

UNEDITED MANUSCRIPT

THE BALLOON THIEF

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CHAPTER ONE: KHADIJA

The white men looked like birds. Or at least, Khadija thought they did. From her bedroom window they were tiny figures, no bigger than the length of her finger. She studied their bent knees, arms a blur like wings caught mid-flight as their desperate motions brought the deflated silk in their hands to life. Any faster, and she'd think they were the ones about to leave the ground instead of the hot air balloon.

She was too far to hear the racist slurs leaving the merchant's lips as they instructed the white men to do their bidding, but she could certainly imagine what was being said as their fair skin reddened beneath the hot sun whilst the silk balloon swelled. And yet Khadija couldn't bring herself to pity them. She envied them. For all their suffering and mistreatment, they still had a better view of the hot air balloon than her.

The tip of her reed pen bled black ink across the paper as she sketched the bright globe of the balloon and criss-crossed it with sharp lines, marking each individual panel. She'd seen women in the bazaar sewing squares of material by hand and stitching the more lavish ones together with freshwater pearls along the seams so that, once airborne, the balloon became a living, flying piece of art.

She decided against including the white men in her drawing, or the wealthy merchants hovering close by, ready to leap forward at any moment should their balloons chance an escape with their livelihoods still aboard. Balloons were unpredictable creatures after all, whisking men

away on the next breeze with almost perfect obedience before becoming greedy and engorged, stuffing themselves with hot air until they burst spectacularly without warning. There were the lazy ones that slumped across the ground like empty carcasses refusing to come alive, and the furious ones with flames so hungry they licked the fabric and set the whole balloon ablaze. No matter how hard men tried, balloons were creatures they could never truly tame. That's why she loved them.

A gentle tap at her door had Khadija swiftly folding her paper in half, causing the wet ink to stick it together. She stuffed it beneath her pillow and wiped her ink-stained fingertips on her shalwar kameez just as the door swung open.

"Yes, Abba." Khadija stood at attention as Abba shuffled in. His glasses had slipped down the bridge of his nose, exposing the permanent dents they'd caused from years of wear. Too much time spent pouring over paperwork and numbers had reduced his eyesight to that of a fruit bat's so that Abba had to squint even when he was but a few feet from her. His frequent frowning only emphasised his perpetual air of disappointment.

"Ahh! There you are, beti," Abba exclaimed. As if she'd be anywhere else but in her bedroom. His knees creaked as he perched on her bed, brow creasing at the open book Khadija had in her haste forgotten to hide. Its spine was bent back to reveal a magnificent silver balloon made of a material as sheer and delicate as lace.

She cursed.

"Are you not too old for story books?" Abba picked up the book by its corner like it was a wet dish cloth.

"It's not stories, Abba, it's history." Khadija quickly freed the book from his fingers. "Stories aren't real. This actually happened."

Abba scoffed. "Pah! You really believe a common jinn kidnapped the most well-protected princess in a hot air balloon? It's nothing more than childish fairy tales."

Khadija winced at Abba's crude description of a legend so old scholars still argued over whether it was a complete work of fiction. The abduction of Princess Malika, who mysteriously vanished the night before her wedding after her fearless nature had caught the eye of the Jinniya Queen Mardzma—the Queen of female warriors. The Queen sent one of her jinn in a hot air balloon, disguised as a handsome prince, to seduce the princess. He stole her up into the skies to admire the world below before delivering her to Queen Mardzma's kingdom in the jinn realm where she was ruthlessly trained to become one of the most heroic fighters to ever live. The book contained a number of her adventures, but the tale of her disappearance had always been Khadija's favourite, if only for the illustration of the silver balloon.

Unlike Khadija, Abba didn't care much for literature depicting women doing things they were not supposed to do. She wasn't sure which part of the story he found most unbelievable: a princess kidnapped by a jinn in a hot air balloon, or an army of female warriors.

Abba cleared his throat. "Anyway, the real reason I'm here." He slapped his thighs. "I have very good news for you! News you'll be pleased to hear."

Khadija smiled meekly. Abba and her often had very differing views about what they considered good news. Certainly, it couldn't be as good a news as fighting alongside a warrior Queen.

Still, she had to ask. "What is it, Abba?"

Abba pushed his glasses back to their usual position so that his eyes looked twice their size. "I have finally found the perfect match for my daughter!"

This again. It was always this. Always another match, another potential suitor, another failed betrothal that ended in Abba's sideburns becoming greyer by the day and Khadija spending more and more time in her bedroom, where she could almost be forgotten about, and Abba could pretend the weight of marrying off his youngest daughter didn't still rest on his shoulders.

“He is a fine young man.” Abba stroked his stubble. “A shoe-maker, in fact. Think, Khadija, all the pretty shoes he could make for you. The village girls will certainly be jealous!”

Shoes. Really! Did he not know her at all?

“I don’t need shoes, Abba. I have enough already.” And that was the truth. Their eyes wandered to her dresser and the neat row of shoes beside it—pretty velvet slippers and strappy sandals studded with rhinestones. None of them hers, of course. None of them she’d ever worn. It’s not that they didn’t fit her.

They were Ammi’s shoes, collecting dust in the corner of her bedroom. The last time they’d ever been worn felt like another life.

Abba’s face fell. His shoulders dropped. Whatever he’d used to inflate himself had just been punctured.

“I know, beti, but I think this could be very good for you. You can’t spend the rest of your life in your bedroom reading story books.”

That stung. He made it sound so trivial. Little did he know there was a pile of sketches under her bed, each one meticulously drawn from hours spent watching balloons take off and land every day. Khadija studied balloons the way one would study birds or wild flowers, and reckoned she knew the anatomy of a balloon far better than the merchants outside. Girls weren’t allowed to fly but that did nothing to quell her obsession. After all, Princess Malika rode in a hot air balloon. All she had to do was get kidnapped by a jinn.

“Most girls your age are already married.” Abba shook his head. “Leave it any longer and all the good men will be gone, and you’ll be left with someone...” he threw his arms up, as if plucking the right words from the air. “Plain. Boring.” He fixed his dark eyes on her.

She’d never realised shoes were that interesting to Abba. Khadija dropped her gaze, fiddling with a loose thread on her bedspread until one of the embroidered beads came away. It bounced across the floor. No. They both knew there was nothing grand or exciting about a

shoe-maker. It was nothing compared to a physician or a scribe or even a travelling merchant. Talia had gotten lucky with her husband. A cloth merchant. Now, she was busy traversing Ghadæa in a hot air balloon whilst he traded in lavish organza and fine, crushed silks. But her older sister had always had more appetite for marriage, if that was the best way to describe it. She could stomach it better than Khadija.

“I’m not that old, Abba.”

“But you will be. Soon,” Abba interrupted. “You’re sixteen now. Talia had already been married a year at your age, and now look how happy she is.”

She rolled her eyes. “How do you know she’s even happy, Abba? We’ve not seen or heard from her in months.”

Abba’s jaw twitched. A few years ago he would’ve scolded her for such outspokenness. Now, he only sighed, like her candour was a sickness he must endure. A thorn in his side that pained him, but he was so accustomed to it now, any hope he’d had of ridding himself of it was long gone.

“Her husband is a busy man, and her place is with him. I’m sure we’ll hear from her soon.” Abba rose from her bed, eyes resting on her dresser covered in stacks of glittery bangles meant for girls with far thinner wrists than her. She was reduced to lathering up to her elbows with soap and forcing them on, and that was when she could be bothered to wear them. Then there were the pretty peacock hairpins and jewelled brooches to decorate her hijab still nestled unopened in their plush boxes. All gifts he’d given her in his attempt to mould her into the daughter he wanted.

Abba exhaled. “It’s almost like you don’t want to get married, Khadija.”

Finally, he’s got it! And it only took how many years? Khadija crossed her ankles, clasped her palms in her lap and met Abba’s gaze. She felt like a little girl with him towering

above her. No matter how old she got, Abba always treated her like she was little. The youngest child. She hadn't always been, but Khadija was his youngest child now.

She bit her lip. "I don't, Abba," Khadija whispered. "I really don't."

He winced at her honesty. "I don't know what the matter is with you sometimes!" He threw his head back as if searching the ceiling for answers. "I bet it's all this time you spend alone. Can't be good for you." Abba hummed as if he'd solved the impossible equation that was his daughter refusing to marry. "Have you been sleeping? Any bad dreams? Headaches?"

She knew where this was going.

"You know, the neighbour's daughter was like you. Didn't want to marry either, and Mr Rashid didn't know what to do about her. It started with bad dreams and then this constant pounding headache." Abba smacked his forehead to emphasise the pounding. "Mr Rashid took her straight to the physician, and do you know what he said?" He didn't wait for her response. "Jinn possession!" He proclaimed. "Apparently, it can easily happen to those with weak minds." He tutted and traced his thumb over the ta'wiz around his neck—an amulet consisting of a cloth pouch containing a prayer to offer protection against evil. "Luckily, they caught it just in time," Abba continued in his light-hearted manner, as if he hadn't just brazenly insulted her. "The jinn was exorcised trapped in a brass-infused glass bottle, and now the girl is happily married. I think she even has a baby on the way."

If it were possible for Khadija to roll her eyes any harder, they'd pop out of her skull and land at her feet. Jinn were shape-shifting spirits residing in Al-Ghaib, a realm hidden to the mortal eye and ruled by various jinn kings and jinniya queens. Most jinn were indifferent to the affairs of mortals. It was unlikely she'd drawn their interest when she rarely left her bedroom. What jinn would wish to possess her?

Hunger was the main reason jinn interacted with humans at all. Jinn had a peculiar appetite, with a particular craving for corpses. Bodies were never kept long enough to attract them and were cremated with speed being of the utmost importance.

“Maybe I should call an exorcist.” Abba tapped his chin.

Exorcists were common, though most were frauds, only serving to feed superstition by preying on the most fearful.

“I don’t need an exorcist. I’m fine.” Though she wished she could say the same for Abba. He’d become increasingly distant over the years, locking himself in his office where he’d be absorbed with paperwork for most of the day. He thought her ignorant but Khadija was well aware of the mounting pile of bills and debt letters in his desk drawer. Most likely this was the real reason he wished to marry her off so soon, whilst he could still afford the wedding.

She had to stop this, convince him, before he rushed into something and ruined her life forever. “Just give me more time.”

“You’ve had enough time.” His eyes fell to the book on her bed. “All those silly stories you’ve been reading! Marriage isn’t a fairy tale, Khadija. I wish it was, but it’s not. Marriage is a matter of convenience, not a whim of the heart.”

Khadija rose and circled the bed, as if by putting a piece of furniture between them she could escape this conversation. “Maybe if you let me meet people.” She was careful to say people and not boys. “Then I could find a husband for myself.”

Abba scoffed like she’d just asked for a hot air balloon as a wedding gift. “A girl finding her own husband. What would the neighbours think of such scandal!” He pursed his lips. “I think it’s time you threw that storybook away. Start living in the real world.” His words were as brittle as glass. It wasn’t like she was expecting a handsome prince to whisk her away in a balloon. Khadija hugged the book to her chest, willing the pages to swallow her. For a moment, Abba appeared ready to snatch it from her. The book was like Ammi’s shoes, from another life.

It had belonged to her brother. Hassan had been a natural storyteller, even at his young age. He could read aloud for hours without making a single mistake. Abba had always said he was destined to become a writer or a wazir for the Nawab of Intalyabad if he could afford the air fare to the city. If she thought hard enough, she could still hear her brother's voice reciting the stories. Magic seeping across the pages and rolling off the tip of his tongue.

Abba's stern voice snapped her back. "I've been too easy on you, and that's not right. I'm your father. I know what's best."

Her stomach twisted into a knot. She'd always managed to talk her way out of Abba's betrothals, squeezing a few extra months out of him. This time seemed different. Her time was finally up.

"Put on something nice and come downstairs. He's waiting in the kitchen." With that, Abba shut the door.

CHAPTER TWO: JACOB

Sticky orbs of semi-cooled glass were sat in a line on the counter like a selection of boiled sweets, but Jacob knew better than to touch one. Munir pierced the centre of each transparent

globe with a white-hot rod, rolling them across a marble slab as he quickly shaped and cooled the glass. Crystal pendants and glass chandeliers twinkled above his head causing rainbows to swirl around his feet like a kaleidoscope. On the opposite shelf the copper and brass-infused glass vials for the local exorcists glistened a rust-coloured orange in the firelight. Infused glass was the preferred vessel to trap jinn, although cruder containers of iron and lead were just as effective, albeit far less pretty.

Jacob began to count under his breath the seconds before the glass would harden and set into shape. Munir was crafting a crystal goblet, or at least trying to. A few more seconds and the glass would be too cool to stick the stem to the base.

He said nothing, of course, as was his place. Munir was not the type to take instructions from his apprentice, let alone admit Jacob might know a thing or two about glassblowing. He was still relatively new to this, apprenticed to Munir for not even a year, but already he'd excelled where Munir had expected him to fail. Glassblowing wasn't just about talent and experience. It required patience, working with something so fragile, bending and twisting it into impossible shapes all in a matter of minutes before the glass set solid. It was easy to rush, produce something careless and sloppy, and that was exactly what Munir was doing.

"Water. Quickly!" Munir snapped, bringing the blowpipe to his lips and inflating a ball of molten glass like a balloon as he worked on the main cup of the goblet before setting the bubble down to cool on the cold marble.

Jacob knew it was too soon for the glass to harden, never mind the stem and base on the side that would snap apart the minute they were handled.

But he kept his mouth shut. The only reason Munir had selected Jacob as his apprentice was the guarantee that Jacob could never steal his designs and set up business elsewhere like his previous apprentice, who now ran a more successful glass business on the other side of

town. People like Jacob weren't allowed to setup businesses. People like Jacob weren't allowed to do much at all in Ghadaea except blend into the background.

Which meant he was expendable; and so he was forced to hold his tongue even when Munir was butchering his own trade.

Jacob swiftly returned with a bucket. His footsteps caused the glass pendants, talismans, trinkets and charms people believed warded off the likes of jinn to vibrate and tinkle. Perhaps they did, though that was more likely due to Munir's subpar craftsmanship than anything else.

Munir plunged the ball of molten glass into the water where it sizzled violently. Flames from the furnace gave his dark skin a crimson hue, his eyes reflecting the fire so that they glowed a hellish red.

They both peered into the bucket. Once submerged, the glass instantly took on a hard, transparent quality. Munir couldn't hide his pleasure if he tried. *Just you wait.* Jacob smiled smugly. *It'll collapse the moment air hits it.*

And it did. The second Munir removed the glass from the water it folded in on itself like melted sugar. Munir growled and launched it across the room where it smashed against the far wall.

"I'll have to start again!" He rounded on him with a look of pure fire. There was nothing more embarrassing than making a mistake in front of someone expected to learn from him. "Well, don't just stand there. Get more water!"

Jacob nodded and retreated. He didn't need much convincing. He'd do anything that allowed him a few minutes of freedom from Munir.

Munir turned back to the furnace, his slur following Jacob out the door: "useless hāri."

The sun dazzled him as Jacob stepped into the heavy heat, past rows of mudbrick houses with orange leopard lilies and red hibiscus flowers dancing in the breeze from their window boxes. Yellow pariah dogs were sniffing through the bins. The air was pungent with rotten fruit

and the subtle earthy smell of pine trees. Jacob made off at a steady pace and angled his face away from the midday sun, but it wasn't long before his neck prickled with heat. Those with any sense remained indoors until early evening when it became cool enough to leave their homes. Few wandered the streets, skirting widely around him as if he was one of the dogs rooting through the rubbish.

He was used to it. His white skin and fair hair were evidence that he did not belong amongst the brown-skinned natives. His ancestors had originated from a place beyond the Himala mountain range, where it was said to be cold enough that when people spoke, their words could be seen in the air. Trade had drawn them to Ghadæa with its wondrous spices and silks, cotton, gemstones and opium, but it had quickly turned to greed and a lust for power. Their attempts at seizing the land and all its treasures for themselves had backfired. Almost ninety years later, and the Ghadæans were still punishing people like him for the mistakes of their grandfathers. They called them hāri now. Unwanted. Stateless. People who didn't belong.

The neat rows of flat-roofed houses soon gave way to dusty shacks and tattered sheets balanced across brittle beams that threatened to blow over at the slightest of winds. Slums, and his home, before Munir had taken him in as an apprentice. In the distance, fields of opium poppies the colour of beetroot stretched in all directions, and further still, the misty blue peaks of the Himala Mountains blurred into the clouds above.

There was only a short line at the well. Jacob slotted behind an elderly man with a constant tremor to his chin. Hāri girls giggled further ahead as they bounded through the poppy fields whilst a cluster of boys lounged against the farming equipment, wolf-whistling and chucking rocks at them. His insides turned wooden and stiff with longing. He missed this. Living amongst his people, even if it meant returning to long days working in the fields and sleeping outside with the constant risk of being snatched by tigers. It was home. Here, at least, he belonged.

At his approach, heads turned, and hungry eyes lit up. “Jacob! Jacob’s here.” A crowd swiftly formed, toddlers tugging on his sleeves whilst their mothers smiled weakly, all sunken cheeks and gaunt faces as they begged him for food scraps.

Jacob produced a single folded roti from his pocket. He’d managed to swipe it at breakfast when Munir’s back was turned. The crowd came alive and ripped the roti apart in a flash, shoving the dry flat-bread into their mouths. No one spoke. Everyone chewed, slowly savouring the taste. Shame washed over him. Some of the children were so skinny, they wouldn’t last until the end of the month.

A hand on his shoulder made Jacob flinch until he caught sight of a familiar face. He allowed William to steer him away from the hungry crowd and plonk him on the yellowing grass. “Not seen you in a while.” William smirked and flopped down beside him, hugging his gangly legs to his chest. He stood a good head and shoulders above Jacob, but he was far skinnier so that his tunic hung from his shoulders like it was dangling off a clothes hanger. “How’s the life of luxury?”

“Luxury!” He snorted. There was nothing luxurious about dodging Munir’s slipper after a poor day of sales in the glass shop, but compared to camping out here with nothing but a moth-eaten sheet to shield against the sun and mosquitos, it could be a lot worse.

“Must be nice, eating more than one meal a day.” There was a bitterness to William’s voice that jarred him. Jealousy didn’t suit him. Not when he was the one to convince Jacob to accept Munir’s apprenticeship.

Jacob’s eyes narrowed. “At least you get to live with everyone else. I’d gladly—”

William flashed his palm. “Calm down! I’m only joking.” But there was an iciness to the wicked sparkle in his eyes that unsettled Jacob. “Got to milk any advantage you can get in this world. You’re getting fed and learning good skills. You’d be an idiot to pass up on that.”

Jacob nodded. William was a firm believer in making the best of a hopeless situation. Whilst most of the hāri simply drifted from one day to the next in a daze of constant survival, William still retained his hope that things would change. His spirit crackled with energy that betrayed the apparent weakness of his skinny body. There was a fire about him, an electricity that was both frightening and addictive. That's why Jacob respected him so fiercely. That and, he'd practically raised him. Jacob had been too young to remember his parents before they were imprisoned, tossed into cells teeming with hāri forced to break the law to survive. He'd never seen them again. William was his mother, his father, his brother and his friend all rolled into one.

Jacob dug into his pocket and produced a bruised mango. "Got this for you."

William's tongue darted across his lips. His fingers twitched, and Jacob half expected him to snatch it up and sink his teeth into it. Hunger did that to a person, the same way opium made an addict's hands jitter, the sight of food to a starving person made the animal in them come out.

William bit his tongue. "Give it to one of the kids. They need it more."

Jacob ignored him and set to peeling it, sticky juices coating his fingers. William stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

"I'm serious. I don't need it."

Jacob sighed. "You have to look after yourself sometimes, you know." He reckoned he could count the outlines of William's ribs beneath his tunic.

William shook his head. "You want to help, then hurry up, fill your bucket and go." He rose. "He'll be wondering what's taking so long."

Jacob chewed his lip. William was right. He could picture Munir simmering by the furnace, but he stayed put, squinting up at William looming above him. "I can spare a few more minutes."

William didn't seem convinced, but he argued no more, gazing towards the distant mountain range and the splatter of fir and cedar trees climbing up the mountain side. "It'll all be different one day, I promise you," he whispered, so softly, Jacob wasn't sure he was speaking to him or the mountain itself.

He scoffed. "You can't promise a thing like that. It's out of your control." He threw his hands in the air. "It's out of anyone's control."

William's neck twitched. "Is it? Or do *they* just want us to think it is." He jabbed a thumb towards the colourful market stalls and tents with beaded curtains rattling in the wind. "I wouldn't give up just yet. Things are changing, and when they do, I need to know you'll be ready. "

Jacob's brow creased. "What things? Ready for what?" This wasn't the first time William had spoken of change. He was stubborn, refusing to let go of that slither of hope that things would one day improve. For Jacob, that hope had died years ago. He had finally accepted his place in society, and it seemed time William did the same, instead of clinging onto the foolish dream that, one day, hāri would be considered equal to Ghadæans. There seemed a better chance of Jacob flying before that day ever came.

William didn't respond immediately, eyes still lost to the jagged peaks on the horizon. He lowered his voice. "What if I told you there was a chance we could make a difference, and not just something small, I mean change everything. Would you do it, even if it meant risking everything you have now, even if there was a chance you'd fail, or even make things worse, would you still do it?"

There was something about how William's words flooded out of him, like a river whose banks had burst, spilling floodwater into surrounding crops that made Jacob's throat tighten. This didn't sound like William's usual proclamations of change. No. This sounded like more than empty words.

“What are you up to?”

“Just answer the question.” Jacob recoiled. “I...I—”

William sneered. “Still too scared. I mean, I get it. Unlike me, you’ve actually got a good thing going with your apprenticeship. Why would you want to mess that up?”

Jacob’s skin flared.

William pressed a palm to his chest. “But I’ve got nothing to lose.”

Jacob’s next words tasted like acid on his tongue. “I’m not scared.”

The corners of William’s mouth prickled. Jacob suspected there was something William enjoyed about riling him up. Perhaps because it was so easy to do, his anger setting him alight throughout the day so that come evening he’d be scorched with burn marks. William had always told him to channel his rage into something useful, but that was easier said than done.

“Then say yes.” William kissed his teeth. “If you’re not too scared, that is.”

Jacob’s nostrils flared. His breath came out in a long, shaky stream. “I’m not going to agree to something I know nothing about. Unlike you, I like to think about things before I do them.”

Jacob bit his tongue, expecting William to thump him on the shoulder for that backhanded insult. It was true, but what he didn’t expect was William to throw his head back and laugh. “I’m only messing with you!” And just like that, the angry charge of electricity surrounding them dissipated. William squeezed his shoulder, hard enough he could feel his nails. Jacob flinched.

“You and that big brain of yours always needs all the facts laid out.” William bonked him on the head.

“Ow!”

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s good, thinking things through. Shows you’re smart.” William tapped his temple. “But sometimes there’s not always enough time to weigh up all the facts. Sometimes you’ve just got to act or you’ll miss your chance. Bear that in mind, OK?”

Jacob rubbed his head. William was giving him a headache with all this talk.

William twirled abruptly, yanking Jacob up by the collar. “You should get back.” He pushed him towards the well. “And make sure to learn everything you can from Munir. Trust me, it’ll be useful.”

Jacob considered prying William with questions until he eventually cracked open like a shelled pistachio but decided against it. He put it down to the ramblings of a starved mind. Jacob failed to see how glassblowing could be of any use to him like William said when he had no hope of ever owning a business or earning money from it.

A commotion from the well made their heads snap round. Children shrieked. The crowd scattered.

“What’s going on?” Jacob rose, eying the swinging bucket at the top of the well, except its motions didn’t appear to be slowing. If anything, they were growing more frantic until the bucket upturned and a furry lump thudded to the ground.

Then everyone was screaming. Jacob couldn’t understand what it was at first, only that it was covered with a swirl of flies. Then the smell hit him, and he backed away with his sleeve over his mouth. There was no mistaking that smell. The stench of something rotten. Decomposing. Dead.

A corpse. A mouse by the looks of it. And where there was dead flesh there would surely be—

“Jinn!”

William yanked him back, his breath hot against his ear. “Go. Now!”

But Jacob couldn't tear his eyes from the shadow stretching across the ground like spilt ink. Boys chucked rocks at it, but they landed uselessly in the grass, whilst mothers screamed and tugged their children away. The shadow grew, becoming darker, thicker, more opaque until it was no longer a shadow but a swirl of smoke coiled around the dead mouse, flicking its tail and baring its fangs, staring at them with emerald eyes.

A snake. Jacob had heard jinn could shapeshift, the weaker ones often taking the appearance of snakes and birds, whilst stronger jinn could shift into cats and wolves. Then there were jinn powerful enough to take the shape of men and women. But he'd never seen one. People made sure of that, ensuring bodies were cremated soon after death. Even animals were burnt before their flesh could turn rotten. Some were missed, of course. It was impossible to burn them all, but jinn were always dealt with swiftly, trapped in vessels and buried deep underground or sent back to Al-Ghaib with the help of an exorcist.

"I've got this," William hissed.

Before Jacob could snatch him back, William was running at full force towards the jinn brandishing a cast iron pot above his head.

"No!" The word tore out of his throat. Jacob raced after him.

The jinn lifted its head, fangs dripping black, sludgy blood. William skidded to a halt, bouncing on the balls of his feet, eyes locked with the creature.

"William!"

The jinn lunged. William slammed the pot over it and clamped his foot on top. The pot rattled, followed by a wounded hiss. William glanced back at him with wild eyes. "Get out of here."

Jacob's mouth hung open, his tongue turning to cotton wool. "How—"

"The iron." William tapped the pot with his boot. "It can't escape." His shoulders were rigid, but there was a looseness to his demeanour Jacob couldn't quite pinpoint. The casual

way William removed his foot from the pot, leant against the stone well and cracked his neck, unnerved him. Almost like he hadn't had to think about where to find an iron pot, or swallow his fear to face up against a jinn. Almost like he'd done this before.

CHAPTER THREE: KHADIJA

A murmur of men's voices from the kitchen had Khadija hovering midway on the stairs, hand gripping the banister, the other feeling for Hassan's book. If Abba truly expected her to throw it away then he didn't know her at all. Toss away all those years of precious memories, as if they'd simply turned rotten like gone off fruit. How could he even ask such a thing?

Probably the same way he'd asked her to marry someone she did not know nor ever care to know. He did it because it was all he knew how to do. Khadija slipped the book between the folds of her kameez. She'd keep it with her. Keep it safe.

The stairway groaned beneath her weight. She froze, her breath clogged in her throat.

The voices fell quiet. “Khadija?”

She sighed. “Yes, Abba.” Khadija emerged into the kitchen, head lowered so that her first sight of the two guests was of their feet.

“Ahh, there’s my beti.” Abba’s face lit up like a newly ignited oil lamp. It had always amazed her how quickly he could transform his face when it suited him. Meanwhile, Khadija could barely stifle a yawn, never mind mask a foul mood.

Her eyes remained fixed on the floor’s geometric tiles. A few uncomfortable seconds of silence followed as the two strangers drank in her image. One was an older man with a bald head that shone in the sunlight filtering in through the window. He had an equally hairless face, not even the hint of an eyebrow. The other was a boy, a year or two older than her. He resembled the other man so clearly it was obvious they were father and son, if their round heads and moon-shaped faces were anything to go by. At her appearance, the boy began fiddling with his thumbs, jittering from one foot to the other. Only then did it occur to Khadija that, like her, he could be an unwilling participant in all this as well. Marriage was for parents, not lovers, after all.

“Khadija has been very eager to meet your son, Mr Omar.” Abba flashed his molars. “Haven’t you, Khadija?”

She hadn’t even known he’d existed until five minutes ago, but Khadija knew when to hold her tongue. “Yes, Abba.”

“This is Mr Omar’s son. Abdel.” As Abba gestured to the boy, Khadija noticed Mr Omar aim a kick at his ankles. The boy immediately straightened up and dropped his fumbling palms to his sides. “He’s a shoe-maker.” Abba beamed. “He has his own stall in the market.”

“Very profitable,” Mr Omar chimed in. “Business is booming, and now is the right time for Abdel to consider marriage.” Mr Omar nudged his son. “He can certainly provide for a wife and children.”

The mentioning of children had Khadija's stomach shrivel up to the size of a medjool date. It didn't come as much of a surprise. That seemed the sole purpose of marriage. To produce babies. Still, hearing it aloud made her palms sweaty. She wiped them on her shalwar pants. Surely she wouldn't be expected to have babies right away. Her sister, Talia, had been married just over a year and there had been no news of a baby yet. But then there hadn't been any news from Talia since the wedding. Her belly could be swollen with a child by now. The thought of her sister going through something as monumental as childbirth without Khadija by her side caused a tightness in her throat she couldn't swallow down. Would she have to go through the same? Alone.

And without Ammi.

Mr Omar's voice snapped her back into focus. He'd been rambling about leather sandals and sequined slippers up until now. "Would Khadija like to visit the market stall? See her husband-to-be in action."

Husband-to-be? It was far too soon for that. Weeks, months too soon, in fact. Abba couldn't expect her to make a decision right away. Unless this wasn't her decision at all.

Abba jumped to attention. "An excellent idea!" He was already reaching for his topi on the hook behind the door, donning it and readjusting the tassel so that it wouldn't flick into his eyes when he walked. "After you, Mr Omar."

Mr Omar ushered his son into the hallway where the open front door allowed the late afternoon sunlight to spill onto the tiles. Khadija couldn't help bristle as Abdel stole a glance at her before stepping into the street after his father. Abba touched his fingertips to her elbow. "You didn't change," he hissed. "You could've at least put some makeup on!"

It was Abba looking to impress, not her. And like Abba said, marriage was about convenience, not priming her cheeks with rose water-scented blush. He couldn't expect her to

give up on any hope of romance and still insist she put effort in her appearance. *Talk about double-standards!*

Mr Omar set a strong pace. The sun was not quite as relentless as it had been a few hours ago, and the town was only just coming to life. Qasrah was once a town bustling with trade and architectural splendour, but years of war between the three Nawabs, all looking to expand their provinces and seize neighbouring lands had reduced her town to a shell of its former self. Khadija's province was in the most northern region of Ghadæa, where the climate was not as sticky with heat like the jungles of the eastern province, or as arid like the region of the western desert. The Nawab of Intalyabad ruled the north from his palace made of copper, reaping the benefits of the province's lush vegetation and thriving opium trade. The Nawab of Intalyabad had instilled his soldiers in all the smaller towns to prevent the other Nawabs from sabotaging his precious crops, but they came with their own problems, a hefty price for one. They were notoriously lazy, lounging in the shade smoking opium, flitting away the townspeople's taxes and genuinely making themselves a nuisance. Another reason Abba insisted she remain indoors.

They slipped down streets packed with young boys balancing baskets of fruit and fresh flat-breads on their heads, and passed homes with women unpegging the laundry they'd put up that morning to bake in the sun.

Mr Omar cleared his throat. "Khadija is... sixteen, you said."

Abba nodded. "Only just turned sixteen. Still young!" That was a bit of a lie. Her birthday had been seven months ago.

Mr Omar whispered something to his son who broke out into a chuckle, which ended in a fit of coughing. Khadija felt Abba stiffen.

The higgledy-piggledy maze of tents and flat-roofed houses petered off into an open square as they approached the market. Khadija stretched onto her tip toes, trying to catch a glimpse of the hot air balloons teasing her with a flutter of painted fabric behind the stalls..

Abba stuck his elbow in her back. “We are not here for sightseeing,” he scolded, yanking her elbow as they swerved a hāri beggar curled on the grass, picking at a sunburn on her cheek.

Khadija dropped her gaze. Though it was common enough seeing hāri wandering the market stalls, begging for food scraps or rooting through bins, they mostly kept to themselves in the mess of patched-up tents and teetering shacks they’d erected just outside of town.

“Filthy hāri.” Mr Omar spat. “Don’t know why we still let them hang around. The soldiers should drive them off. They’re meant to protect us, otherwise what do we even pay them for?”

Abba guffawed, rather too loudly, causing his topi to flop to the side. “You’re absolutely right, Mr Omar.” He shot the hāri woman a look of pure disgust. “But then they’re the only ones desperate enough to do the jobs no one else wants to do.”

That earned Abba a chuckle from both Mr Omar and Abdel, with Abdel’s turning into a cough and ending with a blob of phlegm landing near her feet. Too much time spent in the shisha tents, she reckoned. Maybe she’d prefer that. A husband who stayed out most evenings, stumbling in at dawn and sleeping until midday. It would certainly allow her enough time to continue studying the balloons.

Mr Omar wagged a fat finger in the air. “You’ve got a good point there. Perhaps we should keep them around, but I definitely don’t agree with them being this close to town. Far too close to our women and children for my liking.”

Abba nodded, his face suddenly serious. “Of course.”

“We should be completely segregated,” Abdel chimed in. “The hāri shouldn’t be underestimated. They’re dangerous. Only a week ago, soldiers found a settlement of hāri a few miles north of here.” Abdel shook his head. “The place was sickening, apparently. Corpses strewn across the ground. They’d been practicing sihr by the looks of it.” He cursed.

Everyone reeled. Sihr was the summoning of jinn and was considered black magic. Most jinn were wicked creatures after all and required little convincing to cause mischief, especially when it involved spilt blood. She shuddered. Hopefully it was just rumours, though hāri were known for causing trouble. Khadija had yet to see a hāri that didn’t simmer with barely concealed rage. Violence was in their nature. It was in their blood, just like their ancestors.

Abba snarled. “I hope the soldiers dealt with them accordingly.”

“Oh, I’m sure they did.” Mr Omar waved his hand distractedly. “Probably turning all the nearby villages upside down as we speak until they find who is responsible.”

Abba nodded, his body prickling with a furious heat she could feel from where she stood. Abba detested hāri. Hated them with a ferociousness she wouldn’t think possible for such a placid man who was forever misplacing his glasses or mixing up the names of the barber and the baker if she hadn’t witnessed it first-hand. His rage was raw and unpredictable, lightening in a monsoon. Whenever hāri were mentioned, he became a different person. Seeing him like that, she couldn’t help but hate them too, if only for what their presence did to her Abba.

Abdel cleared his throat. “There’s been an increase in jinn sightings recently. The streets aren’t safe anymore. It has to be them. I heard they’re planning an uprising.”

Most people were quick to call any trick of the light or a suspicious shadow a jinn, so she didn’t pay much attention to that part. A hāri uprising though. That was different. Even so, she doubted the truth behind Abdel’s wild claim. Hāri did not possess the resources or influence

for such a thing, not when they were stamped so firmly into the dirt of society, but it didn't matter if his words lacked logic. Abba would still believe him.

Abba scowled. "I've heard similar. A terrorist group that like to meddle with jinn. Call themselves the Hāreef."

Mr Omar snorted. "Hāri terrorists! That's impossible. As if they have the organisational skills to plan such a thing!"

Abba's face darkened. His voice crackled with barely-contained sparks. "I know what they're capable of, believe me. They can do some horrific things."

Abba's words lingered in the air like morning fog. Khadija pressed her lips together and swallowed the lump that had appeared in her throat. They certainly could.

Mr Omar wiped away the droplets of sweat appearing on his exposed scalp. "Khadija has a dowry, yes?"

Slowly, the tedious talk of money and marriage mellowed Abba back down. They'd crossed the market square and were close enough now she could glimpse the shimmer of vibrant silk balloons peeking through the gaps between the stalls. Her palms tingled, fingertips aching to preserve the image in ink so that she could admire it for weeks to come.

Hāri men were flapping the fabric furiously, forcing the balloons to life. Fire burst into the air in long streams from the balloon's burners as the men quickly inflated the fabric, sweat dampening their shirt collars as they frantically spun the blades of a wooden fan, blowing hot air into the fabric as they encouraged the balloons to inflate. The balloons sucked the air up like hungry creatures until they were full, swollen, engorged and pulling up off the ground.

Khadija craned her neck further. A sharp wind had picked up a balloon with green and yellow panels, the vivid colours bleeding into one another the way the sky blends into the edges of the horizon so that it was impossible to know where one colour stopped and the other began. Green like unripe olives. Yellow like sliced turmeric root. So bright it made her eyes sting.

Men scrambled to stop its escape whilst merchants barked orders from afar. Khadija struggled to hide her envy of the women draped in chiffon dupattas, with painted-on faces and gold nose rings, beside their merchant husbands with henna-stained beards waiting to board it. Imagine the freedom of owning a balloon. To have the sky literally at one's fingertips.

The green and yellow balloon fluttered, tempting her to chase it, spitting fire at the hāri men as they struggled to contain it. Why would it want to spend its life on the ground when it could fly? She knew she wouldn't.

Abba nudged her. "Khadija."

She lifted her head.

"Abdel is speaking to you," he spoke through gritted teeth.

Abdel coughed into his fist. "I was saying that jinn encounters have increased sharply as of late. It's really not safe, especially for young women. Jinn are known to be tempted by pretty faces." He cast a smirk in her direction.

Khadija's skin crawled. She'd given him the benefit of the doubt before, but her patience was swiftly evaporating.

"Women should be kept indoors where they are safe," Mr Omar butted in.

Abdel nodded. "Absolutely! If Khadija is to be my wife, I want to make sure she's safe. Out of sight."

Indoors. All the time. Permanently. Forever. He couldn't be serious. Khadija faced Abba.

Abba stroked his chin and nodded uncomfortably. "Yes. We want to make sure she's safe."

"Of course!" Mr Omar exclaimed.

Safe! She'd die of boredom. No. This couldn't happen.

“Of course I can go out some of the times though.” Khadija threw her palms in the air. “I’m outside now and there’s no jinn trying to possess me.”

All three men shot her raised eyebrows. Mr Omar appeared startled, like he was unaware she had a voice. Abba looked ready to catch fire. She could practically see the smoke curling out of his ears.

She gulped.

Abba laughed it off. One thing he was an expert at was saving face. “Young girls are still so naïve. Unaware of how dangerous the world can be.” He patted her shoulder.

Khadija’s skin started to smoulder.

“When you become Abdel’s wife you will do as he says, Khadija.” Abba’s voice held the hint of a threat. “If he wants to keep you safe indoors then that’s where you’ll be.”

She balled her hands into fists. No. She would not simply trade her bedroom for another to live out the rest of her days under house arrest. She’d been indoors for too long, watching life pass her by from the window pane, away from wandering eyes as Abba would say. What Abba failed to understand however was that, whilst men may indeed look greedily upon her if she were to step outside unaccompanied, it did not compare to the insatiable hunger that consumed her whenever she glimpsed the bright circle of a balloon toppling towards the ground.

“Then maybe I don’t want to be his wife,” she hissed.

Abba stopped dead in his tracks. Mr Omar and Abdel glanced back. “Everything okay? Did she say something?”

Abba seized her upper arm, plastering on a smile. “She’s fine. The heat just making her dizzy.” He drew invisible spirals near his head. “You two walk on ahead.”

When Abdel and Mr Omar’s backs were turned, Abba set upon her like a starved tiger. Khadija struggled to contain the frantic tremor of her wrists. Just like Abba, her rage was

building, only she didn't think she had the power to control it any longer. Its heat was leaking from her skin, dripping down her arms, pooling at her feet. She wouldn't have been surprised if the grass started to sizzle where she stood.

“You will not ruin this, Khadija. You will do as I say now.”

“You can't make me marry him!” Hot tears sprang from her eyes, scalding her cheeks. She wiped them away furiously.

Abba shook her arm, not hard, but hard enough to convey his anger. Khadija felt something thud to the ground. Both their eyes dropped to the floor.

Hassan's book.

She tried to snatch it up, but Abba was too quick. “I thought I told you to get rid of this book!” He shook the book indignantly. “That's it!” He tugged her down the street. “I'll tell Mr Omar that you felt unwell so I took you home.” Abba was seething. “You are going to marry his son.”

“No!”

Heads were turning. They were causing a scene. People started to tut under their breaths.

Khadija knew how much Abba hated scenes.

He yanked her past a market stall where chefs were frying samosas in bubbling oil, his grip so tight on her arm she was afraid it would bruise.

“And no more reading stories!” Abba shook Hassan's book one last time and shoved it into the depths of the cooking fire.

Khadija screamed like he'd set her skin alight. She wrangled free and shoved her hands into the flames, trying to save Princess Malika's face before the fire licked it to dust. The skin of her fingertips blistered.

Abba hauled her back. “Enough!”

Khadija desperately clawed off a singed page and hugged it to her chest. A crowd had formed now, and the chefs were staring, wide-eyed.

Abba spun her around.

And there it was again. That glimmer of colourful fabric. Green and yellow. Fluttering.

Abba lifted himself to his full height and crossed his arms. “We’re going home.” He turned and stomped a few steps, expecting her to follow.

But her feet remained rooted, chest hammering. Khadija couldn’t take her eyes off of the balloon.

Another harsh wind lifted the balloon into the air. The hāri men skidded across the ground, yanking on the ropes as they fought to stifle its escape, but the balloon refused to be dragged down.

It spoke to her. Words hidden in the crackle of its fire that only she could hear. It whispered. Taunted. Teased her with the brightness of its fabric that made her eyes blur, the colour was so vivid. And all at once, her restraint crumbled. She was nothing but a hungry spark lapping at brittle firewood.

A flame flying across the grass. Sandals smacking the ground. Her scarf billowing out behind her like a pair of wings. She was every caged bird seeing the sky for the first time and realising that the pain of squeezing through the gap between the iron bars did not compare to the agony of spending a life having never tested its own ability to soar.

“Khadija!” Abba’s voice was lost to the thrumming of the blood in her ears. “Come back. Now!”

But she’d already gone too far. The burnt page of Hassan’s book crinkled against her chest as she ran.

I can’t stay inside forever.

The balloon broke free of the men's grasps and shot upwards. Three feet. Five feet. Floating higher with every second. Her thighs burned as she increased her speed, eyes locked only on the balloon.

"Don't you dare disobey me, Khadija!"

She jumped.

There was a moment in the air when Khadija wasn't connected to anything. Totally free. Weightless. Airborne. Then her fingers scraped the edge of the basket. She felt herself lift.

Floating feels a lot like falling but in the opposite direction. Her insides jumbled and hastily rearranged themselves. Her stomach turned to lead. She looked down.

"Khadija!" Abba cupped his hands around his mouth.

But she couldn't let go now.

Her arms burned. The balloon was like a wild horse. Threatening to throw her. Refusing to be tamed. It took all her strength to pull herself up where she toppled over the edge and landed in the basket with a thump.

"Khadija!" Abba's voice sounded distorted like it was coming from underwater. She peered over the edge and instantly felt like vomiting.

He was already so small from up here. "Please come back, Khadija!" His voice shrank into nothingness.

Buildings, bleached to the colour of bone, became the size of her fingernail. The spidery tendrils of the Ravi river running through the length of Qasrah became a thin blue line as if she'd sketched it with a reed pen. A landscape of rolling hills, lush green against the harsh white of the cotton fields unfolded below. Up and up she went. Khadija pressed a hand to her mouth because if she didn't she'd scream. There was no going back down now. And despite

her fear and her rage and all the emotions in between, there was only one thing she knew for certain: she didn't want to touch the ground again.