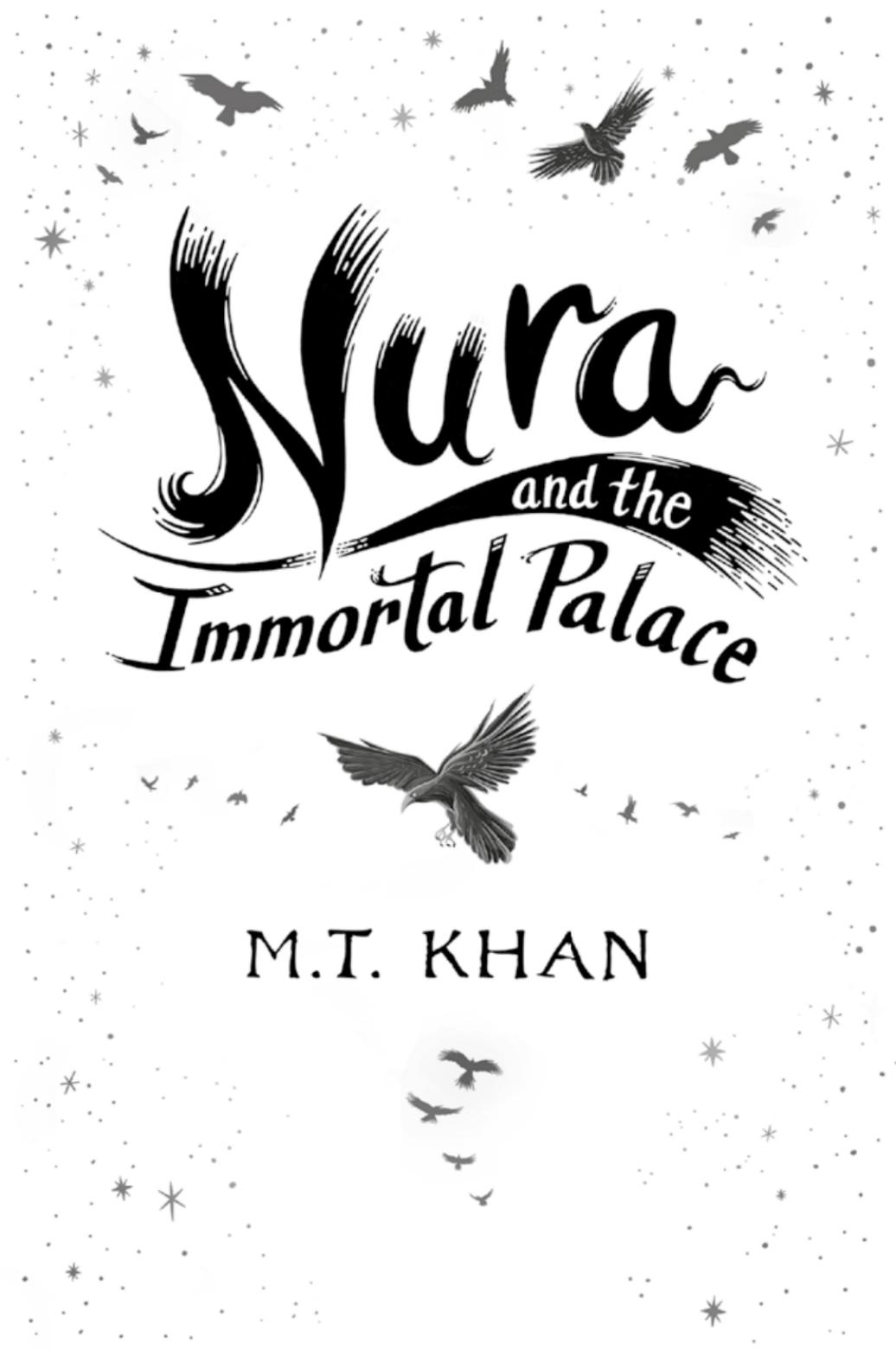


Nura

and the
Immortal Palace



M.T. KHAN



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*To my parents
for teaching me the value of education*





CHAPTER 1

Sparkles in the Dirt

A lot of people dream of being buried by their money.

If these tunnels collapse, I might just get that wish, except none of the mica that's packed into the walls of this mine belongs to me. With my teeth gritted and two hands around a shovel, I strike the dirt wall in front of me. The earth splits apart and crumbles to the floor like an offering, flakes of mica glistening in a pool of orange sunlight.

I crouch, my trousers matted in dust, matching the grime that stains my body like a second layer of skin. I brush my fingers through the pile of dirt, sifting for the precious flakes and dropping them into a basket.

"It's not big enough. None of these are," I mumble. Where is the Demon's Tongue?

My stomach growls. I wonder if a tiger lives in there with how hungry I always get. As my thoughts fade into

images of syrup-covered jalebi and juicy gulab jamun sweets, I leave the worthless pile and stumble deeper into the dark throat of the mines.

“W–wait, Nura! Don’t go so deep,” comes a whine from beside me. “It’s d–dangerous—”

“I know,” I grunt, cutting off Faisal’s annoying warning for the third time today. “But Mr Waleed sells gulab jamun on Tuesdays, and if I don’t dig enough mica today to earn me the rupees to buy one, I’m going to blame you.”

If anyone says that they work for passion or world peace and not the delicious food on their plate, they’re lying. There’s only one truth in this world: everyone’s got a hungry monster in their stomach that roars if they don’t satisfy it.

And I know well enough to satisfy mine.

It’s why I’m searching for the Demon’s Tongue, a legendary treasure buried deep in these mines. Maybe it’s just a rumour invented by kids to spark some life into a boring job, but I swear I’ve heard even the contractors talk about it. It’s money like no one has ever been able to grasp – it’s magic, it’s unearthly... Maybe it can’t even be seen. Maybe it’s not even real.

I chase its myth as I creep forwards. The tunnels are narrow – only fit for a kid’s body. My baba used to

work in these same mica mines, but when the tunnels tapered into thin paths as deep as three hundred metres, contractors learned that adults weren't the best people for the job. It's why a twelve-year-old like me and the other neighbourhood kids are hired to dig up the mica scraps scattered underground.

The sharp clang of hammers against stone rams through my eardrums like the ticking of a clock, and the fading sunlight tells me I don't have much time left before we call it a day. I'm here from sunrise to sunset, from the moment my eyes crack open to the last second before my muscles scream at me to stop.

A sparkle flashes in the corner of my vision and I can almost taste the sweet gulab jamun on my tongue. My lungs protest – this deep underground, the air supply is low. I don't know much at all about science, but I can *feel* it, the chains around my chest that squeeze tighter as I lurch another metre below.

The mine is similar to a human. We enter through its mouth, dive down its throat, and then explore its dark belly. I fold my arms and duck my head into a slender tunnel. I'm just about to approach one of its arms.

“Nura,” Faisal calls. “The sun's a–about to set. You w–won't be able to see any more.”

Faisal's always cautioning safety, but me and all the other kids threw safety into the sea when we accepted this job. The deeper the tunnels we dig, the greater the chance they'll collapse. And I've heard the horror stories too – about all the kids who never came back.

“Nura—” Faisal tries again.

“I'll be quick.” If I don't reassure Faisal, he's going to talk my ears off. Giving warnings is one of the only times Faisal ever pipes up – his stutter is deeply ingrained and a constant source of mockery for the others. One kid is already glancing at him, but I'm not afraid to stomp my feet if they dare insult how Faisal talks.

“I can't let Ahmed beat me today,” I say as I chase the glimmer of the mica shard. It's not the Demon's Tongue, but it has to be at least the size of my finger – a big catch that'll turn my haul into the largest one yet.

Sometimes if we dig up a promising collection of mica, the contractor pays us by the kilogram. It's a game for us, for all the kids who've never been to school or had the chance to glide on swings and play with dolls. If I can buy gulab jamun and beat Ahmed for the biggest haul today, then I'll risk it.

My bare feet slap against a muddy puddle as I hop down a ledge. I tuck my shovel under my armpit and crouch, just barely small enough to crawl through the

tunnel and enter another cavity. Here the mica is more stone than it is dirt, reserves not yet touched. The walls shimmer, streaked with green, white and gold. It's like I'm sitting inside a jewel – a really hot and stuffy jewel. With air that's been torched to forty degrees, my shirt clings to my skin. The heat is a smothering blanket.

“You found my favourite spot.”

I crane my head to the side and see Aroofa, a scornful smile tugging at her lips. She flicks the end of her dupatta over her shoulder as she strikes a large stone against a smaller one, combing through the debris that bursts from the collision. Her younger sister Sadia is busy beside her, hammering clumsily away at the smaller rocks Aroofa throws towards her.

I sigh. Aroofa would be better and quicker with the hammer, but looking at the cuts and scrapes along her fingers, I know why she yielded the tool to her little sister. With so many people in the business, there's not enough equipment for everyone. You get here early and swipe a hammer or shovel, or settle for one of God's greatest gifts: your hands.

“Won't be yours for long,” I reply, pointing to the kids that stumble inside the cavity, a smile creeping across my lips. Some of them are always following me, trying to copy my handiwork. When it comes to the

largest hauls, I'm second only to Ahmed, and he tends to disappear the second he hops down the mines. Me, on the other hand, I don't mind a little attention.

Aroofa's scowl deepens as the kids surround me, pretending to hack at the walls while their eyes stay glued in my direction. I roll my shoulders back. The stage is set. If they want a performance, I'm about to give those Bollywood actors a run for their money.

I narrow my eyes and catch the sparkle of the crystal. The shard is farther than I thought, a flash of white stuck in the folds of a crevice around a metre deep. I grunt as my arm reaches out. My cheek is squashed against the dirt, and the crowd of kids whisper to each other, curious about my overzealous efforts. I can almost feel Faisal's disapproval thicken the tension in the humid, grimy air, but I push forwards, sliding my body into the narrow slot shaped like a crescent moon.

The light is fading. My vision goes blurry. Someone gasps behind me – I've scratched my shin against a rock. I can't even feel the trickle of blood down my ankle when the mica shard is so close – close enough that my fingers brush the smooth surface. One more grunt, and I dig my nails into the dirt around it, clasp the shard in my hand as I shout in glee.

"Got it! Out of the way," I yell as I pull backwards.

The crowd behind me parts, their gazes locked on to my closed fist. I swat my shoulder-length hair out of my face as I stumble back into the mine's arm, up its throat, and leap towards the entrance of the tunnels. All around me heads are turning, and I can just make out Faisal's wide eyes as he joins the group chasing after me, shouting to show the treasure. But I want to see it shine.

As I climb out of the tunnel, my eyes narrow against the embrace of a bright sunset. Compared to the darkness of the mines, the surface is like a different world – one where golden rays wash over me and light the dirt on fire. Tiny, immeasurable shards of mica are littered across the ground, each one holding a flame.

I swallow gulps of fresh air, and it feels like my lungs grow three sizes bigger. The kids above ground who are sifting through baskets of dirt glance over as I raise an arm to the sky and unravel my fingers – the mica in my hand shimmering against the amber sunset.

There's awe pouring from the surprised gasps. Some clap, others whistle. I lower the mica shard down to eye level, and the light shines off it like a wink. It's the biggest piece anyone's found in weeks.

Most of the kids don't know why we dig these tunnels or what mica is used for, but I've overheard

plenty of conversations from the contractors to know why this streaky, colourless mineral has the world in a frenzy. It's used in paint and cosmetics – to make things sparkle.

I trudge towards my basket and drop the crystal into it.

I'm left with just the dirt.



CHAPTER 2

The Taste of Truth

Mr Waleed's cart is an explosion of colour. There's pink mithai, glistening brown gulab jamun and bright orange laddu burning my eyes. My nose tickles at the heady scent, and I can almost hear the sweets chanting, *Buy me, buy me, Nura!*

Faisal clicks his tongue from beside me. "You're pretending the s-sweets are talking to you again, aren't you?"

We're standing at the edge of a dirt street in the town of Meerabagh, a few kilometres away from the mining site.

I almost trip face-first into Mr Waleed's cart as a motorbike zooms by, sweeping up clouds of dust. A goat bleats from the corner of the road, beady eyes staring at me, like it's laughing at my clumsy feet. The sky no longer bleeds reds and oranges, but deepens to

a dark muted blue, beckoning the shops of the market to switch on their dizzying lights.

I love the market, even if it can't compare to what I've heard about the ones in Pakistan's big cities, like Lahore and Karachi. Shop lights flicker awake, flashing white, red and orange – colours turned to their maximum brightness to capture as many buyers as possible. Handmade jewellery twinkles and jingles, a young man yelling the prices of the bracelets in the display case to anyone passing by. There are fruit stalls, clothing stores with racks and racks of vivid, beaded fabric and carts with toys that roll down the road in the hope that some kid will tug their parents towards it.

When night unfurls its fingers and rakes through Meerabagh, it makes sure to turn the usually quiet and dry streets of the daytime into a town that's alive with excitement. And I'm especially excited today – there's a few extra rupees in my pocket.

“Which one, beta?” Mr Waleed asks me like I'm his own child. But the familial affection will stop once it's time to pay.

“You sure you don't want the laddu?” Faisal asks, eyes wide as he stares at the round orange balls. “It's like biting into happiness.”

Mr Waleed laughs at Faisal's ogling. Faisal should've

been a poet. He has the wistful gaze and delicate features of someone who's good with words. But none of us can really read. We've never spent a day in school.

I suck back the drool that threatens to spill down my lips. Eid al-Adha, one of the biggest Islamic holidays, is only a few days from now. It's the kind you spend with your family, remembering all that you're grateful for, and it's the reason sparks fly in my stomach this evening. Maybe if I buy something nice for my siblings, they might feel like we're actually celebrating. "Five gulabs, please."

Mining mica doesn't make you the world's richest kid, actually quite the opposite – we only do it because we're low on money. The daily pay is about two hundred rupees, which is barely enough to buy five pencils. But today – today I deserve something special, and I can't wait to see Maa's face light up at the sight of glistening gulab jamuns.

Faisal refuses to buy anything, even though I hear his stomach growl. Pink tints his ears, and I tousle his dark tangle of hair.

"No one in my family is as obsessed with sweets as you are. And my maa already made dinner," he whines in defence. "Are you sure you should even be buying th-that?"

My stomach sinks, and this time it isn't from hunger. "What do you mean?"

Faisal's gaze drops to the ground, his quiet voice barely audible over car honks and shouting hagglers. "My family is saving up every penny. I n—never get to buy anything."

My brows twist into a frown. It's like that for me too – Faisal doesn't have it any worse than I do. "I have three younger siblings," I snap back. "It's not like I can buy anything I want!" I point to the blue bicycle chained to the side of a stone shop. I jerk my head at a bright red dupatta that swirls around a girl's head. "I want that. And that. I'd buy the whole world if I could," I scoff. "What's wrong with a few gulabs?"

Faisal stares at me for a moment, brows creased, mouth set in a tight line. If he stares a second longer, I might punch him. But instead, he speaks. "You're going to keep on wanting things until you forget why you wanted them in the first place."

I still punch his arm.

I've known Faisal since we both started mining at six years old. He lives across the street from me, and his mother is a sweet angel with twin daughters she carries across her back like wings. Faisal's baba drives a truck from town to town to deliver crates of minerals

and other loads. Sometimes I go to his house just to lie across the mud roof and drink in the sun, Faisal asleep next to me. He knows me better than anyone. Which means he knows exactly what I don't want to hear but will risk a punch to his arm to say it anyway.

We utter our goodbyes as the azan rings from the speakers, announcing Maghrib prayer and the day's descent into night. I turn a corner onto the next block, greeted with more stone shops and large paint-peeling white signs written in Urdu. I stop at a three-storey building that looks like it's hanging by its hinges. Cracks splinter up columns, and chunks of stone have fallen off the walls. I run a gentle finger across a hole in the surface, and pieces crackle to the floor.

I hate this. I wish Maa never had to work here. As I stride across the narrow hallway and poke my head into the door at its end, the room is cluttered with small tables of sewing machines. Women old and young are hunched over patches of clothing, trembling fingers aligning cloth against needle.

“Nura,” my maa calls as she slips out the door, blocking my view of the room. “I told you to wait outside.”

Maa's eyes are a watery brown, like diluted cane sugar, soft and unfocused from hours of straining

them against dim light. She's always telling me to wait outside so I don't have to see the image of a hundred women with bright rolls of cloth in their hands, crouched so close together their shoulders almost touch, eyes flicking back and forth at every creak the building makes. But if I don't witness Maa working in this sweatshop, I'll forget why I mine mica.

Maa tightens the green dupatta across her head. She counts the coins in her palm, tosses them into a small pouch, and slips it back into her shirt. Her bronze skin wrinkles as she takes a sniff, gaze sliding to me. "What's that smell?"

I pounce forward and raise the bag of gulabs. "Our favourite!"

Maa's eyes widen, and a grin snaps onto my face.

But she doesn't mirror my excitement. "Nura."

I lower my arm, and the smile slips off my face. "What?"

Maa grabs my hand as she shakes her head. We trudge down the hallway and out of the creaky building, into the night air and under the flashes of yellow lights. I tug her arm, but Maa stays quiet, her dark brows furrowed. We step into the market, and Maa strides straight to Mr Waleed's cart, where he slouches in a wicker chair.

Mr Waleed's bony fingers pull the cigarette from his cracked lips as he puffs a cloud of smoke into the air. "Nasreen baji," he says to my mother, calling her *sister*, like they know each other past the occasional greeting.

Maa's lips are creased into a forced smile. "I want to return these." She lifts the bag of gulabs. A knot forms in my throat as Mr Waleed flicks his half-lidded gaze between us, something like pity in his eyes when they land on me. But pity lasts only a few seconds in a town like Meerabagh – we're all trying to survive.

He bursts into laughter instead, waving her away as a customer lines up behind us. My cheeks are red hot like they've been slapped, but I'm just relieved Faisal isn't here to witness the embarrassment. He would've clicked his tongue and shaken his head like a grandmother.

When Maa asks again, Mr Waleed says, "Let your child enjoy something for once." It's enough for her to shut her mouth, grab my hand and walk back to our hut at the outskirts of the town in silence.



CHAPTER 3

Stars Staring Down on Us

As Maa and I stumble back home, we pass hills shrouded in haze and towering rock formations. Our hut is a two-room rectangle slapped together with sun-dried mud, brick and reeds. Wooden logs and thatch are strung side by side to form the roof. I smile at the newly-painted scribble at the corner of the wall – that’s definitely the mark of Kinza.

Before we even enter, my three younger siblings greet me at the door, hands flying to my neck as they tackle me in a fit of giggles. I want to play with them, but my stomach clenches in a strange twist, and Maa is still quiet as she hangs her coat on a hook and sits on the dirt ground next to the cloth that serves as our dinner table.

Adeel, the oldest of the bunch at eight years old, bites his lip as understanding washes over him. He’s

quick to pick up on things. When Maa and I are off working, it's Adeel who tidies our hut and makes sure my two younger sisters don't burn the place down. Speaking of those devils, Kinza and Rabia are still bumbling around, hopping towards Maa to plant a kiss on each of her cheeks.

"Nura, bring the gulab jamuns," Maa says.

I swallow nervously. I'm not even that hungry any more, but I lurch forwards and set the bag down. I sneak a glance at Maa, but there's no more fury in her eyes. The hard lines of her face have softened, brows tilted, and she looks at me like I'm a baby bird that tried to fly for the first time but instead flopped to the ground.

"Bacho," Maa calls to us, *children*. "Look at what Nura brought you."

My siblings rip the bag open, and gasps flutter from their mouths. I suppress a smile. *This* is what I wanted to see: the way their cheeks blush and the sparkle that swims in their eyes. We each take one sticky, syrupy gulab. I plop the round ball into my mouth and let it settle there, hoping my tongue soaks all the sweetness so that the flavour never washes away. Lightning jitters up my spine, and I can't help but release a noise of delight.

"Is it Eid already?" Kinza giggles as she licks her lips.

"Soon," I mumble, smiling at her through a mouthful.

Eid is the one time our town goes out of its way to prove it's alive, and one of my favourite times of the year. Soon the streets will be brimming with families hopping door-to-door to share food. It's tradition to distribute meat among friends, neighbours and the poor. When most of your town lives with empty pockets, it still doesn't add up to much – but I love it all the same.

Maa places yesterday's leftover dinner of rice and vegetable curry on a large plate, and we devour it like a flock of hungry vultures. There's still dirt in my hair, and Maa hasn't changed out of her sweaty shalwar kameez either, but we share a look of peace when we see my younger siblings absolutely delighted at the simple joy of food.

“Thank God for your dinner, and make dua for your baba,” Maa says softly. We quiet down at that, whispering our gratitude to God and then praying our father makes his way safely to heaven.

Maa's eyes resemble wells now, glassy and on the brink of tears, but instead of letting them fall, she pulls my sisters into her lap and reaches to pat Adeel's bush of black hair. Finally, she takes my hand in her worn, leathery ones, and I feel my breath strangle to release.

“Nura, I don't want you working in the mines any more,” Maa whispers.

She's been saying it more frequently these past few months, afraid I'm going to end up like Baba, who worked my same job years ago. But I don't have a choice. Faisal may call me stubborn, but I *did* get it from someone.

"Maa," I sigh. "We need the money." I could get it all at once – if I find the Demon's Tongue. But until then, I need to work every day.

My sisters are glancing at each other, still in the midst of learning the language to truly understand the weight of our words. Adeel only gazes down at the floor.

Maa's chest falls with a choked gasp. "I want you to go to school."

This is ridiculous. I know it. Maa knows it. I lost my will to go to school long ago. I knew I'd never have the money for education after Baba died. But I've accepted it. Who wants to sit in a boring classroom all day, anyway?

"I need to work so Adeel can go to school. Then Kinza and Rabia."

Maa shakes her head. Her lips are trembling now. I look away, and my hands ball into fists. I hate seeing her this way. "Are you saying this because I bought gulab jamuns? You just don't want me to have my own money, right?"

"Nura, *no*—"

I slam my fist against the floor. “Then let me work!”

Maa sighs and pulls me closer. She cups my cheek and settles my head across her shoulder, so that all four of her children are piled onto her like a blanket. My anger falls like the swoop of a summer bird, and a delicate breeze curls into my heart as Maa brushes her fingers through my hair.

“Let me tell you a story,” she begins.

I can feel the anger in my stomach splinter into giddy butterflies. “Is it an excerpt from the Quran?” I ask, eager to learn more about the Islamic holy book.

“You and Baba’s love story?” Kinza chirps. Adeel gasps in excitement.

“About jinn?” Rabia grins.

Adeel shivers and Kinza squeezes her eyes shut, both of them fearful of those invisible spirits born of fire and exceptional at trickery. I stifle a laugh. Sometimes I think Maa mentions them just so we do as she says. One time I lingered near the woods, and Maa pulled me back by the ear, saying jinn like to dwell in trees and would swoop down to capture me if I stayed any longer. Another time she caught Adeel skipping morning prayer and told him jinn were whispering the words of the devil in his ears. Do they work for the devil or for my maa? They might be helping her more.

“It is.” Maa snickers as she tickles Rabia. “Your baba used to tell me this story all the time. He always tried to impress me.”

“Tell us!” Kinza whines.

Maa hums, her gaze skyward, glancing at the glittering stars that hang above the streets of shimmering dirt. “Baba was walking down the road one night, when he stopped under a tree to drink his chai. He kept on hearing voices, and a teasing laugh. But there wasn’t anyone around him, and the road was empty.”

Adeel squeezes Maa tighter, mumbling a quiet prayer.

“But then he looked up. He almost dropped his chai. Sitting on the branch above Baba was a man who looked just like him.”

Rabia bites her nails.

“The man who looked like Baba had just enough differences that they didn’t look identical – his brows were bushier, his nails were pointed ... and that’s when your baba knew that he was looking at his own qareen.”

“Qareen?” I mutter. I’ve never heard the term before, not even from Faisal’s superstitious father.

“Yes,” Maa says. “Qareen is a type of jinn. It means ‘constant companion’. Like your own shadow. God bestows everyone in the world with a qareen – and that night, Baba saw his own. The qareen tried to trick your

baba into going in the wrong direction, tried to give him suspicious things, and kept following your baba even when the paved road turned to dirt.”

I suck in a breath. Jinn are born tricksters. Everyone knows that – it doesn’t take an education to be warned of them. The wizened grandmothers around town gather kids and tell them stories about how jinn haunted their homes, misplaced items, or tried controlling their bodies. You don’t go near an abandoned site if you’ve heard rumours about jinn sightings or felt the air shift. They aren’t fairy tales. It’s kala jadu – black magic. My uncle once met a jinn, and he stopped going out at night ever since.

“What did Baba do?” Kinza mumbles, eyes still shut.

“Your baba recited Ayat al-Kursi.” Maa smiled. “It’s the throne verse in the Quran. God will always protect you from harm if you recite it. The jinn disappeared after that.”

I fidget with the hem of my shirt, picking at a dirt stain. “But if reciting the verse keeps you out of harm ... why isn’t Baba here with us now?”

Maa smiles and pulls me close, and behind all the sweat and dust, I smell cinnamon and cumin powder, love and comfort, and peace. “Baba is looking out for us from above. Whenever you think of doing a bad thing, remember that Baba is always watching.”

“So if I’m taking a dump, is Baba watching that too?” Adeel snickers.

Maa slaps the back of his head. I burst into the longest laugh I’ve let out in a while.

“Nura,” Maa whispers to me. “Tomorrow is your last day working in those mines. No arguing with me.”

I freeze. I don’t want to act up in front of my siblings – they don’t need to listen to our money problems. And the tone that Maa uses with me, it’s the kind a general would use to command an army. She doesn’t even want to hear a grunt of disagreement leave my mouth.

Tomorrow, I face the mines again. As a kid, I’m not supposed to be working. It’s illegal across almost the entire world. But when I come home to Maa’s soothing words and the hooligans that are my siblings, I could mine mica for the rest of my life if it meant preserving this little bit of happiness.

Yet that’s what Maa is scared of. Me mining mica for eternity until I fall to the same fate as Baba. But if I stop working, Maa’s going to have to pick up extra shifts, maybe even work a second job. I know she doesn’t want to lose me, but what if I lose *her*?

Maybe there is a solution.

Tomorrow will be the last day I mine mica – because it’s going to be the day I find the Demon’s Tongue.