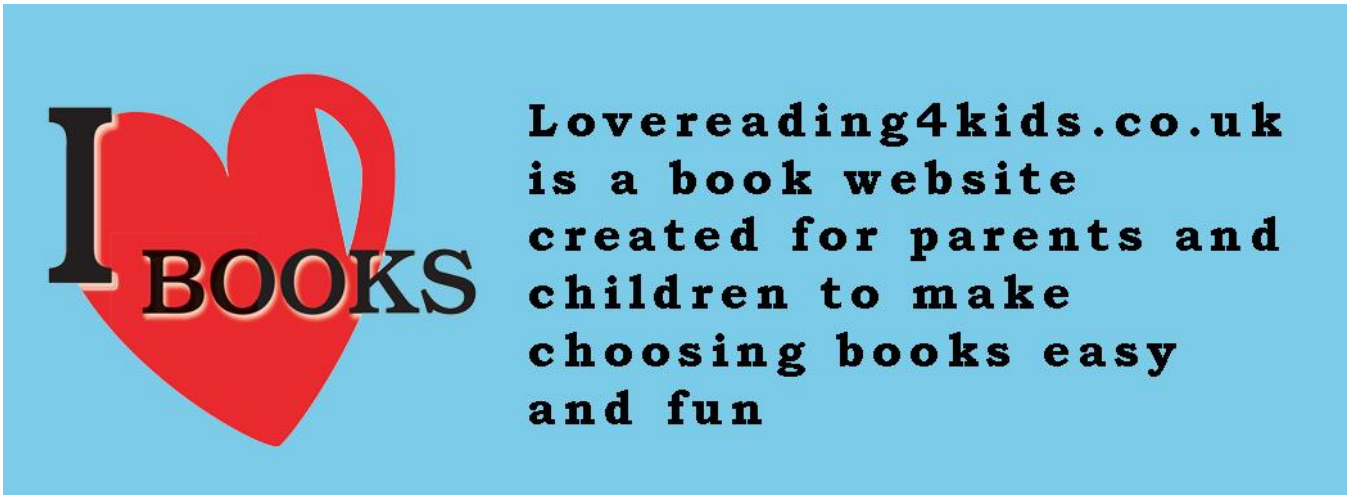


Opening extract from

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Chapter 1

The Foreign Prince

Once, in the desert kingdom of Miraji, there was a young prince who wanted his father's throne. He had no claim to it but the belief that his father was a weak ruler and that he would be stronger. And so he took the throne by force. In a single night of bloodshed the Sultan and the prince's brothers fell to the young prince's sword and the foreign army he led. When dawn came he was no longer a prince. He was the Sultan.

The young Sultan was known to take wives into his harem the same way he had his country: by force.

In the first year of his rule, two such wives gave birth to sons under the same stars. One wife was a girl born in the sands. Her son belonged to the desert. The other wife was a girl born across the water, in a kingdom

called Xicha, and raised on the deck of a ship. Her son did not belong.

But the sons grew as brothers nonetheless, their mothers shielding them from the things the palace walls could not. And for a time, in the Sultan's harem, things were well.

Until the first wife gave birth again, but this time to a child that was not her husband's – a Djinni's daughter, with unnatural hair and unnatural fire in her blood. For her crime in betraying him, the Sultan turned his anger on his wife. She died under the force of his blows.

Such was his rage, the Sultan never noticed the second wife, who fled with their two sons and the Djinni's daughter, escaping back across the sea to the kingdom of Xicha, where she had been stolen from. There, her son, the Foreign Prince, could pretend that he belonged. The Desert Prince could not pretend; he was as foreign in this land as his brother had been in their father's. But neither prince was destined to stay long. Soon, both left Xicha for the open seas instead.

And for a time, on ships going anywhere and coming from nowhere, things were well for the brothers. They drifted from one foreign shore to another, belonging in each place equally.

Until one day, across the bow of the ship, Miraji appeared again.

The Desert Prince saw his country and remembered where he really belonged. On that familiar shore he left the ship and his brother. Though the Desert Prince asked his brother to join him, the Foreign Prince would not. His father's lands looked empty and barren to him and he could not understand what hold they had over his brother. And so they parted ways. The Foreign Prince stayed on the sea for a time, raging silently that his brother had chosen the desert over the sea.

Finally the day came when the Foreign Prince could no longer be separated from his brother. When he returned to the desert of Miraji, he found that his brother had set it on fire with rebellion. The Desert Prince talked of great things, of great ideas, of equality and of prosperity. He was surrounded by new brothers and sisters who loved the desert as he did. He was now known as the Rebel Prince. But still he welcomed the man who had been his brother his whole life with open arms.

And for a time things were well in the Rebellion.

Until there was a girl. A girl called the Blue-Eyed Bandit, who had been made in the sands and sharpened by the desert and who burned with all of its fire. And for the first time the Foreign Prince understood what it was that his brother loved in this desert.

The Foreign Prince and the Blue-Eyed Bandit

crossed the sands together, all the way to a great battle in the city of Fahali, where the Sultan's foreign allies had rooted themselves.

In that battle of Fahali the rebels won their first great victory. They defended the desert against the Sultan who would have burned it alive. They freed the Demdji, another Djinni's child, whom the Sultan would have turned into a weapon against his will. They killed the young commander, their brother who would have shed blood until he could win praise from his father, the Sultan. They ruptured the Sultan's alliance with the foreigners who had been punishing the desert for decades. And the rebels claimed part of the desert for themselves.

The story of the battle of Fahali spread quickly. And with it spread news that the desert might be a prize for the taking again. For the desert of Miraji was the only place where the old magic and the new machines were able to exist together. The only country that could spit out guns quickly enough to arm men to fight in the great war raging between the nations of the north.

New eyes from foreign shores turned to Miraji, hungry ones. More foreign armies descended on the desert, coming from all sides, each trying to claim a new alliance, or the country itself. And while enemies from outside gnawed at the Sultan's borders and kept

his army occupied, the rebels seized city after city from the inside, knocking them out of the Sultan's hands and rallying the people to their side.

And for a time things were well for the Rebellion, for the Blue-Eyed Bandit, and for the Foreign Prince.

Until the balance started to shift against the Rebel Prince. Two dozen rebels were lost in a trap set for them in the sands, where they were surrounded and outgunned. A city rose up against the Sultan, crying out the Rebel Prince's name in the night. But those who had saw the next dawn with the blank eyes of the dead. And the Blue-Eyed Bandit fell to a bullet in a battle in the mountains, gravely wounded and only just clinging to life. There, for the first time since the threads of their stories had become tangled, the Blue-Eyed Bandit's and the Foreign Prince's paths split.

While the Blue-Eyed Bandit clung to her life, the Foreign Prince was sent to the eastern border of the desert. There, an army from Xicha was camped. The Foreign Prince stole a uniform and walked into the Xichian camp as if he belonged. It was easy there, where he did not look foreign any more. He stood with them as they battled the Sultan's forces, spying in secret for the Rebel Prince.

And for a time things were well, hiding among the foreign army.

Until the missive came from the enemy camp, its bearer wearing the Sultan's gold and white and holding up a flag of peace.

The Foreign Prince would have killed for news of what came in that missive for his own side, but there was no need. It was known that he spoke the desert language. He was summoned into the Xichian general's tent to translate between the Sultan's envoy and the Xichian, neither of them knowing he was an enemy of them both. As he translated he learned that the Sultan was calling for a ceasefire. He was tired of bloodshed, the message said. He was ready to negotiate. The Foreign Prince learned that the ruler of Miraji was summoning all the foreign rulers to him to talk of a new alliance. The Sultan asked for any king or queen or emperor or prince who would lay claim to his desert to come to his palace to make their case.

The missive went to the Xichian emperor the next morning. And the guns stopped. The ceasefire had started. Next would come negotiations. Then peace between the Sultan and the invaders. And without the need to mind his shores, the desert ruler's eyes would turn inward again.

The Foreign Prince understood it was time to return to his brother. Their rebellion was about to turn into a war.

Chapter 2

I'd always liked this shirt. It was a shame about all the blood.

Most of it wasn't mine, at least. The shirt wasn't mine, either, for that matter – I'd borrowed it from Shazad and never bothered to give it back. Well, she probably wouldn't want it now.

'Stop!'

I was jerked to a halt. My hands were tied, and the rope chafed painfully along the raw skin of my wrists. I hissed a curse under my breath as I tilted my head back, finally looking up from my dusty boots to lock eyes with the glare of the desert sun.

The walls of Saramotai cast a mighty long shadow in the last of the light.

These walls were legendary. They had stood indifferent to one of the greatest battles of the First War, between the hero Attallah and the Destroyer of

Worlds. They were so ancient they looked like they'd been built out of the bones of the desert itself. But the words slapped in sloppy white paint above the gates . . . those were new.

Welcome to the Free City.

I could see where the paint had dripped between the cracks in the ancient stones before drying in the heat.

I had a few things to say about being dragged to a so-called Free City tied up like a goat on a spit, but even I knew I was better off not running my mouth just now.

'Declare yourself or I'll shoot!' someone called from the city wall. The words were a whole lot more impressive than the voice that came with them. I could hear the crack of youth on that last word. I squinted up through my sheema at the kid pointing a rifle at me from the top of the walls. He couldn't have been any older than thirteen. He was all limbs and joints. He didn't look like he could've held that gun right if his life depended on it. Which it probably did. This being Miraji and all.

'It's us, Ikar, you little idiot,' the man holding me bellowed in my ear. I winced. Shouting really didn't seem necessary. 'Now, open the gates right now or, God help me, I'm going to have your father beat you harder than one of his horseshoes until some brains go in.'

'Hossam?' Ikar didn't lower the gun right away. He

was twitchy as all get-out. Which wasn't the best thing when he had one finger on the trigger of a rifle. 'Who's that with you?' He waved his gun in my direction. I turned my body on instinct as the barrel swung wildly. He didn't look like he could hit the broad side of a barn if he was trying, but I wasn't ruling out that he might hit me by accident. If he did, better to get shot in the shoulder than the chest.

'This' – a hint of pride crept into Hossam's voice as he jerked my face up to the sunlight like I was a hunted carcass – 'is the Blue-Eyed Bandit.'

That name landed with more weight than it used to, drawing silence down behind it. On top of the wall Ikar stared. Even this far away I saw his jaw open, going slack for a moment, then close.

'Open the gates!' Ikar squawked finally, scrambling down. 'Open the gates!'

The huge iron doors swung open painfully slow, fighting against the sand that had built up over the day. Hossam and the other men with us jostled me forward in a hurry as the ancient hinges groaned.

The gates didn't open all the way, only enough for one man to get through at a time. Even after thousands of years those gates looked as strong as they had at the dawn of humanity. They were iron through and through, as thick as the span of a man's arms, and

operated by some system of weights and gears that no other city had been able to duplicate. There'd be no breaking these gates down. And everyone knew there was no climbing the walls of Saramotai.

Seemed like the only way into the city these days was by being dragged through the gates as a prisoner with a hand around your neck. Lucky me.

Saramotai was west of the middle mountains. Which meant it was ours. Or at least, it was supposed to be. After the battle at Fahali, Ahmed had declared this territory his. Most cities had sworn their allegiance quickly enough, as the Gallan occupiers who'd held this half of the desert for so long emptied out of the streets. Or we'd claimed their allegiance away from the Sultan.

Saramotai was another story.

Welcome to the Free City.

Saramotai had declared its own laws, taking rebellion one step further.

Ahmed talked a whole lot about equality and wealth for the poor. The people of Saramotai had decided the only way to create equality was to strike down those who were above them. That the only way to become rich was to take their wealth. So they'd turned against the rich under the guise of accepting Ahmed's rule.

But Ahmed knew a grab for power when he saw one. We didn't know all that much about Malik Al-Kizzam,

the man who'd taken over Saramotai, except that he'd been a servant to the emir and now the emir was dead and Malik lived in his grand estate.

So we sent a few folk to find out more. And do something about it if we didn't like it.

They didn't come back.

That was a problem. Another problem was getting in after them.

And so here I was, my hands tied so tight behind my back I was losing feeling in them and a fresh wound on my collarbone where a knife had just barely missed my neck. Funny how being successful felt exactly the same as getting captured.

Hossam shoved me ahead of him through the narrow gap in the gates. I stumbled and went sprawling in the sand face-first, my elbow bashing into the iron gate painfully as I went down.

Son of a bitch, that hurt more than I thought it would.

A hiss of pain escaped through my teeth as I rolled over. Sand stuck to my hands where sweat had pooled under the ropes, clinging to my skin. Then Hossam grabbed me, yanking me to my feet. He hustled me inside, the gate clanging quickly shut behind us. It was almost like they were afraid of something.

A small crowd had already gathered inside the gate

to gawk. Half were clutching guns. More than a few of those were pointed at me.

So my reputation really did precede me.

'Hossam.' Someone pushed to the front. He was older than my captors, with serious eyes that took in my sorry state. He looked at me more levelly than the others. He wouldn't be blinded by the same eagerness. 'What happened?'

'We caught her in the mountains,' Hossam crowed. 'She tried to ambush us when we were on our way back from trading for the guns.' Two of the other men with us dropped bags that were heavy with weapons on the ground proudly, as if to show off that I hadn't gotten in their way. The guns weren't of Mirajin make. Amonpourian. Stupid-looking things. Ornate and carved, made by hand instead of machine, and charged at twice what they were worth because someone had gone to the trouble of making them pretty. It didn't matter how pretty something was, it'd kill you just as dead. That, I'd learned from Shazad.

'Just her?' the man with the serious eyes asked. 'On her own?' His gaze flicked to me. Like he might be able to suss out the truth just from looking at me. Whether a girl of seventeen would really think she could take on a half dozen grown men with nothing but a handful of bullets and think she could win. Whether the famous