



an
Emerald
Sky

Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome,
Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

ANEESA MARUFU

Text © Aneesa Marufu 2023
Illustration © Catherine Rowe 2023

First published in Great Britain in 2023
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

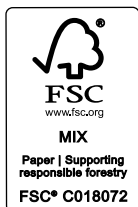
Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

Aneesa Marufu has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



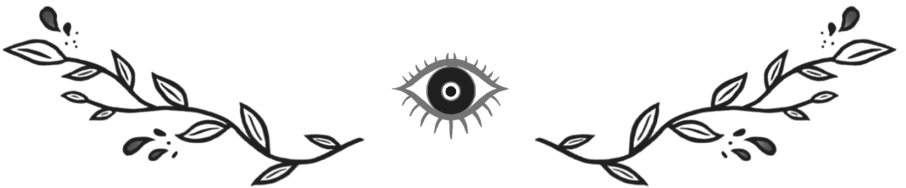
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-915026-28-6
eISBN 978-1-915026-88-0



To Aaliyah, for being my light in the storm.



Also by Aneesa Marufu

The Balloon Thief

Alongside the world we know, hidden from mortal eyes, is the realm of the jinn – shape-shifting spirits ruled by royals who wish for nothing more than the destruction of the human world.

As we begin our story, the city of Al-Shaam lies in ruins. Once a proud settlement for the ruling Ghadaeans, supported by the labours of the hāri underclass, it has been almost destroyed by an attack from the jinniya Queen Bidhukh. The defence was led by the Wāzeem – a group fighting for equality for the hāri – while a group of rebel hāri, the Hāreef, feeling that equality would never be achieved without violence, had fought alongside the jinn.

Instrumental to victory over the jinniya queen had been a very special blade, the Seal of Sulaiman – now as shattered as the city, which is where our story begins.



CHAPTER ONE KHADIJA

The dove-white panels unfurling from the balloon's basket as it slowly came to life looked like a gigantic bird stretching its wings. Her first ascent was long overdue. Each day spent in the infirmary allowing the raw skin of her neck to scab over, as the marks of Caleb's burns gradually faded, had been torturous for her with nothing but the painted silk of her balloon to gaze at from the window. Since the moment the Nawab of Al-Shaam had gifted it to her, Khadija had been itching for her first flight in her balloon.

Her balloon. How she had longed to utter those words. The powdery expanse of pale gold sand was devoid of life that morning. She'd risen at dawn, slipping out of the

Wāzeem's safe house that had sheltered her and Abba since the battle, and picked her way through the rubble to the balloon landing bay. Al-Shaam's streets were a crumbling mess of their former selves, and those with the means of transportation had long since fled to safer cities, so that the square indents in the sand were the only evidence that this strip was once teeming with hot air balloons.

Khadija brushed her fingers against the basket as it strained against the force of the inflated balloon. Not the usual woven wicker, rattan or bamboo, but a rare silver birch that the nawab had said he reserved for only his finest balloons. It made the stone-coloured basket, against the crisp white and turquoise silk of the balloon, look like a sea bird soaring above the ocean.

'You're finally going to fly it.'

Khadija jumped and twirled around.

Darian was scuffing the sand with his boot. He squinted up at the rising sun that was turning their world amber and coral pink. 'You've chosen a good day to fly. Not even a single cloud.' He studied the sky intently, and for a moment all she could do was watch him, wondering what to say to dissolve the awkwardness that had steadily grown between them since the battle.

How had it come to this? They had laid down their lives for each other without question, and now it was a struggle to carry a single conversation. Since Darian had awoken in the bed beside hers in the infirmary, he'd been different, his crooked smile bent at the wrong angle, the

sticky sweetness in his amber-coloured eyes now a congealed mess of thoughts that warred inside of him that Khadija was aching to understand.

She'd put it down to his injuries, at first, or him still feeling the effects of Anam's exorcism. Or perhaps post-traumatic stress, a lack of sleep . . . there were myriad reasons to explain Darian's frostiness towards her.

But it was *only* towards her.

She'd pushed aside the sting of Darian's booming laugh as he'd joked with Zaid over breakfast the day before, the way he'd casually bumped Anam's shoulder at her offer to spar once Jameela had removed Anam's stitches caused by her duel with Princess Malika – the princess who had been abducted by the jinniya Queen Mardzma and taken to Al-Ghaib where she had been trained as her most fearsome warrior. He seemed like the same Darian with everyone else and yet, with her, a stranger.

And she was determined to find out why. 'Come up with me.' She pointed at the orange-streaked sky.

Darian hesitated before clambering into the basket. Khadija untied the rope tethering the balloon to the ground and leapt inside the basket before they drifted upwards. The balloon's panels hugged the breeze as they ascended the way the sails of a ship curl towards the wind.

Up in the air, the true destruction of Al-Shaam lay before them. Burnt buildings and bloodstained paving. Her eyes fell to the gaping hole in the city's once-magnificent golden gates, now a melted mess that was still topped with loose arrows and spears the soldiers had discarded

after discovering they had no effect on the jinn army that had laid waste to the city. For a while, Khadija and Darian just stared, as if only now acknowledging how close to death they'd been at the hands of Queen Bidhukh and her jinn, aided by Vera and the Hāreef. The nawab had issued a mass clean-up of the city, with a huge revelry to follow. He'd called it a miracle that Al-Shaam had survived such an attack. He'd visited her several times in the infirmary, and on each occasion Khadija had shed the shyness that seemed ingrained in her when in the presence of men. The nawab had showered her with praise at her courage during the battle and promised her and Abba a brand-new home in Al-Shaam's upper-class district once the city had been rebuilt. He'd even gone as far as hosting a meeting with the Wāzeem's council members where he'd actually listened to the Wāzeem's beliefs on equality – something Anam had been working tirelessly for.

And yet Khadija didn't feel like celebrating.

She tore her eyes from the scene below and twisted the tap of the gas canister. Hungry flames roared, and the balloon shot up, the wind pushing them off angle slightly. The deck groaned as if in protest. Khadija leant over the side of the basket to untie the ballast sacks hanging over the edge and repositioned them so that their weight would counter the harsh wind current and level the basket.

'How have you been?' Even the words sounded stiff and awkward in Darian's throat like he'd rehearsed them in his head.

She sighed. 'Good. Fine. And you?'

He nodded. 'I am a bit tired. I think I'm probably still recovering from the exorcism.'

'You didn't seem tired when you asked to spar with Anam.' The words left her lips before she could stop them and then, like a dam bursting, the rest spiralled out. 'Or when you attended that Wāzeem meeting with Zaid.'

Darian frowned.

'Or all the times you've risen early to assist the city's clean-up.'

His mouth upturned a fraction. 'Have you been stalking me?'

She glared at him. 'I just want to know why you suddenly don't like me any more.'

There. She'd said it. And it could never be unsaid. The words sank between them like a flightless bird.

'I never said I didn't like you,' Darian whispered.

'You don't have to.' She shrugged. 'It's obvious.'

'I'm sorry.'

She hadn't expected those two words to sting as much as they did. Khadija steadied herself on a rope. He had finally confirmed her suspicions. 'Why?' It was the only succinct response she could muster. She felt her rage hot and sticky in the back of her throat, ready to wrangle his reasoning out of him. 'What did I do?'

Then Darian was striding across the deck towards her. 'You didn't do anything. It's me who should be sorry. I've been avoiding you since the battle when really I should have just spoken to you first.' His gaze flickered to hers, the

action brief, fleeting, as if he was afraid to stare any longer. 'I just needed time to figure this all out.'

'And have you figured it out?' Her tongue felt like sandpaper.

'I think so. Well, Anam did really.' His hands curled around her wrists, but his touch was cold, the pressure far too light, like it was a stranger holding her. 'I think I know the reason why I've been feeling distant around you. Why I don't know what to say or how to act any more.' Despite how much she wished it, there was no mistaking his next words: 'I think Queen Bidhukh stole my heart.'

His declaration was like a knife severing the conversation in half.

'It's the only thing that makes sense,' he continued. 'Anam said Queen Bidhukh is the jinniya queen of magic, but she is also well known for her love spells, and after what I did to her I suppose killing me would be too boring. She wants me to suffer.'

And what was worse than losing the ability to care about anything? It all made sense now. A smoky image of the pulsating heart Queen Bidhukh had wrenched from Darian's chest filled Khadija's mind. Darian didn't care about her because he *couldn't*. She didn't know what that felt like, only that it must be its own form of torture to suddenly lose interest in everything he ever held dear. It would be like the world turning grey, or even worse than that, still seeing the colours but no longer appreciating their beauty.

Life would be meaningless without love.

‘You don’t understand how hard I’ve tried to feel the same way about you.’ His grip tightened on her wrists until it was too tight. ‘But I can’t, like I physically can’t. I don’t know how to explain it, I just feel . . . nothing. Empty. Hollow. And when I think about everyone else, it’s like I don’t care any more. I can joke around with Zaid and talk to Anam but it’s not the same.’ He sighed. ‘I guess I’m just better at pretending around them because I didn’t love them in the same way that I loved you.’

It was funny how his words could both make her insides glow and her heart feel like it had been gutted out of her chest. ‘I . . .’ What could she even say? ‘I’m so sorry she did that to you.’

Darian shrugged. ‘We all have wounds from that battle.’ His eyes fell to the bandages wrapped around her neck. ‘Just not all of them are visible.’

Khadija swallowed. The action still caused her some pain. When she met Darian’s eyes, gone was all the hurt and rage that had built up over the past week. All that remained was a furious hatred for Queen Bidhukh and what she’d done to him.

And she would get her revenge.

‘There must be a way to get it back.’

Darian scoffed. ‘I don’t think it will be as simple as asking for it.’

‘Then we’ll take it back.’ She thumped her fist on the sanded wood of the basket’s banister.

A half-smile spread across his face, and for a teasing moment, it seemed like the old Darian had returned. Then

his smile collapsed. ‘I’ve already thought about all this, Khadija. It’s just not possible.’

‘So what? You give up? You’re just going to live like this’ – she waved at his hollow chest – ‘with no heart?’

‘Some people live with losing their minds. It wouldn’t be the worst thing.’

This was not the Darian who had devoted his life to fighting for the Wāzeem’s cause, the Darian who would sacrifice anything to see hāri people free.

This was a new Darian who was satisfied with being miserable.

Well, Khadija wasn’t satisfied with that.

‘If you don’t want to get your own heart back, then fine.’ She tugged on a rope, and the parachute vent opened. The balloon dropped. ‘But you can’t tell *me* not to get it.’

Then Darian smirked at her, the glitter to his eyes returning briefly enough to make her chest flutter, and Khadija knew she would do anything to get that feeling back. To feel like that always.

One thing she knew about Queen Bidhukh was the jinniya queen’s love of power. She had tried and failed to establish her jinn kingdom in the mortal realm, using Vera and the Hāreef as her pawns. Whilst Vera and the Hāreef had been destroyed, the threat of Queen Bidhukh and her jinn army still remained – it was just a matter of time before Queen Bidhukh built up her strength and rallied her army for another attempt at taking the human world.

‘I’m going to speak to Anam,’ she declared as they

approached the ground. Anam was the most well versed out of all of them in the workings of the jinn world. Maybe she could give an insight into whether it was possible to get Darian's heart back, and if so, how.

'I've already spoken to her,' Darian mumbled, then sighed. 'But I suppose there's no stopping you, either way.'

As the basket sank into powdery sand, Khadija leapt out and swiftly knotted it to a post. Whirling round, she was met by Abba wiping his glasses on the end of his tunic.

Abba's gaze flickered between her and Darian. He frowned but said nothing, and only then did Khadija notice the red rings around his eyes.

'Is everything OK, Abba?' Her brow creased with concern.

His chin quivered. 'It's your sister.'

Her stomach turned to lead.

'Talia is very unwell.'