

AAMNA QURESHI

The
MAN
or the
MONSTER

The
Marghazar
Trials

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CamCat Publishing, LLC
Brentwood, Tennessee 37027
camcatpublishing.com

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2022 by Aamna Qureshi

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Hardcover ISBN 9780744305579
Paperback ISBN 9780744305494
Large-Print Paperback ISBN 9780744305661
eBook ISBN 9780744305500
Audiobook ISBN 9780744305609

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data available upon request

Book and cover design by Maryann Appel

5 3 1 2 4

F or Mimi and Papa,
My beloved grandparents.





THE TRIAL

*S*urkhanai's gaze met Asfandyar's as he turned to look at her one last time.

There was nothing—no one—in the world but them. In that moment, she saw the unmasked love in his eyes.

She knew the same love was mirrored in hers.

Then he moved across the empty space, toward a door. The door on the right.

Her heart seized, knowing the fate she had ordered him to.

He took one step forward, then another, and the crowd held their breaths, the arena entirely silent in agonizing anticipation.

Asfandyar lifted a hand and gestured to the door. The final decision had been made.

From above, someone worked the mechanism to open the wooden doors.

The heavy lock unlatched, echoing in the silent morning. Slowly, the doors opened to reveal a long, dark tunnel.

Durkhanai curled her hands into fists in her blood-red gharara, trying to stay firm on the fate she had chosen for him, trying not to regret.

From deep within the tunnel, movement could be heard. Across the arena, some people stood from their seats, craning their necks to preemptively catch a glimpse of what would come out.

Durkhanai could see Asfandyar's shoulders were shaking, his hands tight fists at his sides. But he did not move. He stood entirely still, awaiting his fate. His chest rose and fell with short breaths, matching the rhythm of Durkhanai's too-fast heartbeat.

A slanted shadow came into view at the edge of the tunnel, right before the doors, and from the darkness, a pair of eyes shone in the light.

A lion burst forth.

The crowd released a collective gasp. The verdict was in.

Guilty.

There was no time, and all the time in the world. Durkhanai saw the shock in Asfandyar's face.

The lion roared, its guttural cry rattling every bone in her body. Asfandyar was thrown to the ground. Durkhanai jumped to her feet, her heart seizing.

No, no, no!

She couldn't tear her gaze away from Asfandyar. She watched as he rolled out from under the lion, impossibly quick and agile, and Durkhanai knew if anyone could beat the lion, it was Asfi. He had to beat it, he had to.

Or she had sent him to his death.

The instant the door had opened to reveal the lion, Durkhanai understood her mistake: She would rather have him live with another than watch him be torn to shreds.

But it was too late, she had unleashed the lion upon him. But he would be all right, she knew it deep in her bones, he would be all right.

He was the great love of her life, he would be all right. *Please*. He *had* to be all right.

Asfandyar ran from the lion, getting ahead for an instant before the lion leapt. It grabbed him by the torso, claws sinking in deep. Asfandyar's face contorted with pain, and Durkhanai squeezed her hands into fists to stop from crying out as he kicked the lion's face, rolling out of its grip.

But he was growing weak, she could tell, and the lion was too quick. Asfandyar was no match for the lion, after all, and a moment later, the lion sunk its teeth straight into Asfandyar's heart. He cried out in pain, and Durkhanai screamed.

"No!"

A thousand faces whipped from the spectacle to stare at her, their faces frozen and stoic. She was making a scene, she was forgetting her place, but she did not care.

"Somebody help him!" she cried, looking at her guards. They would not meet her gaze. "Please! Agha-Jaan, please, stop this," she begged, falling at his feet. He would not look at her.

An iron grip grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. Durkhanai looked up to see Dhadi, pushing her back into her chair.

"Sambhallo apne aap ko," she said. "This is no way for a princess to behave."

Durkhanai threw her grandmother's arm off of her, as if about to stand. She would go down there herself, she would . . .

"Janaan," Agha-Jaan said. "Sit."

And she did. She obeyed, locked in place.

In the arena, Asfandyar was dying a slow, painful death, the lion chewing on his leg. A sob rose in Durkhanai's throat, and she looked away. The reprieve lasted only a moment for a hand steered her jaw back to face the arena, its grip lethal.

"Look," the Badshah said. "*Look.*"

The light was leaving Asfandyar's eyes.

“No, *no*,” Durkhanai struggled, but the Badshah kept her in place.

“Yes,” he said. “See what you have done. This is what happens when you are not careful.”

The lion jumped, its paw swiping across Asfandyar’s throat. Durkhanai’s hand flew to her own neck as blood gushed from Asfandyar’s skin. His face was contorted with pain, his eyes rolling back, and she could do nothing but watch.

He tried to run one last time. Her heart soared with futile hope.

But with a final, deafening roar, the lion lunged, suspended in air for a moment, then crashing down onto Asfandyar. They were a blur of limbs and fur; Asfandyar was out of her sight for an instant. Then the lion shifted, and she saw him.

Asfandyar was looking straight at her, but his infinite eyes were empty. For a moment, she did not understand, and then she saw: His head was removed from his body.

He was dead.

Grief cleaved through her, and she swayed. This time, there was no one holding her upright, and she fell back onto her throne, the metal cold beneath her fingertips. She felt everything all at once: the urge to scream; the need to vomit; the desire to sob.

She felt it all so fiercely that somehow none of these actions occurred. She was frozen in place, shocked. The only sign that this was real was her frenzied heart beating against her chest.

The lion did not stop.

Still frozen, Durkhanai watched everything in perfect detail. The lion gnawed on Asfandyar’s arm, the same arm that held her so gently mere hours ago. His eyes remained open, the antithesis of the amusement and warmth she had always sought in them. He was surrounded by blood, his body mangled, flesh torn.

Bile rose in Durkhanai’s throat.

The people began to leave, the spectacle over, but Durkhanai stayed. She did not notice when her family members had gone, leaving

her. This was her fault. So she stayed. When the last rows emptied, the guards returned the lion to its cage, and the world was quiet.

She was alone.

Finally, she lifted herself up and moved. Durkhanai went down to the arena. The stench of blood was heavy in the air, making her sick, but she felt nothing. Nothing at all. Not even as she approached his remains, a mess of tattered clothes and crushed limbs.

She walked as if through a daze until she reached the mouth of the arena. She entered just as he had in those final moments, and as if his ghost possessed her, she turned to face her own throne.

In perfect clarity, she saw her own ghost gesturing to the door that held the lion.

She looked at those doors now, so hideous in their similarity. It was a game, choose a door, choose a fate.

Until she saw the guards carrying away his head.

It was not a game.

Durkhanai fell to the ground near his remains and screamed. They had not taken away the body yet, and it lay beside her, lifeless, limp. She wished she could detach it from her memory of him, pretend it was not his, but she knew his body too well to do so: the veins of his hands; the once elegant neck, now severed.

Blood surrounded the body, merging with the ends of her red gharrara, the two indistinguishable as his blood soaked into her clothes, hot and sticky.

She dug her hands into the earth, arching her back and shrieking until she felt the inside of her own throat threatening to tear.

He was gone. She had sent him to the lion. For being a spy, to protect her cousin—all silly reasons now because he was *dead* and there was no reason good enough for that.

She had acted on instinct in that final, fatal moment—doing what her grandparents would have wished, and this was the outcome.

He was dead.

Something vital within her fissured. Durkhanai dragged her hands over her face, dirt and blood streaking her cheeks with the tears, and she tasted the sharp salt of his blood on her tongue.

She vomited, sobbing, feeling like she was dying.

Suddenly, the arena was full again. The spectacle was not over.

Durkhanai rose, turning to see the Badshah on his throne. Disgust was evident in his eyes, his countenance marred with disappointment.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she whispered. “Please.”

“Durkhanai Miangul,” he said. “You are held to trial for loving Asfandyar.”

She turned to the doors, so hideous in their similarity. And she knew. Behind one stood a man, behind the other stood a monster.

Durkhanai wasn’t sure if she was guilty; she wanted to say she was, but if she had loved him, how could she have sent him to his death?

Perhaps the trial could tell her the truth of her heart.

Durkhanai stood and walked to meet her fate. As she reached for the door, a hand clasped over hers from behind, strong and sure. She turned and met Asfandyar’s gaze.

“Don’t worry, chanda,” she whispered. “I will be with you soon.”

She opened the door. The last thing she heard was the monster’s roar.



CHAPTER ONE

*D*urkhanai awoke, shrieking.

It was a dream, just a dream, a terrible nightmare in which Asfandyar went to the door she told him to rather than deciding his own fate.

But she could still smell his blood, hear his screams. She could feel the monster's teeth sinking into her own skin.

Durkhanai retched, but only spit and blood from where she had bit her tongue came out. She wanted to sob, but she would not allow herself to. Her heart was buried deep, beneath an ocean and a mountain and a marble house.

She could not hear it beating, could not feel it.

"Shehzadi, do you need assistance?" a maid entered her room, followed by alarmed guards. Durkhanai shook her head.

A glance to the windows told her it was late at night. She had come straight to bed after the trial, entirely numb, and slept the rest of the evening away in the soft comfort of oblivion.

Until her nightmare, of course.

“Draw me a bath,” she commanded. The maid complied. With a wave of her hand, she dismissed the guards. Durkhanai watched them leave, gaze locked on the door. For a moment, she expected someone else to enter in their place but no one did, not her grandparents or Saifullah or Zarmina.

Zarmina would be with Asfandyar.

The thought made her sick. She imagined his fingers in her hair, his lips against her neck the way they had been against her own just two nights ago. It was an unreasonable thing to imagine. Zarmina hated Asfandyar.

Even so, Durkhanai ground her teeth together, simmering in potent jealousy and anger. They were easier emotions to latch onto than the more dangerous feelings lurking beneath.

She had willingly sent him to the lion. But Durkhanai had never considered Asfandyar would not go to the door she chose. When his quick and anxious glance had asked *Which?* she had assumed he would obey her without question.

He had not.

It was why he was still alive. He had opened the door to reveal Zarmina, as shocked as everyone else to discover Asfandyar had been innocent all along.

He hadn't loved the princess.

The trial had proved as much, and the people believed in the trial wholeheartedly. The results were never questioned.

She had made the right choice: Asfandyar was a liar and a spy. He had used her. Her grandparents would have never accepted him.

And yet. She heard the distant sound of her heart beating in its cage.

You love him.

It would have been better for him to die at once, and wait for her on the other side.

But he was no longer hers. He belonged to Zarmina, now, and she was glad for it. If it had been anyone else, Durkhanai may have schemed stolen kisses, perhaps content with an illicit affair—but she would not betray her beloved cousin.

Their nikkah, the Islamic wedding ceremony, had occurred right there in the arena, in front of everyone to see. The maulvi had given the khutbah, the lecture, and the papers had been signed. The wedding reception was to commence as soon as Asfandyar's tribe and Wali could come from Jardum.

When the maulvi had asked Asfandyar, "Qabool hai? Do you accept?" a hideous hope had burned within her, the possibility that he might say no, that he might refuse. There would be no wedding without a groom—but he hadn't. He had hesitated, then accepted, his face blank.

The thought had never occurred to her before; whoever was judged innocent was usually so happy to be alive that they consented to the marriage straight away.

Durkhanai had wanted to cry then, witnessing it, but she had not. She had felt Saifullah and Agha-Jaan and Dhadi watching her reaction, so she had shown none. Everyone, including the bride and the groom and the audience, were all stunned into silence during the entire procession.

The law was the law; nobody argued with it.

She had been numb. The moment it was over, she had disappeared.

She hadn't spoken to Zarmina, but she could guess only a fraction of how furious she would be. Her and Saifullah both.

Zarmina had told Durkhanai which door she, the lady, would be behind; thus, the outcome of the trial would make her cousins believe that she had betrayed them, choosing love over blood.

She pushed them from her mind. Asfandyar was harder to keep from her thoughts, and again, guilt and fear rose in her. Guilt for the

decision she had made for him; fear of what would have happened had he listened.

Perhaps Asfandyar hadn't seen her gesture, she tried to console herself, or he had misread it—but she knew deep down the perfect clarity that had existed between them in that final, fatal moment.

It was why she had avoided everyone after the tribunal, gone to her room, and slept, warning her guards not to let anybody bother her—though she doubted anyone would try. Her grandparents would let her sulk, at least for the rest of the day; she could feign fatigue, illness maybe.

But come tomorrow, she would need to be the smiling princess once more, planning her beloved cousin's wedding reception, crushing any whispers of rumors that linked her name to Asfandyar's.

While the trial had proved his innocence of loving her, there might still be some lingering suspicions. People would be watching her closely.

He was married now.

Married. The thought cut through her like a thousand tiny blades. How ironic and cruel. The one man she wasn't allowed to marry was now married to her best friend, her own blood.

She wanted to sob again, but she bit her lip until it drew blood.

"Shehzadi?" her maid said. "The bath is drawn."

Durkhanai took a deep breath and nodded, unable to speak. Her eyes were blank as her maids helped her undress. She slipped into the tub, hissing as the scalding water touched her skin.

She did not retreat. She submerged herself, and eventually, the pain subsided. Rose petals drifted across her skin as the maids scrubbed her body and massaged her hair with coconut oil.

She was the Shehzadi. It was time she started acting like it.



CHAPTER TWO

Asfandyar's Tale

*A*sfandyar wished he could say he was surprised. Yet, he was not.

He knew her, after all, knew of her thorns. He couldn't help his relief when the door opened and the lady walked forth, rather than the lion. Couldn't help his relief, even though he knew what it meant.

That Durkhanai had willingly sent him to the lion. The solace had faded quickly, followed by a thousand warring emotions: betrayal, love, confusion, hatred, pain, loneliness.

When he had turned to look at her one last time after the doors opened to reveal Zarmina emerging from that long, dark hall, Durkhanai's face had been empty.

He loved her.

The truth was when he asked her to run away, he was willing to leave everything behind; to start a new life with her somewhere far away. To abandon his oath to Wakdar and Jardum and spend his days counting the freckles on Durkhanai's nose and cheeks.

He would have done it; he would have been happy.

But she had chosen her people and sentenced him to death when he was willing to make *her* his people, to choose her and only choose her.

He had offered his soul to her, in a cup like wine: She drank from it, growing drunk from its sweetness. Her lips were scarlet red, and he saw it was not his soul but his very life's blood she drank.

She was a monster.

He hated her.

It had been a gamble, either way. Yet Asfandiyar was surprised to find his spy in the palace hadn't lied about the doors.

Perhaps the spy had depended on Asfandiyar not trusting him and going to the opposite door. It would have been risky to do either, which was why before the trial even began, he had decided to do the opposite of whatever Durkhanai instructed.

Had she sent him to the lady, her love was true, and he would rather die than be with another.

Had she sent him to the lion, he knew anything he felt for her would die instead, and he would rather live and spite her.

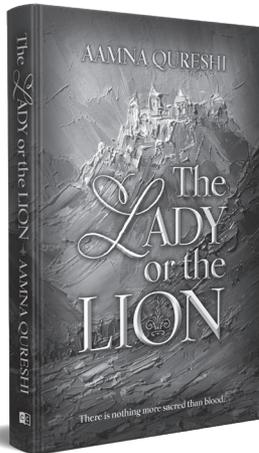
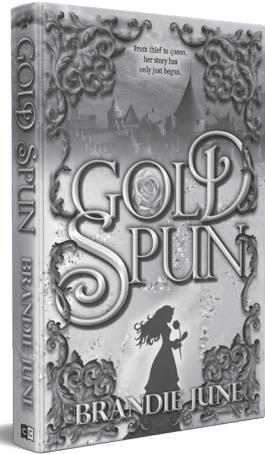
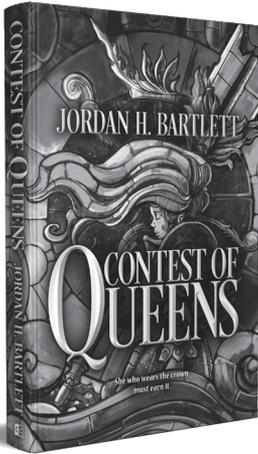
And spite her he would. He would finish what he started.

He had let her in close enough to kiss, close enough to kill. She had made her decision—she had picked her side.

They were at war.

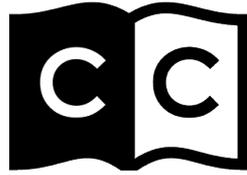
This time, he would not lose.

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She made her decision. Now she has to live with it.

Durkhanai Miangul sealed her lover's fate when she sent him through a door where either a lady or a lion awaited him. But her decision was only the beginning of her troubles.

Durkhanai worries that she might not be the queen her people need or deserve when conflict threatens her kingdom. Her presumed-dead father comes back with a vengeance and demands she join him in his cause.

But her family's denial of his revenge forces Durkhanai to take matters into her own hands and she must decide whether to follow the traditions of her forefathers or forge a path of her own.



Praise for *The Lady or the Lion*:

"Aamna Qureshi writes of a world steeped in rich culture and tumultuous politics with an expert hand. The Lady or The Lion is a gorgeous read."

—Chloe Gong

New York Times bestselling author of *These Violent Delights*


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Cover Design: Maryann Appel
Cover Artwork: Asrar Farooqi

Young Adult / Historical Romance

USD\$14.99 CAD\$19.99 GBP£9.99

ISBN 978-0-7443-0549-4

90000



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