

Prologue – The Game: Prince Faraj
(Gharnatah, al-Andalus: Jumada ath-Thani 663 AH or
Granada, Andalusia: April 1265 AD)

Defeat loomed near sundown. By the light of brass lanterns glowing blood red, Prince Faraj met his adversary on a familiar battlefield. His uncle, the Sultan of Gharnatah smiled a predatory grin and delivered the deathblow. “Do you yield?”

Faraj surveyed an ebony wood chessboard, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a gift from his late father to the Sultan. After many years, it remained a beautiful piece of handicraft. Faraj’s wall of white pawns now lined his uncle’s side of the board. A reckless move with his knight heralded the Sultan’s easy victory.

He wracked his brain for a counter-move. His uncle held the advantage despite his advanced years. Since Faraj’s arrival in Gharnatah nine years ago, wearied and bloodied, the old man had raised him. At nearly seventy-four, the sovereign’s mind remained formidable. He appeared rested and focused, but then, he likely slept well every night. Unlike Faraj – who had not enjoyed a peaceful slumber since he was ten years old.

“Do not succumb to idle thoughts, nephew. You’ve lost three pawns as a result.”

“I don’t have my father’s skill. He once told me he bested you every time.”

The Sultan chuckled. “Indeed. You may not have his talent, but each day you grow more in his image. If he’d lived, my brother would be very proud of you.”

He leaned back in his cedar chair. “He’d be prouder still to know I’ve chosen to unite our great family as he would have wished. With the coming of the New Year, you’ll wed my granddaughter Fatima, eldest daughter of the Crown Prince.”

Earlier that day, when Faraj received his uncle’s invitation to dine, he puzzled over the purpose. The Sultan had remained kind and solicitous to him over the years, but Faraj always suspected his motives. Now he understood. He shook his head in disbelief. “Why do you do this?”

“My choice of you as the bridegroom will surprise many people. It will also anger others, particularly the Ashqilula family. Your union with my granddaughter, however, merely represents a break with custom.”

“Forgive me, but we both know this is more than a matter of breaking with custom.”

The Sultan removed his *shashiya* and placed the plain wool cap at the table edge. His withered hands smoothed gray hair cropped close to his skull. “I would speak as your uncle, not the Sultan of Gharnatah or the chieftain of the Banu’l-Ahmar family.”

Faraj nodded. His uncle groaned when he stood. In silken slippers, he shuffled to the window. Yellow damask curtains embroidered with gold filigree stirred in a gust of wind. His gnarled fingers traced swirling designs etched in the plasterwork wall. Folding his gaunt arms across a barrel chest, he exhaled a heavy sigh. “By tradition, our family has always sealed the alliance with the Ashqilula through marriage. However, they have become far too powerful under their new leader, Ibrahim. His ambitions threaten my legacy.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“I have sent a diplomatic delegation to the Marinid Sultan in al-Maghrib el-Aska. If he intervenes, our family will have a strong ally against our enemies.”

“Forgive me, noble uncle, but what about the greater danger of an alliance between Castilla-Leon and Aragon? Gharnatah’s treaty with King Alfonso of Castilla-Leon has ended now. Hostilities may resume at the frontier. The allies you seek are across the sea and over the mountains. Can they aid us against the Christians who are at our borders?”

The Sultan looked over his shoulder and smiled. “You’re well aware of the politics of my kingdom, for one who shows no obvious interest in courtly life.”

Faraj ducked his head and strove to hide the blush warming his face.

His uncle continued. “We’ve made an attractive proposition to the Marinids that includes two strategic ports, and the offer of my newly widowed daughter, the Sultana Maryam. She is not in the flower of her youth, but like her mother, Maryam’s beauty is timeless. As with his ancestors, the Marinid Sultan would love nothing more than to meddle in the politics of al-Andalus. I know the danger of foreign warriors with a foothold on my land, but the Ashqilula pose too great a threat to discount outside aid.”

“But good uncle, the chieftain Ibrahim will recognize the challenge you issue in Fatima’s hasty betrothal to another. Wisdom might suggest it is not good to throw off the Ashqilula yoke now and risk civil war.”

The Sultan chuckled, a hollow sound. “Wisdom has no influence here. Had I been wiser, I might have never allied with Ibrahim’s father. Another, rather than Ibrahim’s aunt, might have been my bride. My brothers, including your father, and my own beloved firstborn daughter would have wed others. My heir would not be enduring a sham marriage. I sacrificed my family’s futures in favor of the Ashqilula’s ambitions.”

Faraj shook his head. “No man can know the future, not even the Sultan.”

His uncle’s fist pounded the window grille and rattled the metal bars. “I didn’t care what the future held! I wanted power, and secured it with the support of the Ashqilula. Now our blood bears the taint of theirs. My first wife’s greedy nature signifies all I find intolerable about her clan. Now they plot against me, secure in the power bases I’ve given them. They conspire to steal my throne.”

He whirled toward Faraj. “Your marriage will check the ambitions of our enemies. Fatima is my heir’s eldest daughter and has a special significance to our foes. A union between her and the Ashqilula would continue our alliance. Now, there can be no more marriages between my heirs and the Ashqilula. You must wed Fatima and secure my legacy.”

Faraj shook his head again. His uncle played them all like pieces on a gaming board.

The Sultan strode toward him. “For years, the faith of our ancestors bound them to this land. I am Sultan, and our people look to me to hold Gharnatah. When I am gone, they’ll look to my heirs. You will play your part.”

He gestured to the chessboard. “The pieces are set. The game can begin.”

Myriad thoughts swirled in Faraj’s mind. Foremost, he meant to ensure his uncle’s machinations would not threaten his own survival or interests. He was not about to become anyone’s pawn again, not even that of the Sultan of Gharnatah.