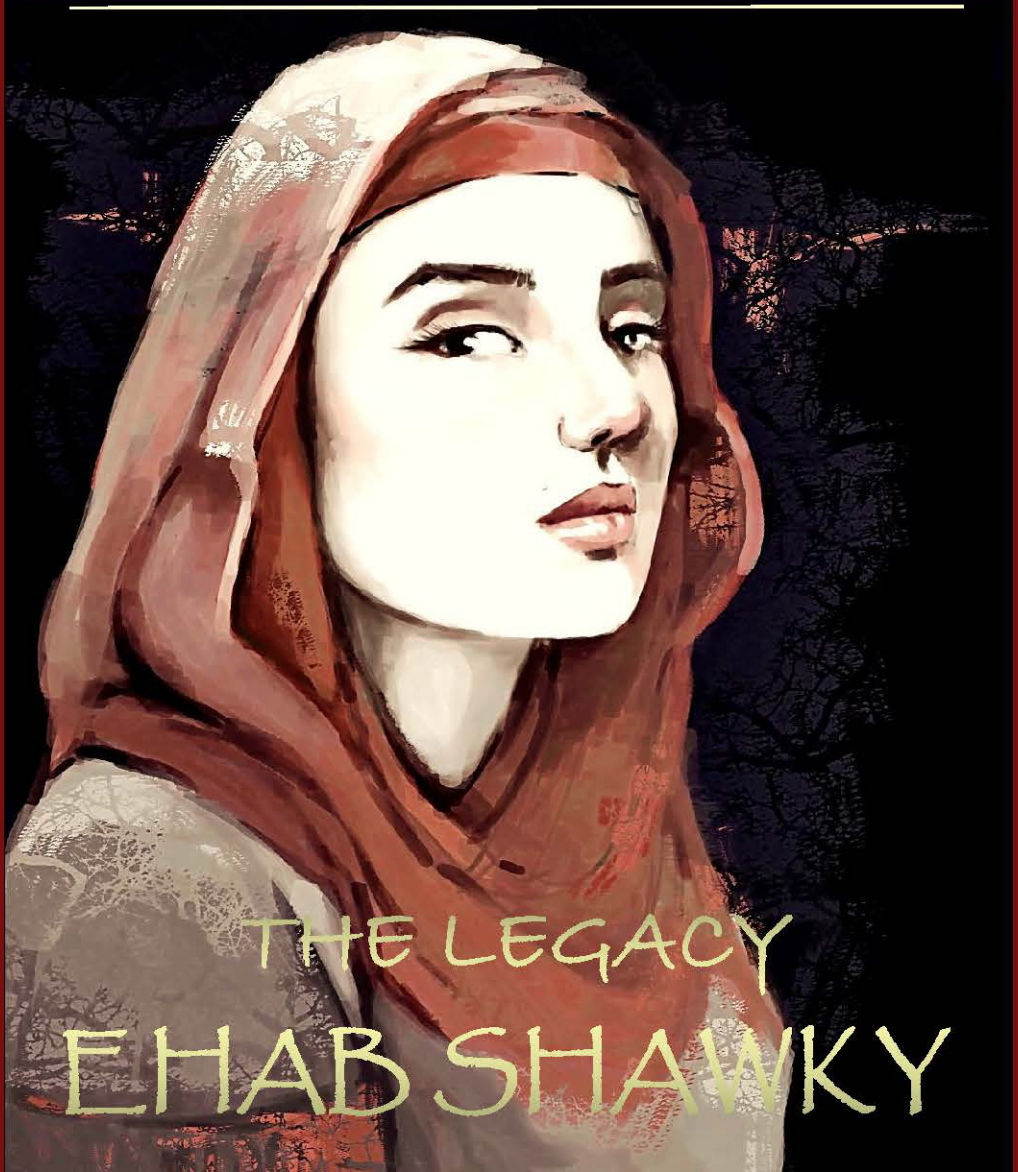
THERE IS ALWAYS A PRICE FOR RESISTING TRAITORS,
BUT THE PRICE OF NOT RESISTING IS WORSE AND MUCH HIGHER.

THE LOST WAY TO MISROST



THE LEGACY

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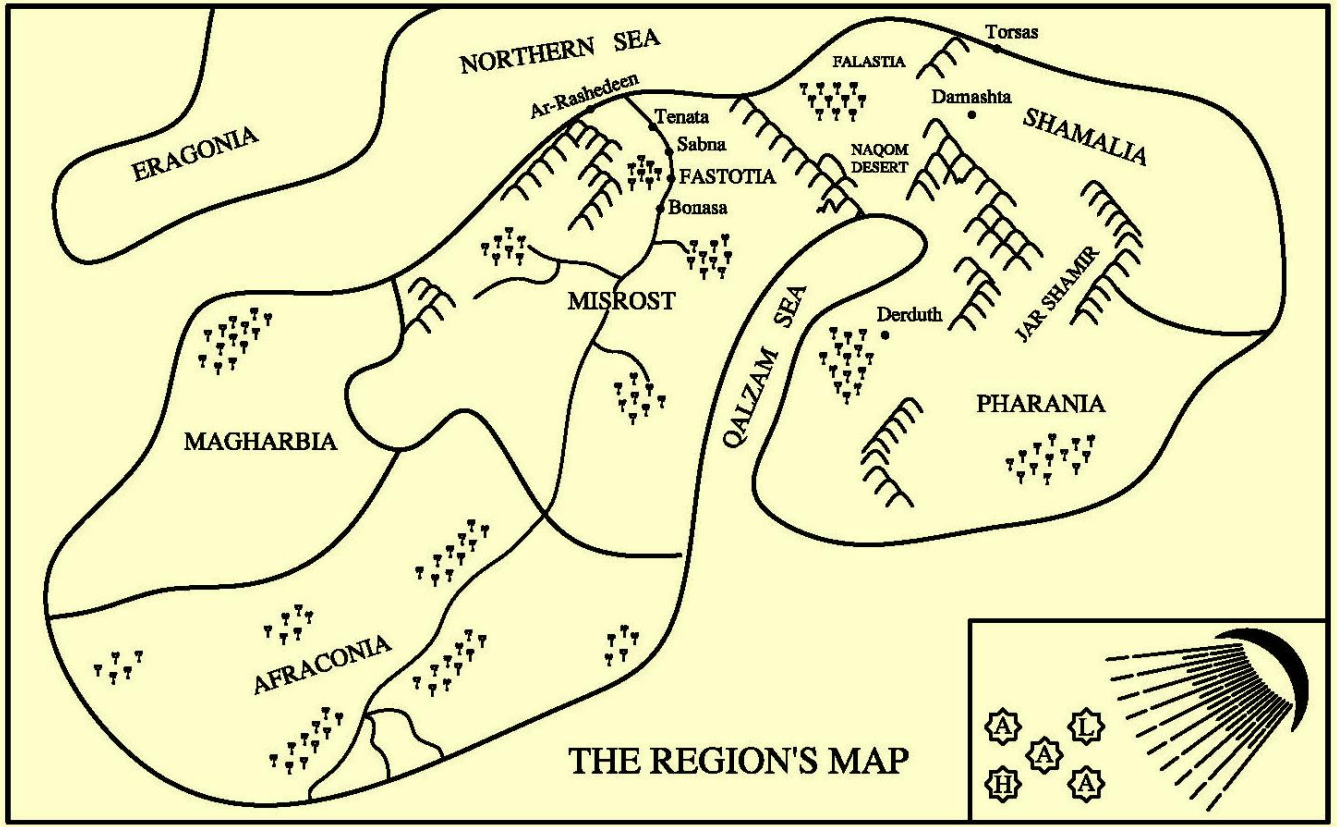
NORTHERN SEA
ERAGONIA
Ar-Rashedeen
Tenata
Sabna
FASTOTIA
Bonasa
FALASTIA
Torsas
Damashta
SHAMALIA
NAQOM DESERT
MISROST
QALZAM SEA
Derduth
JAR SHAMIR
PHARANIA
MAGHARBIA
AFRACONIA
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A
THE REGION'S MAP

To the sincere youths of the lost generations,
"Every place and every time has its traitors.
In different shapes and figures they come,
And there is always a price for resisting them.
No matter how high this price may seem,
You must always fight their corrupt regime.
The price of not resisting is much worse,
For their presence is a destructive curse.
Unite your forces, heal the broken parts,
25th of January will always be in the hearts."

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PART I
THE RETURN

1

Struggling against endless raging waters, stroke after stroke my arms relentlessly fought. My eyes searched for the shore. Disabled by the ruling night, I strove and strove but to no avail. Suddenly, a fading silver light started to rise on the horizon. Before it filled my eyes, before certitude filled my heart, I woke up.

Looking around, I found myself still sleeping in that abandoned oasis amidst the Misrostian eastern wilderness. I looked at the stars and pondered over their silence and might, hope had always gleamed in their light. A gentle breeze blew away the heat of the night and renewed my vigour. I got up, looked around bidding the peaceful place farewell, and then I started my journey back to the heart of Misrost.

My name is Qotazio Al-Misrosty. I am the former captain of the famous merchant ship, "Karma." I am the son of late Mohab Al-Misrosty, one of the former generals of his majesty's once had been army. Some say that the lineage of our family could be traced back to the descendants of Misroim himself. Personally, I never believed this allegation. I still remember how my grandmother used to tell me the stories of my ancestors, and I remember how I used to mock those stories during my teenage years. My father always resented my attitude regarding this particular issue, but he never tried to discuss the matter with me. There was I… the alleged descendant of Misroim himself, wearing patched dirty clothes, starving, and walking back to my homeland after a long tiring journey that ended up with colossal failure.

Near the border of the oasis, I saw an old man leaning his head on his stick, sitting under a palm tree.

"Peace and blessings be with you old man," I said.

He raised his head, looked me up and down, and then said suspiciously, “May Alaha’s peace and blessings be with you my son. To where might the traveller be headed?”

“To the heart of Misrost,” I replied.

His eyes grew wider and protested, “Heart of Misrost! Are you crazy?”

“Why are you saying that?” I asked.

The old man got up, grabbed me by my shoulders, and said hysterically, “The way to Misrost was lost long ago. It was overtaken by beasts that kill its youths. If I were you, I wouldn’t go there. Go and start a new life elsewhere.”

He retreated in quick humpy steps towards the heart of the oasis. I heard him repeat that last sentence continuously until he disappeared amidst the palm trees.

The old man must be mad, I thought to myself. I turned around and continued my journey back home. All I was hoping for at that moment was to return to my family’s farm, settle down, and raise a family of my own. I still had relatives living in Misrost, so I was counting on the help I shall get when I arrive. I was two weeks away from home. All I had for food was a sack of dates and a waterskin, which I refilled whenever I passed by a water well.

A few miles away from the ancient city, the gigantic ancient monuments were still standing as a warning for invaders. *“Beware, intruders. A mighty, capable nation lives behind me. Go back before it’s too late,”* that’s what I have always imagined them saying.

On approaching the city gates of Fastotia, the largest Misrostian city, I saw some soldiers searching an entering caravan. They were treating the riders in a very harsh manner. One soldier pushed a young woman throwing her on the muddy grounds and shouted roughly, “Where is the damn message?” The young woman seemed oblivious to what the soldier meant. He pulled her up by one hand and slapped her with the other, and then repeated the same question. Not receiving an answer, he dragged her by her

hair into the officers' room beside the city gates. Another soldier pushed an old man violently towards a higher-ranking officer and said something about Shamalia. The officer pointed towards a caged wagon and ordered the soldier to throw the man inside it.

I wanted to stay out of trouble, so I decided to mind my own business. I waited for my turn in the line trying not to care too much. Suddenly, a small, firm palm pulled my left hand. I looked, and there was a young child with a dirty face smiling at me. He was champing from an apple in a funny manner.

"Peace be with you, uncle," he said loudly.

I patted his head in a bit of disgust and responded smiling, "Peace be with you, young man. What are you doing outside the city gates? Where are your folks?"

The boy looked at the gate and said, "My family lives inside Fastotia near the gates. I was playing with the boys in the street when a fruit seller passed by. One of his bags was leaking but he didn't notice this. I collected what fell from the bag, followed the man, and returned the apples. As a reward, he offered me those few apples. Can you take me with you into the city? I'm afraid the soldiers would confiscate the apples and arrest me thinking I'm a thief?"

What a chatty little person, I thought to myself.

"Why would they think you are a thief?" I asked wondering.

"Apples are very expensive. A poor boy like me cannot buy them," he answered in a pitiful tone that felt fake.

I looked him in the eyes and asked, "Why don't you just tell them what happened as you told me?"

"They won't believe me, uncle. They would confiscate the apples as they always do with poor people. Please uncle, just hold my hand till we pass through the gate. My sisters haven't eaten anything for two days now. Please uncle, please."

Unable to deny some admiration that had crept into my heart towards his persistence, I decided to help him. I held his little palm until we reached the checkpoint. The soldier sitting behind the desk said, "Your name and address of residence."

"My name is Qotazio Al-Misrosty. My family owns a farm by the river bank in Fastotia."

The soldier raised his head piercing the boy and me with his looks in a strange way.

"Wait here," said the soldier. He got up and walked over to the officers' room hurriedly. The strange manner in which the soldier looked at us made me nervous. The moment this boy grabbed my hand, I smelled trouble. I felt he was hiding something. *He must have stolen the apples' bag from the officers' room*, I thought looking at him doubtfully.

"Did you say your name is Qotazio Mohab Al-Misrosty, uncle?"

"Yes," I responded coldly concentrating on the rapid movement around us.

Suddenly an officer came out from the guards' room, mounted his horse, and took off towards the city gates shouting, "Make way."

Then the soldier came out and whispered some orders to his comrades. They immediately started moving towards us. The boy pulled his hand out of mine saying, "I'll see you later, uncle." He ran through the gate and disappeared amidst the crowds. Amazingly, the soldiers didn't care whatsoever about the boy. They surrounded me, and their leader said, "The chief wants to see you. He is waiting for you in his office at the city hall. Walk along now."

Without giving me a chance to utter a word, they pushed me forward, and we started walking towards the heart of Misrost.

2

Walking amidst the soldiers without having a clue what was happening was frustrating. I noticed the people's pitiful silent looks. I had been away for years, and no one knew who I was. This helped reduce my embarrassment.

The city was nothing as I remember it. The streets were incredibly filthy and crowded. Hundreds of new buildings were filling the scene; all were hideous and poorly built. The once before green areas, the water wheels, and the beautiful merging trees, all disappeared. Instead, tens of wheel charts owned by loud merchants have taken their place. Complete disorder seemed to be a common feature in the streets; that was significant in the piles of rubbish present at every corner. Near the road that led to my family's farm, I saw a woman and two young girls collecting the remnants of food from the rubbish bins. When I passed by them, they gave me a sympathising look that I didn't understand back then.

On reaching the city hall, the boy I met earlier was standing twenty feet away from the gate. The little devil was smiling in a manner, which indicated amusement and happiness. I looked at him angrily. He threw the last piece of apple he was holding into his mouth and ran away shouting, "Make way for the piercing ray… make way for the piercing ray." I heard his voice repeating that same meaningless sentence until the sound faded away. *What a loud little idiot,* I thought to myself.

We entered the city hall, and walked through a long, faintly lighted, ugly, bad smelling corridor. In a side-space, I noticed some criminals handcuffed and tied together. They were forced to sit on the ground by one of the guards. The ugly corridor led us to an iron door. My accompanying guard knocked on it shouting, "Open up." A small sight window opened, and the guard behind the door took a quick glance at us.

"Who's the newcomer?" He asked curiously. The guard leading my escorting troops whispered something in his ear. The man pierced me with a long disturbing gaze, which continued as we marched forward.

After passing through the iron door, we walked through a cleaner, adequately lighted corridor until we reached a huge, extravagantly decorated, wooden door. The guards stopped, and their leader said, "Wait here." Again, he whispered a word to the guard standing by the fancy door. The latter immediately carried the news inside to the important occupant. After a long moment, he came out and said, "The chief will see you shortly."

We waited and waited; then after that, we waited a bit longer. The guards sat down, some went into another room, but none of them directed a word to me. I asked the guard at the door, "What is going on? We have been waiting here for a very long time, and I haven't seen anyone entering or leaving this room?"

The guard raised his head and said coldly, "It seems that the chief is busy right now. Don't worry. You will soon enter."

Another long while passed before finally, a voice from inside the room shouted, "Guard." The loyal servant rushed into the room and stayed inside for a moment then he came out and pointed at me arrogantly saying, "You, come."

When I went in, a man was sitting behind a desk that resembled the door of his huge room. He was reading some scrolls. Everything inside was decorated with golden ornaments and sculptures. The floor was covered with rugs. The ceiling had a stupidly huge chandelier adorning its centre, but most of its candles were off, and the room's lighting was dim. The guard stood beside me until the man behind the desk signalled him to get out without raising his head. While he continued reviewing his scrolls, he asked, "What's your full name?"

"Qotazio Mohab Al-Misrosty," I replied nervously.

"What brought you to Misrost, Qotazio?"

"My business abroad got compromised due to the hazards at sea, and I lost my ship, so I decided to return to my homeland here in Fastotia, and take care of my ancestor's farm."

"How long have you been away, Qotazio?"

"More than I can remember, sir. I guess it has been ten years. I went away when I was fifteen."

The man raised his head. He stared at my face, looked deeply into my eyes for a disturbingly long moment, and then said, "Your eyes tell me that you are an honest man, Qotazio. This is a troubled country. Our enemies won't let us prosper, and they are using native agitators to spread corruption in the lands. Are you a man who respects his word, Qotazio?"

"Yes sir, I am."

The chief got up from behind his desk. He walked towards me, placed his big palms on my shoulders, and said in a strangely threatening tone, "So as I, so mark my words, Master Qotazio… If you promise me that you won't cause any trouble, and stick to what you just said, I shall grant you all the help you need until your farm becomes one of the biggest farms in all Misrost. Of that, I promise."

He then smiled saying, "Agreed?"

I didn't know what was that all about, so I said, "Sir, I'm just a lonely man who wishes to raise a family and live in peace. What kind of trouble could I possibly cause?"

The chief smiled widely, patted my shoulders harshly, and said, "Agreed then." He walked back to his seat and said, "Go home, Qotazio. Begin your new life as a good citizen of Misrost. I shall watch your progress and grant you my help whenever you need it."

"Guard," he shouted, and immediately the loyal servant came in. "Let this man go. He is a good citizen. We need people like him."

"Yes sir," the guard said with a strangely wicked smile.

The guard walked me back to the entrance of the building. "You're free to go, make sure to retain this status," he said that then went back inside.

I didn't know how to feel regarding all this, but I decided to treat it as if it never happened. *Let's go home,* I said to myself as I started walking.

3

Passing through the streets of Fastotia was once before spirit healing. Seeing the condition things have reached in the once before beautiful city, pierced through my heart like a flaming arrow. I reached my uncle's armoury, but it was closed, and the old man wasn't there. I walked over to the diner where he used to rest, but the place was a wreck. There weren't but a couple of empty tables remaining at its entrance. I stopped there staring in disbelief at the once before crowded place, the hub where poets and storytellers used to hold their contests and entertain people. It had turned into a spiritless dusty forsaken place. Only one person was sitting at the inner corner, he was holding a quill, and writing on a sheet of paper with high concentration. I walked over towards him seeking to inquire about my uncle and his whereabouts.

He was raising his hand approaching the inkwell with his quill when he noticed me approaching. He got up smiling and said, "Finally! O thank you Alaha. You have returned." He held me by my arms then hugged me tightly. The quill was still in his hand. I felt its tip pricking my shoulder. This sudden welcome from a person I couldn't recognize was stupefying. He struck my shoulder in a friendly manner saying, "It's me lad, Salamio." I was shocked when he said that. I stared at his thin figure, weary face, full beard, and unusual modest clothes. All I was able to recognise were the full of life smile, and the frisky kind eyes.

"O Salamio, I'm hugging the best days of my life in you, old friend." I said hugging him tightly. "Where is everyone?" I asked.

"Let's go. I'll walk you to your uncle's house. We can talk on the way," he responded.

I grabbed his arm and said, "I want to know what the hell happened here, Salamio?"

He remained silent for a moment then replied, "I know that look. To tell the truth, I've been waiting for it for a long time. A lot has happened, my friend, a lot." His tone then changed, and he said playfully, "But starting this moment, everything is going to change, don't worry."

As we headed towards my uncle's house, Salamio asked me about my journeys during the past years. We chatted all the way, and he kept on joking whenever he got the opportunity as he always did. The same young boy was still there beneath the changed features. Salamio had always been my most joyful friend, he was never a sad person, nor did he ever like those who were too serious. He was incredibly kind, and the most generous towards the poor and the needy.

"Remember when you stole all the money inside your father's drawer and gave it to a woman he had forbidden from beggary in front of the diner."

He laughed and said, "Of course, who would forget the toughest beating his father ever gave him…" He hushed shortly staring at me, and then said, "What! Orabio, later on, told me it was you who told my father that I did it, you stupid jackass."

I laughed dodging and blocking his pokes and punches. "There was nothing else I could have done. Your old man went crazy. He was about to accuse the poor woman of stealing his money. 'No good deed goes unpunished.' Didn't you always say that?

"Ten stripes with that lousy thin cane on my butt. I couldn't sit, or even lie down on my back for a whole week you stinking rat," he shouted angrily.

I couldn't help but laugh imagining that. Enraged by this, he grabbed me by my garment and pushed me backward swearing at me in anger. I grabbed his hands trying to stop him, but we both ended up in the watered field by the side of the road.

"Look what you did, you grouchy stupid idiot," I shouted angrily trying to get up.

He looked at me spitefully and replied, "Oh, I'm the stupid idiot now," then he grabbed me from behind by my collar and pulled me back into the muddy field.

We struggled for a moment. Then a girlish voice suddenly said, "Boys… Boys, stop this. You're making fun of yourselves. You're not fifteen anymore."

I looked at the female who uttered those words, but the sun was in my eyes. I was unable to recognise her.

"He started this over ten years ago. This is payback time, Fatamia," Salamio responded.

I wiped my face, and shaded my eyes with my hand. My heart quivered as I stood staring at the girl, or rather the woman standing in front of me. She was wearing a blue dress with a grey apron. She wrapped her hair and bosom with a dark shawl. It made her shining face look like the moon amidst the night. She was supporting a basket that seemed heavy on her waist and held it tightly.

"Fatamia!"

"How are you, Qotazio? Long time no see," she replied smiling sardonically at our appearances. I wasn't embarrassed; she had seen me looking much worse than this. True that this was a very long time ago, but at that moment, it felt like yesterday.

"I'm fine. Well look at you, you have grown into a fine young maid. I still remember the weepy little brat chasing