

CHAPTER 11

The sea spray tickled the nose of young Zaiah as she stood on the docks watching the ships enter the port city of Derna, the place she called home. Her long black hair tangled in the salt wind and her brown eyes stung, but she stayed at her post. Zaiah would be turning seven soon, and her father was supposed to be home in time to celebrate. She stood resolutely still, deep in thought.

Her home was different now. Despite her young age, Zaiah knew something bad had taken hold of her city. Black flags twirled above capital buildings and adorned the city's police cars. The insignia she had learned to loathe decorated shops, restaurants, markets, and even her school. The football stadium was off limits to students now; Zaiah wasn't sure why, but she had a hunch. Some of the older kids had whispered about beheadings, screams they had heard above the wind at night coming from the stadium. Zaiah shivered just thinking about it. She hoped it wasn't true.

At last, a ship she recognized approached the docks. Zaiah's blood coursed with excitement, but also fear. That snake-like insignia was painted on her father's ship. It hadn't been there before. The flags were also there, rippling against the wind at the hull of the ship. Now Zaiah was feeling ill; her stomach churned like the waves and she thought she might cry. She clenched her small fingers and ran towards the ship, shouting, "Papa! Papa!"

Finally, she saw her father's warm smile peeking out among the masts. He opened his mouth to call out to her, but before he could, something, or someone, pushed him forward, causing him to stumble across the slippery boards of the ship deck.

"Papa!" Zaiah abandoned all caution, intent on getting to her father's side.

"Zaiah! No. Go back." Her father's voice sounded strained, different. Zaiah didn't like it. Now she really was crying.

A man with mean, flinty eyes strode into view. He saw Zaiah standing there crying in front of the ship and it brought a sardonic smile to his face.

"What's wrong, girl? Is this your papa?" The man motioned to her father.

Zaiah nodded and wiped her running nose on her sleeve.

"Well, he's proved to be a great help to our cause, girl. Be proud of your Daddy." The man chuckled at himself and ordered the other men to unload the ship as quick as they could. "A storm is coming," the bad man said.

"Zaiah," her father said in a low tone. "Go home. I'll see you there." He forced a smile and blew a kiss to his youngest child. Zaiah caught it, like always, and held it close to her chest.

"Okay, Papa." Zaiah turned slowly and began walking back towards the innards of Derna. She looked back over her shoulder to see her father speaking furiously to the bad man. She wished her father would just leave now, with her.

Zaiah didn't know what else to do but obey her father, so she started the short walk home. On her way, she saw a woman crying, on her knees in the street, clutching at the pant legs of a police officer. He wasn't a normal Libyan police man; he wore the black insignia on his shirt in place of the usual star.

"Please! Spare my son! He's a naughty boy; he didn't know any better!"

Now Zaiah saw Jonja, a boy from her school, locked in the back of the police car. He had tear streaks on his cheeks, but also blood on his scalp. Zaiah's heart thumped loudly in her little chest and she was scared it would draw the attention of the police man. She hid behind a cart full of fish and ignored the rancid smell.

"Your son is coming with us. He will benefit from a night in jail. The cause needs boys like this to be made example of," the police officer said evilly. Zaiah thought he looked like a crow— black eyes and black hair with a beak-like nose. His skin was too dark for a Libyan.

"No! Please! You don't need my boy. He needs his mother!" The woman was weeping louder now. "Help! Stop these intruders from taking our sons!" She looked wildly around, silently begging someone to come to her aid, to take her boy out of the police car. No one moved. They watched, but did not interfere. There was a sense of fear permeating the small alley; it stunk worse than the fish.

The police ignored the woman and shouted a few things to nearby witnesses like, "Learn from this!" and "We will prevail!" Then they were gone; Jonja too. His mother was inconsolable now. She was on all fours in the dirty street mumbling, "Jonja, Jonja," through her tears. Zaiah's sick feeling returned and she threw up all over the wheel of the cart she was hiding behind.

She wiped her mouth, shaking slightly, and began to run. She was running home before more of her city turned into a black pit right before her eyes. She hated these new men posted all around the city. She hated the rumors of screams and torture that went on at night in police cells and the stadium. She hated the men that had pushed her father and painted their sign on his ship. She hated it all. She was starting to hate Derna. She had always loved her home.

Once home, Zaiah ran into her mother's arms, crying like the little girl she was.

"Mama, Papa is back. But bad men on his ship— they wouldn't let me see him!" She dissolved into sobs again, unable to speak about what she had seen anymore. At that moment, the door opened again and her father entered.

"Papa!" She ran into his arms now, leaving her mother bewildered and frightened.

"What is this? Your daughter speaks of crazy things—" her mother began, but her father interrupted his wife by waving his hands. He was out of breath, so it took him a moment to speak.

"Must go. Now. ISIS is here. Not safe."

ISIS. Now Zaiah knew what they were called. ISIS: the black plague that had taken over Derna.