



The Balloon Thief

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A decorative border with intricate floral and vine patterns, featuring leaves and small flowers, framing the top and sides of the page.

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 away to hear the racist slurs leaving the merchants' 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 the 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 to attention as her father 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 emphasized his perpetual air of disappointment.

‘Ah, 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 picture of a magnificent silver balloon made of a material as sheer and delicate as lace.

She cursed.

‘Are you not too old for storybooks?’ Abba picked up the book by its corner like it was a wet dishcloth.

‘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 a princess in a hot air balloon?’

Khadija winced. The book told the tale of Princess Malika who, long ago, 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, or so the story said. 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 their most heroic fighters. The book contained accounts of 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 – 'is that I have very good news for you! News you'll be pleased to hear.'

Khadija smiled meekly. Abba and she often had very differing views about what they considered good news. Certainly, it couldn't be news as good 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 beard. ‘A shoemaker, in fact. Think, Khadija, of all the pretty shoes he could make for you. The neighbours 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. But they were her mother’s shoes, collecting dust in the corner of her bedroom. The last time Ammi’s shoes had 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,’ he said, ‘but I think this could be very good for you. You can’t spend the rest of your life in your bedroom reading storybooks.’

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 had ridden 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 realized 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 shoemaker. Her older sister Talia had gotten lucky with her husband. A cloth merchant. Now she was busy traversing Ghadaea in a hot air balloon whilst he traded in lavish organza and fine crushed silks. But Talia had always had more appetite for marriage. 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 was already engaged at your age, and look how happy she is.’

Khadija 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 splinter lodged so deeply beneath his skin he had given up trying to rid himself of it.

He rose from her bed, eyes resting on her dresser covered in stacks of glittery bangles meant for girls with far thinner wrists than her. Khadija was reduced to lathering

up to her elbows with soap before forcing them on, and that was when she could be bothered to wear them. Then there were the pretty peacock hairpins and jewelled brooches, still nestled unopened in their plush boxes, to decorate her hijab. All gifts he'd often encourage her to wear, all to no avail.

Abba exhaled. 'It's almost like you don't *want* to get married, Khadija.'

Finally, he'd 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 so little, his youngest child – though she hadn't always been that.

She bit her lip. 'I don't, Abba,' she 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 emphasize 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 exorcized, trapped in a brass-infused glass bottle, and now the girl is happily married. I believe Mr Rashid is about to become a grandfather as well.'

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 Mr Rashid's daughter had drawn their interest when, like Khadija, 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 for corpses, both animal and human. Bodies were never kept long enough to attract them and were cremated with speed. Death was said to pierce the veil between the two worlds, allowing jinn to slip freely into the mortal realm – another reason bodies were quickly disposed of.

'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 soon, whilst he could still afford the wedding.

She had to stop this, convince him, before he rushed into something and ruined her life for ever. ‘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. But he didn't.

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 airfare to the city. If Khadija 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.'

Khadija's stomach twisted into a knot. She'd always managed to talk her way out of Abba's betrothals, squeezing a few extra months from 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.