



THE  
CANDLE  
AND THE  
FLAME



BY NAFIZA AZAD



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The novel uses the following Fijian Muslim nomenclature: *djinni* to refer to the singular of the species and *Djinn* to the plural.

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Fatima lives in the city of Noor, on the Silk Road, which is currently protected by the Ifrit, djinn of order and reason, from attacks by the violent and ruthless Shayateen djinn—but Fatima was infused with the fire of the Ifrit who died saving her when she was four years old, and when one of the most important Ifrit dies she finds herself drawn into the intrigues of the court, the affairs of the djinn, and the very real dangers of a magical battlefield.

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## PROLOGUE



The desert sings of loss, always loss, and if you stand quiet with your eyes closed, it will grieve you too.

Perhaps it is the comfort that the shared sense of sorrow brings that draws her to the desert. Perhaps it is the silence unbroken but for the wind sifting through the grains of sand on the dunes. Or maybe it is the wide desert sky, the blue of which peers into her soul and finds things there better left to the darkness.

Ghazala doesn't know which of these things attracts her the most, but since the day she lost everything, the desert has been a balm to all her hurts. This place with its emptiness and the promise of heat glimmering underneath the sand lies in Qirat, a country divided almost perfectly between the desert and the forest. Every chance she gets, Ghazala slips away from the fiery landscape of her home, from Al-Naar, to soothe herself with the unchanging panorama of the desert. The humans call this place the Desert of Sadness; they believe that the land grieves for the forests that once stood on it.

In the moment before she transforms from a being of smokeless fire to a being of flesh and blood, Ghazala often thinks she can hear the land's lament. If she told her father this, he would call her fanciful and ask her to pay more attention to the act of transformation instead. When a djinni becomes flesh and blood, she dons her Name and feels her fire flow into a shape that is uniquely hers. The

Ifrit clan of the Djinn have the ability to bring over material objects when transforming. Ghazala has her oud slung over her shoulder from a strap she attached to it for times when the silence is a bit too loud.

At this moment, she stands with her hands clenched into fists, breathing hard. The transformation is not difficult if done properly, but when performed in a rush, the physical toll is considerable. As soon as Ghazala has her breath back, she masks her fire, the fire that defines every djinni, no matter their clan and physical shape. She pulls the heat deep within herself so no other djinni will be able to sense it. Her father has often impressed upon her the importance of caution, especially in a world that is, for all intents and purposes, strange to her.

Judging from the position of the sun, it is late afternoon. Very soon the sky will put on a show that few will have the pleasure of experiencing. Ghazala walks down the sand dune she appeared on, her pace slow and her direction arbitrary. She doesn't ever plan her excursions to the human world; they are escapes from the demands *her* world makes on her.

Her father would be sad at the admission, but when Ghazala lost her daughter, her life lost its honey; she lost any desire she ever had to be who she is. All she has, all she clings to, are memories, and to fully indulge in those, Ghazala needs the desert's plentiful silence.

She walks aimlessly, trekking up and down sand dunes without leaving footprints, immersed in the memory of the first time she held her daughter. The sun begins its descent, and Ghazala reluctantly thinks about returning home.

A sudden scream splits the silence before it is cut off. The quiet following the scream is heavy with sinister anticipation. Ghazala rapidly moves toward the place the scream came from. It doesn't

occur to her to be afraid of what she'll find on the other side; what more, apart from her life, can she lose now?

Ghazala knows she is too late long before she reaches the top of the final sand dune. The stench of freshly spilled blood permeates the air and prepares her for the sight that awaits her at the bottom of the dune. The remains of a derailed caravan train are scattered on the desert floor; the bodies of four camels lie in various positions, as though a vicious wind picked them up and threw them down again. Ghazala climbs down the dune slowly; her breath hitches when she sees the dead. Scattered among their colorful material possessions are the corpses of three men and four women, one elderly. Ghazala looks closer at the bodies, noting the slashes that ripped each one from stomach to neck. Whatever did this was extremely vicious and strong. In fact—Ghazala straightens when a frisson of danger dances down her spine—this looks very much like the work of the Shayateen. She looks around but finds the area deserted except for the corpses and herself. Shayateen have never made forays into the human world as far as she knows. Why would they start now?

Ghazala gazes upon the empty faces of the dead for a long moment. Who were they? Where were they going? Will anyone know they died? Will anyone mourn them? She turns her attention to the task of burying them; it is the least she can do. A little nudge to the sand with her fire has the desert pulling the bodies into its depths. She says a prayer for them, asking her Lord to show their souls mercy. The camels she leaves for the vultures. The senselessness of the deaths angers her, gouging into wounds she thought were healed.

She is ready to leave, when a glimmer of gold attracts her attention. A beautifully woven rug has slid off one of the camels and lies bunched up on the desert floor. The quality of its weaving is far

superior to anything Ghazala has ever seen before. The scent of blood strengthens as she nears the rug, and Ghazala wonders, for the first time, where the attackers went. The idea that they could be lurking nearby doesn't scare her; in fact, she would welcome the chance to give action to her burgeoning anger.

Her senses sharpen when her masked fire flares in recognition of kin. Ghazala blinks twice before she realizes that before her, hidden underneath the rug, is a Qareen. The Qareen are a clan of diminutive Djinn. Each human has one Qareen bonded to them; this is the service their Creator demands of the Qareen.

This Qareen is grievously injured and fading quickly. Unlike the Ifrit and the Shayateen, the Qareen need no names to anchor them to earth; their bond with their humans takes care of that.

"I am Ifrit," Ghazala says to the Qareen, her words meant as a statement of friendship. "Can I ease your way, brother?" She assumes the human he is bonded to is already dead.

"Will you get this child to safety?" the Qareen responds in a reedy voice.

Ghazala peers closer into the gloom underneath the rug and sees now what she failed to see before. A girl child, around four years of age, lies curled into herself.

"I tried to take the brunt of the attack, but I couldn't stop them. They killed everyone else and wouldn't hear of mercy even for a child," the Qareen says in a voice choked with anguish. He twists his smoky body to face Ghazala and beseeches her. "Her name is Fatima. Save her, daughter of Ifrit, I beg you."

Ghazala reaches into the shelter provided by the rug and gently picks up the child who whimpers at the contact. The Qareen, almost transparent now, follows. Ghazala's heart lurches at the warm weight of a child in her arms. How many months has it been since she has felt this warmth? She thinks of her sweet Shuruq and

holds the human child a bit closer. The child has dusky skin, curly black hair, and gold eyes wide with pain and fear. Ghazala lifts the child's dress and sucks in a breath at the sight of the wound on her stomach. A slash from a sword has cut her deeply.

"I think my time has come," the Qareen whispers, and fades entirely before Ghazala can respond. The child jolts as though she felt the separation. Ghazala looks down at the girl, and the girl looks back at her with eyes that seem far too old on such a young face.

"I suppose I will save you now," Ghazala tells her solemnly, and smiles when the child blinks. The best idea would be to take the child to a human city. The only one nearby is the city of Noor. Ghazala hoists the child up against her shoulders. If she travels in the Djinn way, she'll get there faster. Before she can make a move, however, she is struck hard from behind. The breath rushes out of her. The child falls from her arms and onto the ground.

Ghazala whirls around to see a trio of armed Shayateen in front of her. They are awash in blood; blood on their hands, their clothes, and around their mouths. Ghazala edges closer to the crying child. She is struck by a cruel sense of *déjà vu*. The heat of the sand, the glare of the sun, the blood on her hands, and Shuruq's final cry. Ghazala draws in a shuddering breath and forces herself into the present. She reminds herself that *this* child is still alive.

The Shayateen look as human as she does, and these three in particular have assumed attractive faces. The only inhuman things about them are their eyes with black irises that cover all the white. Malice emanates from them, malodorous and corrosive. Ghazala braces herself.

She knows she is outnumbered. Were she by herself, she would discard her name and flow back into her djinni form, where she is the strongest she ever is. But she cannot fail the child. Not again.

Ghazala lets go of her mental hold on her fire, hoping knowledge of her Ifrit nature will hold the Shayateen at bay.

The Shaitan on her right moves toward the child. Ghazala pulls her sword from its scabbard and lifts it in warning. The other two rush Ghazala. She dances out of the way but not before one of the Shayateen stabs her in the side. Her blood splatters, and the Shaitan reaches for it.

The Shaitan screams as her blood, the blood of an Ifrit, undoes him. That is the power the Ifrit have in the human world. Their blood is toxic to the Shayateen, a fact with which the Shaitan is becoming intimately acquainted. His name is ripped from him, and he turns to ash before their eyes.

The other two Shayateen have frozen, disbelief on their faces. Ghazala stares at them, the sword in her hand wavering. Her wound must be deep because she is losing strength quickly. The other two Shayateen look uncertain, and Ghazala waits, wondering if she is going to have to fling her blood at them. The taller of the Shayateen snarls, and Ghazala takes a deep breath.

But their resolve is lost. They flee, leaving dust in their wake, and Ghazala's sword falls. She runs to the child, whose cries have become snuffles, and gathers her up in her arms once again, kissing her cheeks and murmuring consolation.

The child has lost a lot of blood, and the fever that was a threat has now bloomed in her cheeks. Ghazala grits her teeth against her own pain and clutches the child closer before setting off for the city. She travels in the Djinn way—in desert tornados that cover long distances quickly. She reaches the city just before the gates close at nightfall. Ghazala doesn't notice the child's silence until much too late.

When she shifts the child in her arms, she realizes that the eyes she admired are closed and the child's breath is shallow. Ghazala



sees Shuruq dying all over again. Her mouth opens, and her grief, usually so carefully controlled, escapes. She drops to her knees and rocks the child, wishing she could pray her well.

Her wound twinges, warning that she also is losing too much blood. Ghazala looks down at the child's face and remembers something her father told her about the forbidden rite of transferring Djinn fire. Ghazala cannot let another child die. She cannot look grief in the face again.

The decision is much easier than it should be.

Jagan is nearly at the city gates when the sound of a child crying makes him turn and peer into the darkness. A girl child, about four years old, is sitting on the ground at the side of the road, crying. In the dim light afforded by the torches at the gates, Jagan can see dark stains on her clothes. She clutches some kind of musical instrument in her arms, hugging it as if it were a favored toy.

He looks around cautiously, knowing better than to accept innocence by appearance alone. Then the child looks up and sees Jagan. Her cries peter off, and she regards him with eyes that are remarkable in both color and expression. Even in the semidarkness, Jagan can see the clarity in her eyes. He walks toward her cautiously. When she doesn't sprout horns or fangs, he crouches down to her height.

"Where are your parents?" he asks her. She doesn't respond. All right.

"What are you doing?" The silence continues.

"What is your name?"

The child moves slightly, and Jagan swallows. Then she rewards him with a smile. "My name is Fatima."





PART ONE







## CHAPTER 1



*Fourteen years later . . .*

The muezzin's call pierces the thinning night air, extracting Fatima from dreams of fire and blood. Her eyes open to the darkness, and for a moment, she is caught in the dark space between sleep and wakefulness. This space is filled with beautiful snarling faces, fear as vast as the night sky, and grief only just realized.

The call to prayer comes once again, and this time tips Fatima fully into the land of the living. She sits up in bed with a gasp and glances across the room to where her sister is sleeping. Fatima watches her sister breathe until her own breathing calms. Satisfied that Sunaina is not going to stir anytime soon, Fatima slips out of the charpai and pulls on a shalwar under the tunic she usually sleeps in. She moves swiftly out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, where she performs wudu in front of the shaky but clean sink. Her ablutions complete, she leaves the apartment with a dupatta on her head, a lamp in her hand, and a prayer mat under her arm for the open rooftop of the building in which she lives.

The rooftop is deserted, as it usually is at this time of the morning. Other faithful Muslims in the building she lives in prefer to pray in the comfort of their homes. Fatima places the lamp on the mid-level wall that runs around the rooftop and gazes out at the expanse of the desert. Northern Taj Gul, so called because the buildings in this area are built of rosy pink stone, is right next to the wall that surrounds the entire city of Noor. The

circumference of the city wall is rumored to be undetermined, as the city is immense and, people like to claim, immeasurable. Fatima spreads her prayer mat, pointing it north toward the Kaba. The time before dawn is precious, as the air has a delicious chill to it that the sun doesn't allow during the day. Jama Masjid is lit up like a beacon; from her vantage point on the rooftop, Fatima can see groups of boys and men making their way to it for the Fajr prayer. Turning her back to the city, she, too, prays the four rakats of Fajr, bowing down with her hands on her knees for the ruqu before touching her forehead to the ground in a sajdah. After the prayer, which culminates in a dua, she gathers her belongings and returns to the apartment, where Sunaina is still sleeping. Briefly, Fatima considers returning to bed but shakes her head and stifles her yawns. She has an errand to run.

Their apartment is on the seventh floor of the building and is probably one of the shabbiest. It is, however, the only one the sisters can afford. Their apartment is one large room that has been sectioned into three different parts by thin wooden walls. The tiniest section, in the corner with a window high up on the wall, is the bathroom, which comes equipped with plumbing thanks to the Emir of Noor City who made indoor plumbing mandatory. The other section is their modest sleeping quarters, in which they have squeezed in two charpais and little else. The largest area serves as a kitchen, a dining room, and a living area.

The apartment is humble. However, compared to the street they used to live on, it is an unimaginable luxury. A chest of drawers in the living area contains their clothes. Fatima rummages in the top drawer before pulling out a clean beige tunic and matching shalwar. She binds her breasts and changes quickly, grimacing at how uncomfortable the binding is. She doesn't aim to dress like a man so much as she tries to focus attention away from her

femininity. Living on the streets has left her wary of people who attempt to turn it into a weakness.

The flame in the lamp is flickering when Fatima finishes getting ready for her next excursion. With her eyes kohled and a red ambi-patterned turban wrapped around her head, she can pass for an affluent young scholar from Shams Gali. She nods at herself in the mirror and leaves the apartment with no sound apart from the click of the lock as she closes the front door behind her.

Outside, the air still has the chilly flavor of a desert night, though orange streaks in the horizon warn of the approaching heat. The sizable amount of foot traffic on the streets belies the early hour. The city of Noor never sleeps. As one of the more profitable stops on the Silk Road, a steady stream of caravans enters or leaves the city at all times of the day or night. The merchants do not just bring goods to be traded but also people who either want to visit the city of the Djinn or who want to live here. The Bayars, dressed in stately robes, jostle for space on the same sidewalk that the Han people in their white hanboks do. From the melodic Urdu to the breathy Nihon-go, the cadence of a thousand different languages fills the air. The city of Noor brings people of all colors, ethnicities, and religions together and takes from them everything they do not always want to give. Fatima has seen people pay more for the city's grace than they ever thought they would have to.

She walks quickly, cleaving to the shadows, not wanting to be recognized by friends or drawn into conversations by acquaintances. Not that any friend of hers would be out on the streets at this time of the night. But just in case, she keeps her head down and her feet swift. She passes a group of boys returning home from praying Fajr at Jama Masjid, and her eyes snag on Bilal, the muezzin, whose voice is more familiar to her than her own.

Away from residential Northern Taaj Gul, the foot traffic

decreases, allowing Fatima to hasten her pace. She takes the Rootha Rasta and emerges onto a main road that connects Northern Taaj Gul to the more affluent areas of the city. A ride hitched on a mule-pulled cart deposits her by a line of beautiful houses that come complete with courtyards painted in pastel shades and paved with intricately decorated tiles. Fatima follows a haphazard path through the row of houses and ends up in Chameli Baag, named for the flowers that no longer grow there. It is not much of a garden; the land became desert a long time ago. A number of khejri trees still wage war with the elements, though, surviving one day to fight again the next.

Gardens on the forest side of Noor City are explosions of green, embarrassingly lush after the dearth of natural bounty on the desert side. Fatima has traveled to Southern Noor carrying messages or packages from one side of the city to the other. Sometimes she lingers over the rosebushes in the gardens there. At other times, her work takes her into courtyards spilling over with trailing vines and other wanton greenery.

Two distributaries of the River Rahat section Noor into three parts. Aftab Mahal, the palace shared by the royal family, the Emir, and the human and Djinn armies is located in the middle of the city on a tract of land separated from the rest of the city by the two distributaries.

It takes Fatima three-quarters of an hour to reach Neem Ghat, the riverside port in Northern Noor. She comes to an abrupt stop under the neem trees that grow in a line along the river a few meters from the steps leading down to the river's edge. Time is of the essence, yet Aftab Mahal, luminous in the waning darkness, commands her attention. Dawn has tender regard for the palace's domes and spires. The carved stonework on the palace walls is said to be



exquisite—not that Fatima has ever had the pleasure of looking at them herself. A muted shout from a man piloting a wayward boat reminds Fatima of her errand. She takes one last glance at Aftab Mahal before hurrying down to the river's edge, where several boats laden with flowers are already in the process of docking.

A number of dockworkers walk around with lamps dangling from long sticks. Because it is Deepavali, the port is more crowded than usual. Fatima looks at the flowers on offer and is, as always, taken aback by the opulence of the blooms. There are coy nargis, delicate lilies, jewel-colored gladiolas, and haughty orchids. Vying for equal attention are irises, roses, poppies, buttercups, hollyhocks, and flowers whose names are mysteries to Fatima—mysteries she'd very much like to solve one day.

Fatima breathes deeply of the floral bouquet and looks around for a familiar face among the flower sellers. She finds him securing his boat on the far side of the port and hurries toward him. The flower seller, Niyamat Khan, has a kind face with eyes that shine with the smiles he has yet to give the world. Though he is in the twilight of his life, he has a wiry body and a thirst for life that is evident in the care he takes of the flowers he sells. The last time Fatima bought flowers, it was from him. She hadn't been able to afford many, so he had gathered the leftover and rejected flowers into a bouquet and presented it to her. Fatima smiles at the old man, at his blue cotton shalwar kameez that is not wrinkled even after a night on the River Rahat, and at the taqiyah that sits straight on his head. Niyamat Khan's face lights up when he catches sight of Fatima.

“Assalaam wa alaikum, baba,” Fatima greets him. “It has been a while since I saw you.”

“Wa alaikum ussalaam, beta,” Niyamat Khan says, beaming.

She helps him unload his boat and waits patiently while he deals with the porter he contracts to transport his flowers to the market. Finally, he turns to her and smiles.

“Do you have them, baba?” Fatima asks.

As an answer, Niyamat Khan goes back into his boat and drags out a basket he kept separate from the rest. The basket is heavy with the blooms of damask roses in several colors: many shades of pink, red, yellow, white, and maroon. Fatima looks at the roses and, to her horror, feels her throat grow thick and her eyes sting. She swallows and blinks before taking out the money she has been saving for a month. She pays the flower seller, thanks him, and picks up the basket of flowers, flinching at the weight.

Carrying it all the way back to Northern Taaj Gul would usually be a daunting task for Fatima, but luck is on her side. She runs into Amrit, an acquaintance who raises camels for their milk, and begs a ride home on his cart. In return, she listens to him complain about the human servants in the mahal who take the milk he delivers daily without so much as a thank-you.

In about an hour, and before the clock is able to strike six, Fatima, with her precious basket of flowers held close, is carefully easing open the front door to her apartment.