

*For the readers—  
both invisible and visible.*



## Chapter 1

There was a reason Sharmeen's mum had forbidden her from listening to Nani's stories. No cuddly creatures scampered about getting into merry scrapes and happy endings here. Dark Ones lurked in these tales: furious snake-women avenged their dead offspring through fangs and poison; witches with mangled feet bit off the heads of piglets and cast black spells to lure unsuspecting victims into dark forests from which they never emerged. Tonight, Nani narrated the gruesome story of Samarkand, the unfortunate traveller, while her twelve-year-old granddaughter lay curled up against her, wide-eyed and trembling.

'His feet ached. The sun descended into the violet mountains in the west, highlighting the silhouette of a black willow tree in the distance. Wreathes of old leaves dangled from its branches, reminding Samarkand of his mother's untied hair as she begged him not to leave home. But he was not content being a lowly woodcutter. He wanted more than a lifetime of felling beautiful trees. So

under the cold shade of the dark willow he lay, leaning against the rotting bark. He drifted into a deep slumber, but little did he know...'

The last words made Sharmeen scoot closer to her grandmother. This was the point of dramatic irony: where she would know something Samarkand did not. Nani shifted, making room on the bed, lazily gazing into the distance where visions of verdant fields, thick-leaved willows and sleeping sons swirled.

'Little did he know that the willow was the special abode of a Janeeree: a cruel she-Jinn who lived within the cocooned spirals of the tree's dead leaves. As Samarkand snored, the Janeeree awoke. She drew the drooping curtains aside and scuttled down the thin branches. Her amber eyes spotted her sleeping prey, oblivious to the danger looming above him. Licking her lips with a forked tongue, she made her way further down. She was a fierce creature with sharp, sabre-like teeth unfolding from the grooves of her mouth as she neared. Below her waist, eight spidery legs, slender and bent, moved slowly and steadily towards Samarkand's body.'

Nani looked down at her button-nosed granddaughter whose lips quivered with anticipation and barely suppressed questions. 'But the truth is that when Jinn are around, nothing is inevitable. Just when the mouth is open and the fangs are drawn, something unexpected happens.'

'A twist!' Sharmeen proclaimed triumphantly. Nani chuckled, her crinkled face unfurling into a wide grin, and carried on.

‘The Janeeree crept on leg after naked leg, inching towards Samarkand’s sleeping form. Her jaw unlocked like an anaconda’s, preparing to swallow the sleeping man whole. But his smell made her stop.’

‘Body odour?’ Sharmeen enquired.

‘Dhat!’ snapped Nani, signalling amused disapproval. ‘It was not body odour! He smelt of unshed tears. It was an unfamiliar wetness for her smokeless fire.’

‘Smokeless fire, Nani?’

‘Yes. Humans are made from clay, angels from air, and Jinn from smokeless fire.’

‘How can fire be smokeless?’

‘Because the first flame ever created by God was pure. It blazed and yet did not burn, sustaining without destroying: a beautiful lamp in the sky. From this, the earliest Jinn were born. Their breath formed the first suns around which planets would cluster. They adored their Master and did His bidding, their loyalty engendered by wonder, awe and fear.’

‘They sound beautiful.’

‘Oh, they were. They could cut through mountains the way a knife slices through butter. They breathed on galaxies, and their heat made the cold stars flow like liquid rivers in the sky. They fashioned many beautiful worlds, adorning the inky universe with glittering galaxies. Fiery artisans of the five skies: they began to admire their craft and gloat in its glory. Slowly, arrogance crept in, followed by rebellion. Who was God—they whispered among themselves—but a broken architect, closeted up in the seventh domain, distant

and invisible? Did they not do His work for Him? Did *He* not need *them*? He was nothing but an old, decrepit Jinn, losing power, hiding His weaknesses from His children. So they rose up in dissent.'

'Did God punish them?'

'He let the consequences of their misdeeds taint them instead, hurling them out of Heaven, banishing them into the worlds they had constructed. When they gazed upon all they had lost, they wept with bitter regret, choking and gagging, their tears mingling with their fiery beings to create a black, acrid smoke that spread into our world. That is why our flames are hot, destructive; no longer eternal. Some Jinn strove to reclaim their purity through atonement. But others, like the Janeeree, forgot that they had ever been pure.'

'So they're not smokeless anymore?'

'They were made smokeless, but do not remain so. They thought, as the Janeeree did, that the smoke, like the evil inside them, was now a permanent part of their being. Thus it came to pass that the Janeeree adopted the path of the damned, walked by all who are disobedient.'

Sharmeen gulped. She was on the path of the damned right now; just yesterday she had promised her mother that she would no longer listen to Nani's Jinn stories.

'So Jinn are like flames in the air? Is that what they are?'

'No, my love. Jinn are a part of the invisible realm. We cannot see them, but they can see us. They are powerful enough to traverse the seen and unseen worlds. This planet has stones, plants, animals, humans, but it also has Jinn, and we all coexist. Now, may I continue my story?'

‘Yes! Sorry.’

‘Where was I?’

‘The Janeeree was about to eat Samarkand, but was interrupted by his body odour.’

Nani sighed and shook her head. ‘She bends her legs, all eight of them, and kneels. Slowly, she runs a long slender finger along his cheek. She has missed the feel of a man’s beard. A creature of impulse, she decides not to kill Samarkand, because she is lonely.’

‘Why lonely?’

‘How many people do you think would befriend a Janeeree, whose bitter pastime consisted of ensnaring travellers who sought refuge underneath her tree? She liked to sniff out their fears and chant, giving them nightmares until they woke up, screaming in mindless terror. And when she tired of toying with them, she bled them, leaving their corpses rotting on the ground. But not this time. The Janeeree decided to use Samarkand by binding him to herself.’

‘How?’

‘Stop interrupting, child!’ admonished Nani before continuing. ‘The Janeeree put Samarkand’s head on her lap and murmured prayers of the ancient realm, of days before the sun and stars, of swirling infernos and thick goop. She wove a heady spell of passion and whispered it into his ear. He dreamt of a beautiful woman, bereft and abandoned, reaching out to him through the dark halo of her hair.’

‘He awoke from a fitful sleep and saw the same woman, naked and trembling before him. He covered her with his