over the rooftops.

Layla followed his gaze.

“Free thing,” she said.

“Like the truth,” Suhail added.

“Like you,” she said, squeezing his hand.

They stood there for a while, watching the hawk drift higher. It didn't flap hard. It just used the wind. Trusted it. Let it carry.

Suhail pulled her closer. "You ever think about leaving this place?"

Layla rested her head against his shoulder. "Sometimes. But now... I think I want to stay. Just a little longer. Maybe fix a few more things."

Suhail chuckled. "You think we're still broken?"

"I think we're a little cracked. But that's how the light gets in."

He turned to face her. "You've been reading too much poetry."

"Or maybe I've just been hanging around a guy who talks like the desert."

Suhail smiled again. "Then you're doomed."

They kept walking, side by side, step by step.

Al Waha rose around them again, loud and alive.

And somewhere above it all, the hawk flew higher.

Chapter 13: Whispers in the Wind

Al Waha returned to its usual rhythm, but something in the air had shifted. The city was no longer watching through closed blinds and fearful silence. People spoke more freely now; their eyes no longer dropped to the ground when discussing the powerful. But still, in the corners of tea stalls, under the shade of awnings, stories lingered like smoke. Some said Al-Shabah was dead, swallowed by the storm that ripped across the dunes. Others swore they saw a figure vanish into the sand the night the tower burned—his coat flapping like wings, his voice caught in the wind. No one could agree on the truth. But everyone agreed on one thing: he was not forgotten.

Suhail didn't chase the rumors. He didn't speak of the fight. He didn't correct the stories. What happened in the storm belonged to the wind now. He had nothing left to prove. What he did carry was something quieter. He had built something small, something steady.

His detective shop sat on the edge of the old district, near where the spice market touched the modern rows of banks

and cafés. The door had no shiny sign. Just a small, worn wooden board painted in black: "Suhail Investigations." Below that, in faded white, it said: "For truth. For the forgotten."

The shop had one desk, two fans that made more noise than wind, and a single window that stuck on hot days. There were no glass trophies, no pictures on the wall—only a dusty shelf with old notebooks and a jar of coins for tea. But people came. And they kept coming.

Women whose brothers had vanished in back alleys. Old men who'd lost savings to fake land deals. Young workers blamed for crimes they didn't commit. They came with thin folders, cracked phones, and eyes full of questions. Suhail listened. He always listened.

Layla sat at the desk beside his, typing up reports faster than he could speak. Her hair tied back with a pencil tucked behind her ear, she clicked through files with ease. When clients walked in, she greeted them before Suhail could stand.

"You're late again," she said one morning, without looking up from her screen.

"I had a lead," Suhail replied, dropping into his chair.

“You also had a kebab,” she added, sniffing the air. “A strong one.”

“I can solve crime and eat. Multitasking.”

She smirked. “Unless it’s paperwork. Then you suddenly forget how to read.”

He grinned. “That’s why you’re here.”

Layla rolled her eyes and clicked save. “I’m here because we promised. We said we’d fix what we could.”

“And we are,” he said. “One strange case at a time.”

Outside the window, a boy passed by on a bicycle, shouting about dates on sale. A dog barked in the distance. The fan buzzed and clicked, giving them short bursts of warm air. Suhail leaned back, pulling a folder closer.

“Next case?”

Layla opened the file. “Missing woman. Sister says she vanished after a job interview in Sector Four. No police report filed.”

“Of course not,” Suhail muttered.

“Family says she was nervous. Said the place didn’t feel right.”

“Let’s pay them a visit,” he said, standing.

“You sure? You haven’t even touched your tea.”

“I’ll bring it with me,” he said, grabbing the dusty mug.

They walked the streets together, passing familiar corners. Kids waved at Suhail. Vendors gave Layla extra herbs without asking. They were no longer strangers here. They were part of the breath of the city now.

At the office building in Sector Four, the receptionist looked bored until Suhail flashed a worn ID badge he made himself. It didn’t say much, but people didn’t question a man who looked like he belonged.

Layla leaned close to him. “You think this is where she disappeared?”

“I think something’s off,” he said. “These glass towers have shadows too.”

They didn’t find the woman that day. But they found a janitor who remembered her. They found a camera no one thought

worked. They found an elevator that stopped one floor early, without lighting up the button. By the time the sun touched the rooftops, they had names, times, and a location.

Back at the shop, Layla typed as Suhail cleaned the mug he never drank from.

“She was trafficked,” Layla said quietly. “Almost sold to some rich diplomat in the south.”

“Almost,” Suhail replied.

“She’s safe now. Her sister took her home.”

He nodded. “One more done.”

Layla stood and stretched her arms. “How many have we helped now?”

“I don’t count,” Suhail said.

“You should. It matters.”

He thought for a second. “Maybe. But it’s not about numbers. It’s about dusting off one truth at a time.”

A knock on the door interrupted them.

An old man with a weathered face stepped in. He held his hat in both hands, his clothes clean but old. His eyes were tired.

“Can I help you?” Suhail asked.

The man looked at him for a moment, then spoke. “They said you help people no one listens to.”

“We try,” Layla said, stepping forward.

“My son,” the man said. “He’s been gone three years. They say he joined a gang. But I don’t believe it.”

Suhail looked at the man. His voice had no anger. Just tired hope.

“We’ll look into it,” Suhail said.

The man handed over a photo, nodded, and left as quietly as he came.

Layla picked up the photo. “Another one.”

“There’s always another one,” Suhail said.

“But that’s why we’re here.”

That night, Suhail sat outside the shop. The stars were out. The streets were quiet. Layla brought out two cups of tea and sat beside him.

“Do you ever wonder if we’ll run out of ghosts to chase?” she asked.

He sipped his tea. “The day we do, I’ll close the shop.”

She leaned back. “But until then?”

He looked up at the sky, where the stars blinked like distant watchers.

“Until then, we chase them,” he said.

A breeze moved through the street, lifting dust from the corners. Somewhere far off, a hawk cried out over the rooftops.

Layla smiled at the sound.

“They’ll still whisper about him, won’t they?” she said.

Suhail didn’t ask who she meant. He knew.

“They’ll always whisper,” he answered. “Some names don’t fade. But whispers don’t scare me anymore.”

Layla looked at him for a long second. “Good. Because they used to.”

He gave her a slow nod. “That was before we had something louder than whispers. We had truth.”

She sipped her tea, and they both sat quiet, the kind of silence that didn’t need to be filled. The kind that knew it had earned its place. The lights of Al Waha shimmered ahead like stars turned upside down. The city buzzed quietly, not in chaos now, but in movement—new life, old lessons.

Later that week, after two more missing-person cases and a very short chase involving a dishonest loan agent, Suhail stood alone inside the shop. The sun had dropped low, sending long streaks of orange across the floor. He walked to the window and leaned against the frame, his eyes on the horizon.

The dunes still rose out there, just beyond the last cluster of towers and satellite dishes. The desert had not changed. It still waited, still stretched out like a sleeping giant. Sometimes, on quiet nights, Suhail would stand there just to watch it. Not for answers. Not for threats. Just to remember.

He'd never found his father's body. Never saw bones or cloth or a sign left behind. But he dreamed about it more now. Not nightmares—just images. His father standing under a moonlit sky, eyes strong and tired. A whisper of his voice. A hand on Suhail's shoulder.

"I didn't forget you," Suhail whispered to the window, his fingers resting on the glass. "You were never lost to me."

Behind him, Layla entered with two paper bags full of groceries and a bag of bolts that wasn't on the list. She dropped them on the table and caught him staring.

"Dreaming again?" she asked.

"Remembering," he said without turning.

"Is there a difference?"

He finally turned toward her. "One keeps you up. The other keeps you moving."

She tossed him an apple. He caught it easily.

"Well," she said, "I don't mind your staring. Just don't forget we're still behind on the electricity bill."

He laughed. "Spoken like a true business partner."

Layla started unpacking the bags. “Partner, assistant, coffee-maker, paperwork-fixer...”

“And don’t forget co-ghost chaser,” he added.

She stopped and looked at him seriously. “You ever wonder if we’ll actually find him again?”

He didn’t need to ask who. “Al-Shabah?”

She nodded.

“I think he’ll always find ways to hide,” Suhail said. “But I don’t think he wins anymore. Not in the way that matters.”

“You think people are safe now?”

Suhail thought for a moment. “Safer. Not safe. That’s a different word.”

She pulled a notepad from her bag. “Then we keep going.”

They worked for another hour, sorting files, checking updates, and listening to a crackly old radio that Suhail refused to replace. The building creaked like an old friend settling into a chair. The street outside quieted. And then the knock came.

A woman in her early forties stood at the door, holding a faded picture in one hand and a tiny pouch in the other. Her face was worn by sun and grief, but her steps were steady.

“I heard you help people like me,” she said softly.

Suhail opened the door wider. “We try.”

She held up the photo. “My brother disappeared four years ago. Everyone said he just left, but I know he didn’t.”

Suhail stepped aside. “Come in. Let’s talk.”

Layla poured her a glass of water while Suhail pulled a notepad closer.

They listened. They asked questions. They took notes. And when she left an hour later, her shoulders were a little straighter.

Suhail walked her out and stood at the doorway for a while after she left. He looked out again at the sky, where the light was soft and the stars were waking. The wind came again, light and warm, brushing past his face like an old friend returning.

Back inside, Layla was filing papers.

“She looked lighter when she left,” Suhail said.

“Because someone believed her.”

He nodded. “That’s sometimes all people need.”

“Not always,” Layla replied. “Sometimes they need proof. Or a second chance. Or someone who won’t give up when things get messy.”

Suhail leaned back in his chair. “Or they just need someone to stand next to them.”

She looked at him. “You’ve become that someone.”

He shook his head slowly. “We both did.”

The phone buzzed once. A text message lit up on the screen: Just heard about you from a friend. I need help.

Suhail looked at Layla. “Another one.”

She stood and grabbed her coat. “Then we better get to it.”

They walked out, locking the door behind them.

That night, Suhail visited the dunes again. Alone. Just for a while. He stood where the sand met the city, where the old

stories met the new. He carried a small pouch filled with dried herbs, bits of stone, and some soil from the city's heart.

He found the same place he had once stood with his mother, long ago. The spot where they buried her with simple cloth and whispered prayers. He knelt beside the mound and placed the pouch at its base.

"I brought you a little piece of the city," he said softly. "It finally made room for people like us."

The stars above blinked. The wind moved gently, not loud, not cold.

He sat there for a while, not speaking, just listening. He didn't ask the desert for answers. He didn't ask the sky for signs. He knew what had to be done—and more importantly, what had already been done.

Back in the city, Layla waited on the balcony above the shop. A lantern swayed beside her, casting warm light on the wall. She watched the street, not for danger, but for his return. She trusted he would come. He always did.

Suhail showed up not long after, boots dusty and eyes clear. He climbed the stairs without a word, stood beside her, and leaned on the railing.

They didn't speak right away. Layla handed him a small mug of warm tea, and he accepted it with a nod. The silence between them was not heavy or cold. It was easy, calm, like an old friend resting quietly.

From the street below, the city hummed gently. Night in Al Waha was never fully silent, but it wasn't angry anymore. The noise had changed. It was softer. The voices carried laughter, not panic. The footsteps didn't run — they strolled.

After a few sips, Suhail said, "Someone left another one."

Layla looked at him. "Another what?"

He pointed toward the small step outside the shop's front door. "White rose. Wrapped in paper."

Layla leaned over the railing. "Friday again."

"Always Friday," Suhail said.

"Do you know who's leaving them?"

He shook his head. "Never see them. Just find the rose."

Layla thought for a moment. "Maybe it's someone we helped."

“Maybe,” Suhail said. “Or maybe someone we haven’t met yet.”

He went downstairs after finishing his tea. He opened the door slowly, careful not to disturb the little white flower resting there. It was wrapped in brown paper, tied with a thin string. No note. No name. Just a rose.

He picked it up, held it close to his nose, and breathed in the soft, clean scent. It reminded him of quiet things — of peace, of small thank-yous, of hopes tucked away in paper.

Back inside, Layla had cleared the desk. A new folder sat on top. Another request. Another search. Suhail placed the rose in a glass jar on the shelf beside the window, where it joined the last three Fridays’ gifts. They sat in a row now, each in its own glass, like quiet little trophies.

The folder’s file was thin. Just a name, an address, and a worried note scribbled by someone unsure how to ask for help.

Suhail read it once. Then again. Then handed it to Layla.

She scanned it quickly. “Looks simple.”

He smiled. “It never is.”

By morning, they were already on the road. The case took them into the oldest part of the city, where the houses still wore their age with pride. The streets were tight, the walls close, but Suhail liked it there. It felt honest.

They knocked on a door, asked gentle questions, and listened longer than they spoke. Sometimes, that was all it took.

The sun followed them all day. They walked, talked to vendors, followed a name that led to another name that led to a small courtyard filled with chickens and laughter. It wasn't a chase. It was a search. One that mattered.

By evening, the file was heavier. But they were closer to answers.

They returned to the shop tired, dusty, and full of that kind of calm that comes after good work.

As Suhail flipped the sign from OPEN to CLOSED, a small voice called from across the street.

“Detective!”

He turned. A girl stood there, no older than eight. She wore a blue scarf and carried a white rose in her hand. Suhail's heart paused.

She walked up slowly, holding out the flower. “For your window.”

“Do you bring these every week?” he asked gently.

The girl nodded. “My brother said you helped him. He can’t walk well, but now he sleeps better. He told me to say thank you.”

Suhail knelt down. “What’s your name?”

“Yasmin.”

“Well, Yasmin, thank you. Your rose means more than you know.”

She smiled, placed the flower in his hand, then skipped off before he could say more.

Layla had watched from the doorway. “So it wasn’t a ghost.”

“No,” Suhail said, standing again. “Just a little sister with a big heart.”

The rose joined the others. Five now, in a neat row. A quiet kind of story that only made sense if you watched closely.

That night, Suhail stood by the window. The city was dark, but the stars above were bold. He thought about the stories that still circled Al Waha, whispered through alleyways, painted on old walls, passed from lips to ears to dreams.

They said Al-Shabah had drowned in the sandstorm.

They said his body had never been found.

They said he now rode the winds at night, laughing as he moved between tents and towers, still trading secrets for silence.

Suhail didn't believe in ghosts. But he believed in shadows. He knew some stories never truly ended — they just waited.

And when they returned, he would be ready.

Layla joined him at the window. She handed him a new file. "This one's different."

He opened it. Inside was a picture of a man in a suit, taken in a mirror. The reflection was cracked. The eyes unreadable. But the tattoos were there, curling along the neck, barely hidden by the collar.

“No date on the photo,” Layla said. “Just a location tag. Outskirts. Near the oil fields.”

Suhail’s jaw tightened. “He’s still out there.”

“But this time,” Layla said, “we have more than a name. We have the truth.”

They didn’t speak for a moment. The air between them held weight — not fear, not doubt. Just focus.

“We’ll wait,” Suhail said. “Then we’ll act.”

Layla nodded. “Together.”

He smiled. “Always.”

The wind shifted again. The curtains fluttered. The glass jars on the shelf clinked softly.

Down below, the streets of Al Waha stayed alive, filled with lights and stories, people and promises.

And above them, the lantern swayed.

But in the small office on the second floor, where two chairs stayed warm and the roses never wilted, Suhail and Layla kept their promise.

To protect.

To listen.

To search.

And never stop.