



Saqr Waqt

(The Falcon's Time)



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"Al-Mashi yanzuru. Wa nahnu nadhhab.

The Walker is watching. And we go."

— Isaad saying

Nedjima set the bone folder down and did not pick up the next one.

The page was resting under its weighted board, waiting for the skin to remember its shape. That was the part of the work she loved most and had learned last — the waiting. A khunoni's hands could do only so much. After a certain point the page had to become what it was going to become on its own, and so she sat with her hands in her lap and watched the light move across the felt wall of her bereth-workshop. Most bereth were small wheeled dwellings; this one her husband had converted for bookmaking.

Nedjima placed her hands on the worktable. Its wood was smooth under her fingers, oiled and warm and shaped to her tools.

She heard a gentle fluttering outside; Saqr Waqt brought many people, and with them wings. Memories of her falcon came with those sounds, like an echo of loss. Nedjima's mother had given her Shahida on her thirteenth birthday. Munira had been Banat as-Saqr since before Nedjima could remember. Her mother's bereth had been a place where falcons came and went the way most bereth were places where children came and went.



Nedjima had grown up under wings. She had known the names of every Banat in her birth-qaum since before she could read — Yamina who flew the small fierce birds, Hala who tended the elders' perches, Maryam who had taught Munira and eventually taught everyone, and her mother in the middle of all of them, laughing with them at the long fire after a flight. Nedjima had been the child who slept in the corner of the qadrim while the women talked about birds late into the night. Their voices were the lullaby she would remember until her last days.

When Nedjima had turned thirteen, her mother had walked her out behind the qadrim where a young saqr was waiting on a low perch. *This one*, Munira had said, with the matter-of-fact warmth she used for important things. *I have been watching her for you since the spring.* The bird had looked at thirteen-year-old Nedjima with the level disinterest of a falcon who had not yet decided whether the human at the other end of the leather was worth knowing, and Nedjima had decided, in that moment, that she would spend however many years it took to be worth knowing. Munira had named the bird Shahida — *witness* — before giving her over. *She will see you*, her mother had said. *Let her see you.* Then she had stepped back, and Shahida had been Nedjima's, and the years had begun.

Rashan had given her this bereth in the first month of their marriage. Without announcement, the way Rashan gave most things — he had simply commissioned the bereth-sanai who was traveling through that season, and one evening at Hadra-layl had taken her hand and walked her out to the edge of their sahn and shown her the bereth standing there with its new wood and its new paint and the eight-pointed star carved into the door. *For your hands*, he had said. That was all he had said. Nedjima had wept, which she had not expected to do, and Rashan had held her without speaking, the way Rashan always held her when she wept, and in the morning she had begun to move her tools in.



Two gifts, from the two halves of her life. The bird had flown. The bereth was around her now, holding her quiet while she worked.

The thoughts that came today were Shahida.

It had been over a year. Nedjima could count the days if she wanted to; she had at first, when counting felt like a way of holding on. She had stopped in the third month. On the day Rashan found her at the edge of their sahn with her eyes on the sky. He had said nothing and sat down beside her until she was ready to stand up and go back to her work. He had not touched her that night. Nedjima had understood, afterward, that this was the kind of man she had married, that understanding had made the grief larger and also easier to carry at the same time.

She wiped the bone folder and carefully put her cloth into the leather roll before tying it shut. Outside her bereth, Nedjima could hear their sahn filling. Horses coming in. A child's sharp joyful laughter. Somebody's voice calling for a hand with the poles. Their ahl was hosting Saqr Waqt this year, the Banat as-Saqr would be here by midday, and her new family would be watching how she conducted herself at her first hosted festival, and Nedjima was going to walk out there and do what needed to be done. Her birth-ahl would not arrive until the second day; Munira would come with them. Nedjima would not have her mother's hand on her shoulder until tomorrow.

Nedjima was also going to choose a new bird.



She had decided on it the week before. Rashan had not asked her to decide. The Umm as-Saqr, whose name was Tahira and who had been Munira's closest friend for forty years — who had stood at her wedding, who had been kind to Nedjima in the small specific ways of a woman who had once held her as a baby — had not asked her to decide either. No one had asked. A Banat who had lost a falcon chose another when she chose another, or she did not. But the mourning year had ended, and Nedjima was tired of carrying the weight of not-choosing, and on the other side of her bereth's door the Banat's perches would have birds to spare, and Nedjima had decided that today she would take one onto her glove and begin again.

She thought of Shahida. The specific weight of her on the leather. The way she had sat close to Nedjima's wrist rather than out at the end of the glove, more like an older bird who had decided her falconer was home than the younger bird she was. Shahida had been neither young nor old when she flew at the last Saqr Waqt Nedjima's birth-ahl had hosted. A grown bird, with years on Nedjima's glove, a bird who knew her hand the way a bird knew anything — without being able to say it, without needing to.

She had flown that afternoon the way she always flew. Up into the high air over the deep-desert. A clean arc against the sun. Nedjima had watched her turn at the top of the arc and begin to come down and then — Shahida had opened her wings and caught some current Nedjima could not see. Going sideways instead of downward, north-northeast, toward the empty country, and she had not come back.



The whispering had started before sundown. *The Eighth Road*, the older Banat had said quietly to one another. *That was no wind we know. The road took her.* Tahira had said nothing, but had watched Nedjima the way an Umm as-Saqr watched a young Banat who had just been touched by something she did not yet understand. Munira had taken her daughter's hand that night and said only, *Wait, daughter. Birds the road takes are not always birds the road keeps.*

Nedjima had wanted to believe it. The Isaad faith was hers — she had spoken Fajr-sabr every morning of her life, she had stood at every Hadra-layl, she had drawn the eight-pointed star on the brows of newborns in her birth-ahl when asked. But the eighth road as a *real* thing, a thing that took your bird sideways out of the sky in front of your own eyes — that was the kind of belief Nedjima had grown up hearing the elders speak about and had never quite found in herself. The whispers at sundown, the older women's certainty, Tahira's careful watching: these had felt to Nedjima less like the truth and more like the way her people made grief bearable, by giving it a road and a Walker and a reason.

Not that afternoon. Not that evening. Not the next day, when Nedjima had stood at the edge of their sahn with the leather glove on her wrist until Rashan — who was not yet her husband then, only the young tribal leader whose ahl had come to trade for bookbinding stock, only the man whose gaze she had felt across the fire at Hadra-layl the night before and pretended not to — until Rashan had come to stand beside her without asking and had said, quietly, *she may still come.*



She had not. Nedjima had married Rashan two months later, at the autumn gathering, and had braided her cord to his in front of her birth-ahl and his, and had come to live with his ahl, and had wept the night Rashan presented her with the bereth he had commissioned for her hands, and had begun her first khunon in that workshop, and had been happy — honestly, genuinely happy, in the way she had not known she could be — and Shahida had not come back. Her bird, whose name had meant witness, was gone.

The grief sat under the happiness like a small feathered shadow, coming to her thoughts again at every heard flap of wings. Nedjima had learned to hold both. This was the skill the year had taught her, and she understood, even in the middle of it, that it was a skill she would need again and that it was worth the learning. A woman who could hold two true things at once could hold most of what life would bring. A woman who could not would be broken by the first thing life brought her.

She had also learned, in the long quiet of the mourning year, that her own faith was not what she had been taught it was. She honored al-Hadir. She honored al-Mashi ath-Thamin. She did not destroy books, did not lie to guests, did not refuse to teach. But the eighth road, in the year after Shahida flew, had not given her a sign. Not a feather on her perch. Not a dream. Not a single moment in which she had felt watched. If the road was real, if a Walker walked it, then either he had taken her bird and moved on, or the older women had been wrong all along about what the road was. Nedjima could not tell which, and she had stopped asking.



She put the leather roll away in its place and stood up. Her ink was stoppered. Her qalam was clean. The page under its weighted board would wait. She smoothed the front of her dress with both hands — an old nervous gesture she had not made in months — and caught herself, with a small private smile, before going to the door of her bereth and pushing it open.

Their sahn was bright with sunlight and sound.

Somebody had already hung the saqr-banners from the poles around the central fire — long strips of dyed cloth with the eight-pointed star sewn in white thread, moving slightly in the midday air. The children were running a course with bells. Tahira was standing beside the Banat's traveling perches with Khawla and Iman, and the three of them were laughing about something, and Khawla was making some gesture with her hands that was clearly about a bird doing something a bird should not have done, and Tahira was shaking her head and smiling.

Nedjima knew them all. She had grown up knowing them. Khawla had taught her how to hood a bird when she was eight years old; Iman had carried her on her hip at gatherings when she was small. Watching them now from the door of her own bereth in her husband's ahl was the strange double-vision of a daughter become wife, of a girl who used to fall asleep at the long fire become the woman whose sahn the long fire would be lit in tonight. She did not know yet if she had become this woman or only learned to wear her shape.

Nedjima stepped down from her bereth onto the packed ground of their sahn. Her eyes went, first, to the Banat's perches.



There were seventeen birds today. A good number for a Saqr-Waqt. Peregrines and saker falcons and some larger birds she did not recognize — probably one of the coastal hawks Qaum al-Bahr bred. All of them were beautiful. All of them were calm. The Banat did not bring troubled birds to Saqr Waqt.

Tahira saw her and raised a hand. Nedjima raised hers back. She did not walk over yet. She stood in front of her bereth for a moment longer, letting herself feel what she was about to do.

A new bird.

A good bird. A bird she would choose with the Umm as-Saqr's counsel — Tahira would have been considering it for her since the year had begun, Nedjima knew, the way Munira had once considered Shahida — one that would sit on her wrist with the proper weight and learn her voice and come home from the first flight and the second and the third. A bird whose name would not be Shahida because no bird's name would ever be Shahida again.

The ache of that — the finality of naming a bird something other than the name she had loved — was the part Nedjima had not let herself feel all year. She let herself feel it now. Standing in her own sahn at her first hosted Saqr Waqt, the grief that had sat under her happiness rose up and met her at the surface, and she did not push it down, because the Isaad did not push grief down. She let it come and stand beside her and be what it was.

She started to walk toward the Banat.

She was halfway there when Rashan caught her eye from across their sahn.



He and Tajhir were talking with two of the men from Qaum al-Khala who had brought the horses for Saqr Waqt. He was not looking for her; she had caught him in a sideways glance, the small checking-in that had become one of their habits across the year. His eyes met hers. He did not smile. He saw the grief in her face — of course he did, he always did — and he gave her the smallest nod, the one that meant / see *you*. Her husband had become her witness.

Nedjima kept going.

She did not see the bird until the child saw it first.

It was one of the younger girls — Layla, maybe six, who had been running the bell-course with the others and had stopped running and was standing in the middle of their sahn with her head tipped all the way back, staring up. Her mouth was open. She was not making a sound.

Someone beside Nedjima made the small surprised noise a person makes when they have just noticed something they cannot account for. Nedjima did not look up yet. She was close enough to the Banat's perches now that Tahira was turning toward her, and Tahira was the person she was walking toward, and she did not want the grief on her face to be the thing Tahira saw first.

Then Tahira looked up.

The Umm as-Saqr's face did something Nedjima had seen the woman's face do many times. Tahira went very still, the way a falconer went still when something was about to happen that she did not want to startle. She did not speak. She only looked.

The whole sahn was looking now.



Nedjima felt it before she looked up. The quiet of an ahl all at once tilted in the same direction. The kind of quiet that meant something had entered the sky above them that did not belong to any of the perches on the ground.

Nedjima looked up.

A falcon was circling.

Not one of the Banat's. Not coming in from any of the approaches the Saqr Waqt birds were using today. Not marked with any of the leather the Banat's birds wore. A wild bird, from the way it flew — or a bird that had been wild long enough to have forgotten its leather. High, and slow, and very certain. Coming down in the patient spirals of a bird that had already decided where it was going.

Coming down out of a sky in which no wind was moving the banners.

Nedjima saw it in the same instant the older Banat saw it. The cloths around the central fire hung still. No breeze stirred the children's hair. The midday air over the sahn was the dead air of a hot deep-desert summer, and the falcon was descending through it on a current that was not there. The bird's wings caught and lifted and caught again on something none of them could feel.

The same nothing that had taken Shahida sideways over a year ago.

Nedjima's hand went to her belt.



She did not realize she had done it until her fingers closed on the glove. She had not worn the glove since the mourning began. She had carried it with her, folded under the sash that held her qalam and her small knife, because she could not bring herself to put it away and could not bring herself to wear it, so she had kept it folded, close to her body, the way a woman carried a thing she was not ready to decide about.

Her fingers were pulling it free before her mind had finished understanding.

The bird was coming down.

Someone behind Nedjima — she did not know who, she could not turn to look — said her name very quietly. *Nedjima*. The way a person said a name when they were not calling the person, only saying the name to steady themselves.

The falcon dropped out of its last spiral, wings opening. The sound of feathers.

Nedjima got the glove onto her hand. She raised her arm.

She was not thinking. Her body was moving. She was a falconer who had been waiting for over a year to do this one thing, whose muscles remembered the angle of the wrist and the set of the shoulder and the slight give of the elbow as a bird came in. Her arm went out from her shoulder and up and she set her feet and she felt her heart doing something she did not have a word for.

The bird came down out of the bright air and settled on her glove.



Shahida.

Not a bird like Shahida. Not a bird she was mistaking for Shahida in the first shocked instant of recognition. Shahida herself, the same bird, the same weight, the same grown-falcon calm of a bird who had decided the falconer's wrist was home. She sat close to Nedjima's wrist, like she used to.

Their sahn was silent.

Nedjima looked at her bird. Shahida looked back at her. Whatever was in the bird's eyes had not changed. Whatever a falcon's eyes ever held, Shahida's still held.

Where have you been? Nedjima thought, and did not say, because the Isaad did not ask such questions of what the Eighth Road brought back.

The Eighth Road. The Eighth Road. The thought arrived in Nedjima's mind not as a phrase she had been taught but as a fact she had just been shown. The road was real. It had taken her bird. It had kept her bird. It had brought her bird back. The older women whispering at sundown over a year ago had not been making grief bearable. They had been naming what they had seen. The faith Nedjima had held politely all her life — the faith she had said the words of and never quite found — was a description of a real thing, and the real thing had just put its hand on her shoulder, in front of her whole new ahl, on the longest day of the year.

Al-Mashi ath-Thamin, The Eighth Walker, was watching. He had been watching. He was watching now.



Nedjima's knees did not buckle. Her hand did not waver. The training of a Banat raised in the long fire of her mother's qadrim held her upright on the packed ground of her husband's sahn, even as everything beneath her belief gave way and rebuilt itself in the same breath.

Someone, finally, spoke. It was Tahira. The Umm as-Saqr of the Banat as-Saqr, standing four paces from Nedjima, did not come closer. She did not touch the bird. She said, in the voice a Banat used for birds and for very young children and for the very rare moments when an Isaad was in the presence of something that had crossed a road no one living could walk:

"Al-Mashi yanzuru."

Nedjima's throat closed.

She did not weep. An Isaad bride at her first hosted Saqr Waqt did not weep in the middle of her sahn. She stood with her bird on her glove and her husband's eyes on her from across their sahn and the Banat's eyes on the bird and her heart doing the thing it had been doing since the falcon came down out of the sky, and she did not weep, and she did not speak. Nedjima understood this moment did not require her to do anything at all. She only had to be the person standing under her bird.

Nedjima had spent a year learning how to hold two true things at once. The happiness of her marriage and the sorrow of Shahida's loss. Both things had been true.

But now Shahida had come home, after over a year of absence.



Rashan was walking across their sahn now. He was not hurrying. He came across the open space the way he crossed any ground — steady, unhurried, his hand near his belt in the small ready way of a man who had been a hunter before he was a husband. He stopped a little way from her. Not so close as to crowd her. Not so far as to be absent.

"Nedjima," he said.

She could not speak yet. She turned her head a little toward him. It was enough.

Rashan looked at Shahida. He looked at the bird for a long moment, without reaching out, without smiling. Then he looked at his wife.

"Your bird is home," he said.

Nedjima nodded. The nod broke the small fragile thing inside her chest that had been holding the tears at bay all year. She did not make a sound, but the tears came, and she felt them on her face, and she did not raise her free hand to wipe them away because she was not willing to make any movement that might startle her bird.

Shahida did not startle.

Their sahn was beginning to make sound again. A breath somewhere. A murmur. Tahira saying something quietly to Khawla that Nedjima could not hear. Children who had not understood what had happened beginning to ask questions in the tone children used when the adults around them had all gone strange at the same time.

Saqr Waqt would resume. It would resume in a moment. The Banat would go on with the flights. The bell-course would start up again. Someone would hang more banners. The day would be what it was going to be.



But for this one moment their sahn was held very still, and Nedjima stood in the middle of it with Shahida on her glove, and her husband beside her, and the Umm as-Saqr's benediction still hanging in the air, and somewhere behind her Khawla and Iman watching the daughter of Munira hold the bird Munira had named, and she understood — in the way an Isaad sometimes understood things before they had words — that the year she had just survived had been the price of this. That you did not get your witness back without paying for her. That Shahida had flown a road Nedjima could not follow and had come home bringing something Nedjima could not yet see, and that Nedjima's job, now, for the rest of her life, was to be ready.

She did not know what she was being made ready for.

She would find out, in time. She would find out years from now, in some other time. But today, in her sahn, she did not know.

She only knew that her hand was warm where Shahida's talons gripped the leather, and that her husband was beside her, and that her face was wet, and that the grief she had carried for a year was still there — it had not disappeared, it would not disappear, a year of a falconer's waiting did not simply vanish because the falcon came back — but the grief had been joined, now, by its opposite. And the two of them were standing together inside her at the same time, the way they always would for the rest of her life.

A khunoni who could hold two true things at once could make any book.

A Banat who had seen The Eighth Road could walk the rest of her years on it.



She looked down at her bird. Shahida looked back.

"*Shahida*," Nedjima said aloud. The first time the name had been spoken in their sahn. "*Ahlan*."

Welcome home.

Their sahn began to move again. Tahira came forward and stood close, not touching, and said something low and practical about water and about a perch. One of the older girls came running with a cloth for Nedjima's face. Rashan's hand, when it came, came to the small of her back — the lightest touch, the steadying touch, the one that said *I am here, take your time*.

Nedjima took her time.

High above their sahn, the sun was at its longest point of the year. The light was going to last a long time. Saqr Waqt was going to last a long time. There was ink drying under a weighted board inside her bereth, and a new khunon waiting to be finished, and a bird on her glove who had come back from somewhere Nedjima now believed in.

The Isaad said: "Al-darb maktub. Al-Mashi yanzuru. Is'alni fi al-laylat ath-thalitha." *The road is written, the Walker is watching, ask me on the third night.*

What Nedjima said, in her own quiet voice, for no one but Shahida to hear, was:

"*Maktub*."

It is written.

Shahida blinked once, slow, the way a falcon blinked when she was home.

