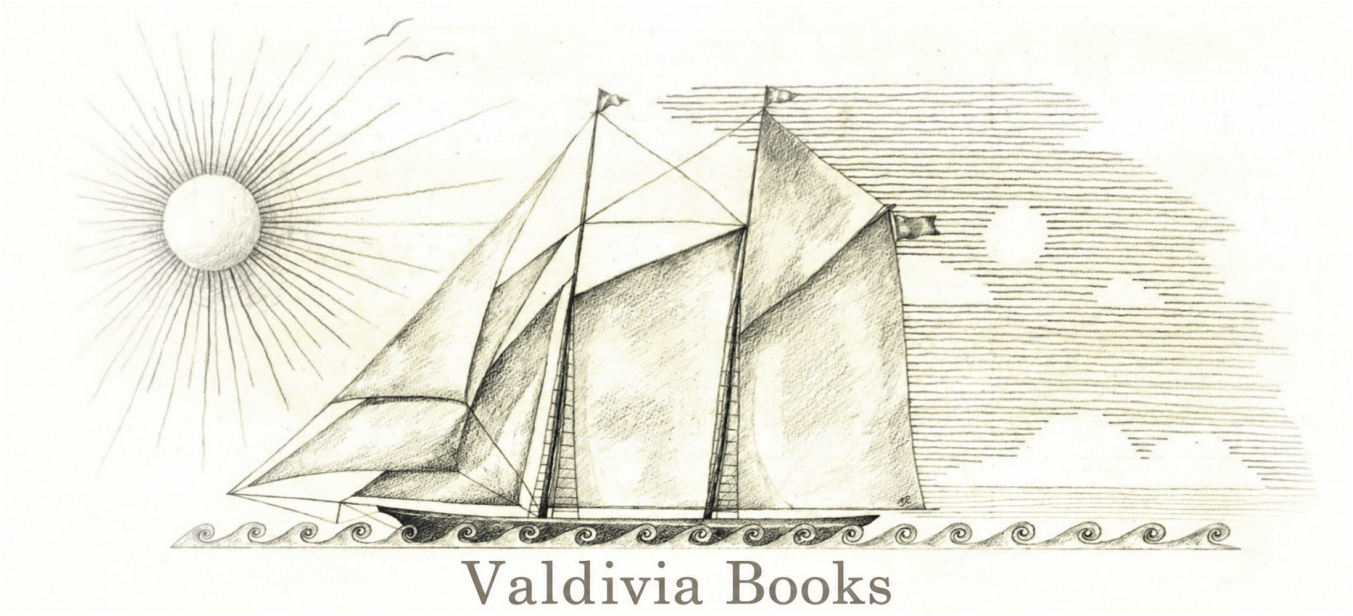


Sanctuary of Echoes

Reading Sample — Chapter Eight

The Scarred Sailor

by

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This sample presents the prose.
Typography and page layout may differ in the published edition.

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Sanctuary of Echoes - Chapter 8

The Scarred Sailor

Marrakesh, Morocco -1901

Themes:

1. **Ishq-e-Haqiqi – True Love, Divine Love**

"The Beloved is not to be possessed, only recognised."

2. **Sabr – Sacred Patience**

"The soul that waits in silence is closest to the Beloved."

3. **Fana – Annihilation of the Self**

"What is not burnt away will burn you."

"You cannot drink from the cup of fire and expect the tongue to remain whole."

— Sufism saying

"In which a scarred Sailor writes to the dead, a Beautiful Lady reads his soul, and a Sister finds her Brother just in time to show him redemption exists."

There is no history here.

No names. No noise.

Only heat.

And distance.

The world does not begin this morning.

It tightens — like a funnel of breath — over the red earth and cracked white walls of a villa just outside Marrakesh.

There is no sign. No gate.

Only the smell of oranges and the absence of sound.

A window is cracked.

The shutters are green, peeling slightly, like skin after sunburn.

And inside, the air holds still — like it's waiting for someone to weep.

A man sits at a desk.

Not hunched. Not slouched.

Just placed — like he has always been there.

His back straight, as if he'd grown from the chair itself.

Before him: a stack of paper.

The ink is fresh.

The light is low.

He writes with the ease of someone no longer trying to be understood.

The letters curl like windblown smoke —

graceful, ancient, unspeaking.

To anyone else, it would look like madness.

A script forgotten even by ghosts.

Not a diary. Not a confession.

A ritual.

He dips the pen again.

The candle wobbles slightly in its pool of wax.

Outside, the sky yawns blue and hot.

…

But inside —

the language curls on the page,

and the man does not look up.

Not at first.

The scratching of the pen slows,

then stills,

as though the words themselves have tired of trying to translate grief.

He sets the pen down — gently, without thought —

and lets his gaze drift beyond the candlelight,

past the edges of the desk,

through the cracked green shutters

to the river.

It moves without effort.

Slow, silken.

Not rushing, not stagnant —

just eternally unfolding itself across the land.

The kind of river that doesn't announce itself.

It isn’t for commerce.

It isn’t for ceremony.

It doesn’t offer absolution or arrival.

It flows because it flows.

Because it is.

And that was why he stopped here.

Not for the orange trees.

Not for the villa.

Not even for the quiet.

He stopped because the river did not care who he was.

It didn't ask questions.

It didn’t measure the weight of his mistakes.

It simply kept moving —

a quiet reminder that not everything needed a reason to endure.

He had once sailed oceans,

mapped coastlines,

fought the wind with knotted rope and salt in his eyes.

But this river —

this narrow, sleepy thread of light in the dust —

was the first body of water that had asked nothing from him.

And so he stayed.

A flicker at the window draws his eye.

A dragonfly.

Not large — no longer than a finger,

but its wings shimmer like oil over ink,

held open with the delicacy of old lace.
It floats in the heat,
hovering just beyond the glass,
a breath above the stillness.
It does not land.
It does not flee.
It observes.
And for a moment —
just one moment —
the man and the dragonfly are the only two things not moving.
And then the wind shifts,
and the wings shimmer again —
and the dragonfly is gone.
He watches the space it leaves behind
for longer than he should.
Then — without ceremony —
he picks up the pen,
and begins to write again.
…

He began to write again,
but the pen paused above the page — suspended, uncertain.
Not because he couldn't write,
but because somewhere in the quiet corners of the universe,
it was agreed that he shouldn't.
His hand hovered.
His breath slowed.
And his mind — unwilling, but obedient —
followed the shimmer of the dragonfly.
Not the one at the window.
The other one —
the one he remembered, not with thought, but with feeling.

It hung in the sky over Oxford.

…

Spring, 1875 — England
The British Empire was swollen and unrepentant,
its fingers pressed deep into the velvet seams of the world.
Disraeli had just declared Queen Victoria Empress of India —
an empire she had never seen,
and could not have pointed to on a map if asked.
She was poorly educated, cloistered, and silent —
still wrapped in fourteen years of mourning
for Prince Albert,
the only man who had ever spoken to her like she was real.
Disraeli's gesture —
a golden title for a grieving queen —
was not so much political
as ritualistic.
A symbolic attempt to awaken her.
To pull her back from the realm of the dead.
But grief does not respect crowns.
And Victoria remained, in soul and silhouette, a widow.
The nation felt her absence
like a punishment they hadn't earned,
or perhaps a silence they didn't know how to fill.
England was alive with empire —
but hollow at its core.

By 1875, Oxford was a cloister of minds wrapped in sandstone.
The colleges stood proud and half-crumbling,
their bell towers ringing not just time, but tradition, arrogance, and memory.
Boys in straw boaters and striped blazers laughed too loudly down cobbled lanes.

Ink-stained fingers gripped books that had never seen the inside of a church.
And the dons, old as furniture, shuffled like ghosts through cloisters,
debating God, Greece, and gin in the same breath.
But even among that academic theatre,
a quiet tension pulsed —
between what must be said,
and what must never be named.

West of the dreaming spires,
where the stone gave way to meadow and myth,
lay Port Meadow —
ancient common land, flat and endless,
touched by the lazy sprawl of the River Thames.
Here, nothing was taught, but everything was learned.
Boys came to row.
To escape rules.
To pretend they were men.
To feel the sun without being seen.
The grass grew wild.
The river moved slow — like it had nowhere in particular to be.
And on one forgotten spring afternoon,
beneath the same sky that watched over Marrakesh decades later,
a dragonfly danced above the still water.
Its wings caught the sun,
and then caught the eye of a boy named Oscar
just as a voice behind him said something he'd never forget.
…

He had not meant to be alone that afternoon.
He was meant to be reading —
well, pretending to —
Virgil open on his lap, the sunlight pooling in the crease of the page.

But the lines blurred.

Not from boredom,

but because his mind kept turning to things no one had taught him to name.

The air was warm,

but not heavy.

A dragonfly stitched invisible circles above the water,

and for a moment — he envied it.

It moved like it belonged.

It moved like it had always known how.

Oscar had not felt that.

Not yet.

Not here.

He'd only been at Oxford a few months,

but he already knew how deep the current ran —

how fast one could drown in conversation,

in lineage,

in who your father was and what chapel you'd been baptised in.

He had ideas.

He had feeling.

But no language for them yet.

He wore the blazers.

He played the part.

But he had not yet stepped into his own name.

Not until that voice.

It didn't call his name.

It didn't mock his solitude.

It simply said — as if it were nothing more than weather:

"If you stare at the water long enough, it begins to write back."

Oscar turned, blinking like he'd just been called by the wind.

The voice was soft, but not shy —

spoken in perfect English,

the kind that felt older than the empire it came from.

And then he saw him.

The man — or was he a boy? A few feet away,

one hand resting lazily on the tiller of a moored boat,

the other holding a cigarette like a violinist holds a bow — not for the smoke, but for the balance.

He wore a white shirt, sleeves rolled.

Trousers that looked like they belonged to no era in particular.

No hat.

And hair the colour of lost sunlight,

that curled — not for style, but because it refused not to.

But it was his face — not the structure, but the stillness.

He had the sort of presence that made the birds quieter.

Not beautiful, not stern — just… placed.

As if the world had built itself around him

and hadn't yet asked why.

Oscar swallowed — not from fear, but recognition.

Something in his chest opened like a book too long pressed shut.

He didn't know what to say.

He didn't know how to speak to someone like that —

someone who looked as if silence belonged to him.

The stranger watched him for a moment — just long enough to make the moment matter.

And then said, almost absently:

"You're holding Virgil upside down."

Oscar looked down.

He was.

And that's when he laughed.

Not because it was funny.

But because for the first time since arriving at Oxford, he didn't feel wrong.

He felt seen.

Yann smiled — not broadly, not as performance,

but with the quiet approval of someone who had just confirmed a hunch.

"Come," he said, nodding toward the boat.

“Books lie. Oars don’t.”

Oscar hesitated —

but only in the way one does when they know their life is about to split into before and after.

He gathered his things without looking down,

stuffed Virgil into his satchel upside-down again,

and stepped carefully into the boat.

Yann didn’t offer a hand.

But he offered balance.

And somehow, that was more intimate.

The boat rocked gently beneath them,

and as Yann untied the line with one hand and pushed off with the other,

Oscar felt the shore leave him.

Not just physically.

But in a way no one else would ever quite understand.

They didn’t speak at first.

Yann rowed —

slow, effortless movements,

his arms quietly strong beneath the loose linen sleeves.

Oscar sat opposite,

his satchel beside him,

fingers worrying the edge of a frayed bookmark as if it could keep him tethered.

The water made no noise.

Even the dragonfly was gone.

And when Yann finally spoke again,

his voice dropped like a pebble into a still pond:

“You’re not afraid of beauty.”

Oscar blinked.

“You just haven’t decided what to do with it yet.”

Oscar opened his mouth —

then closed it.

He didn’t know how this man — this stranger —

had seen what even his tutors hadn't noticed,
what his mother had feared,
what he himself had only begun to suspect.
But somehow — he had.

Yann wasn't looking at him.
He was watching the water.
Not like someone admiring the view.
But like someone listening to an old friend speak very softly.
"They'll tell you to be clever," he said,
"when what they mean is: hide.
But you don't have to. Not with me."
Oscar's throat felt tight.
The sun was higher now,
and the meadow was already slipping behind them.
"Who are you?" he asked finally.
Yann paused, oars stilled.
Then — with the faintest smile:
"A fellow Traveller on the long path."
Oscar was quiet.
Not out of fear —
but because no one had ever said something like that to him before.
And just as the silence began to stretch —
not uncomfortably, but like a breath held in awe —
Yann rested the oars across his knees,
and turned to face the boy.
Not with drama.
Not with lecture.
But with certainty.
"You need to learn to be you."
Oscar met his eyes — startled, almost embarrassed,
like someone had walked into a dream he hadn't meant to speak aloud.

Yann's voice didn't rise,
but it filled the boat like wind fills a sail.
"And when you are — when you've found that shape —
don't dim it to make others comfortable."
The sun flickered across the river.
A heron in the distance stretched its wings,
and something ancient shifted in the reeds.
"Burn, Oscar.
Burn bright.
Like a comet in the sky."
He leaned slightly forward —
not urgently, but with reverence.
"Because you are brilliant.
And beautiful.
And the world's going to try to shame you for that.
Don't let it.
Not for one bloody second."
Oscar looked away —
not to retreat,
but to let the tears slip past the corners of his eyes unnoticed.
No one had ever called him beautiful without cruelty.
No one had ever called him brilliant without qualification.
And no one — not even himself — had imagined both could be true in the same breath.
He nodded.
Once.
Not in agreement.
But in acceptance.
Something had changed.
Not in the world —
but in the way he would now walk through it.
But time is a trick in memory.
And when it came to Yann, every day burned longer than it should have.

They met that day in the boat.

But it was not a meeting.

It was a beginning.

Oscar watched Yann more than he spoke to him.

He studied the cadence of his silences,

the architecture of his laughter.

He began to quote Yann in debates — never admitting the source.

Yann never corrected him.

Only raised an eyebrow, and, sometimes, smiled.

Oscar's essays changed.

He started using pauses as punctuation.

He wrote not to argue, but to enchant.

And suddenly his tutors leaned forward when they read.

But it wasn't Wilde yet.

Not fully.

Not yet his own fire.

Still the shadow of another man's candle.

They walked more.

Drank occasionally — Yann never did, but Oscar did, and Yann never judged him.

They sat in quiet corners of libraries,

and Oscar would sometimes read out loud —

only to hear how he sounded when Yann listened.

He began to wear his blazers less properly.

He let his hair grow.

He practiced lines not in mirrors — but in Yann's silence.

Once, in late November, he said something clever at a party —

and a don called him "unnaturally bright."

Yann heard.

Didn't speak.

Only whispered the next day:

“Bright things frighten the blind.”

Oscar never forgot that.

By the third year, Oscar’s voice was recognisable.

Not just on paper.

But in rooms.

People quoted him without knowing who he was quoting.

He walked slower.

Laughed softer.

Spoke as if every word had been rehearsed in the mouth of a wiser man.

And sometimes, Yann would nod in approval.

But not always.

Sometimes, Yann went silent.

And Oscar, though he said nothing,

felt the distance like a draft under a locked door.

One afternoon they drifted on the lazy river, the water moved slowly beneath them.

Not in waves, but in that heavy-lidded way the Thames carries on in summer — thick, greenish, reluctant. The skiff creaked as it drifted near the bank, its hull sighing against the reeds, like even it was content to rest. Above, the sun spilled in long fingers through a thin haze, warming the old wood and the canvas cushions. Somewhere upstream, a bell rang. Not loud — just the memory of sound.

Yann sat with one hand trailing in the water.

Oscar had learned not to interrupt him when he went quiet like this — when the stories were folding themselves together inside him. Yann never looked like he was thinking. He looked like he was listening. To the past. To the breath of ghosts.

Then, without warning, he spoke.

“It was spring in Paris. I don’t remember the year — not exactly — but it must’ve been ’77 or ’78. Before the world turned cold again. Before the Americans electrified everything, and the Russians forgot how to laugh. You could walk from Montmartre to the river with a bottle of red and a story, and both would be finished by the time you reached the bridge.”

He smiled. Not at Oscar — at something far away.

“I knew a place. Not on any map, of course. You had to be invited. Behind a perfumer’s shop near Rue de Provence — nothing fancy. Just a door with no handle and a red cloth nailed to the top. Inside? Velvet. Not brothel-velvet — this was older. Quieter. Dust in the corners, absinthe on tap, a piano missing half its notes but none of its pride.”

Oscar said nothing.

“There were dancers, yes. Courtesans, painters, two anarchists and a midwife who could recite Racine by heart. It was a haven. A place where names didn’t matter, only stories. And one night…”

Yann’s hand lifted from the water, fingers now laced over his chest.

“One night, he walked in.”

Oscar didn’t need to ask who.

“Not with an entourage. Not with a flourish. Just a tall man in a simple coat, moustache thick, eyes tired in a way only aristocrats and orphans carry. He moved like someone who’d stopped pretending a long time ago. Sat near the piano. Ordered nothing.”

“We knew who he was. Of course we did. Prince Albert Edward, heir to the British Empire. Bertie. Son of Victoria. But no one bowed. And he didn’t expect us to. That was the strangest thing — he looked relieved.”

Yann exhaled, like even telling the story cost something.

“The absinthe was flowing that night — cold, green, milky where the sugar melted in. It softens everything. Like the world’s holding its breath. He took a few sips. Then stared at the mirror on the wall for a long time. Not checking his appearance. Not posing. Just... looking.”

Oscar leaned forward.

“He didn’t speak for nearly an hour. Just sat there, watching the girl at the piano massacre Debussy, and letting the room pass around him. And then — just as I was thinking he might leave — he turned to me. Not drunk. Not solemn. Just... honest.”

“‘Do you know what it’s like,’ he said, ‘to be hated by the one person you were born to please?’”

The boat rocked slightly. Somewhere in the reeds, a heron flapped its wings.

“He didn’t say her name. He didn’t need to. We all knew who he meant.”

“‘She buried my father and forgot to grieve,’ he said. ‘She put him in a temple — a shrine, a mausoleum — and then looked at us like we’d pissed on the altar.’”

“He wasn’t crying. Not quite. But his hands were shaking. Just a little. Just enough.”

Oscar looked out at the water. Quietly.

“He told me,” Yann continued, “how every smile from his mother felt rehearsed. How she punished him for not being the shadow of a man she canonised. He said, ‘I was nineteen when he died. I didn’t know how to be him. And she never forgave me for that.’”

“He spoke about tutors, about the weight of silence in Windsor, about letters never answered. But what I remember most… was the sound he made.”

Oscar turned.

“A laugh. But not a happy one. The kind of laugh you make when the last illusion crumbles.”

“‘The nation called her the widow of Europe,’ he said. ‘But I was the boy who made her a widow. And she never let me forget it.’”

The breeze shifted. The scent of river grass and coal smoke drifted past.

“He finished his glass. Stood up. No farewell. Just a nod. And as he turned to go, he said — not to me, but to the room — ‘They will love me when I’m dead. Perhaps not before.’”

Yann closed his eyes.

“And I think he was right.”

By 1878, Oscar Wilde had arrived.

The teachers who once muttered about indulgence now quoted him in lectures.

The boys who once mocked him now wore their hair longer.

And Yann?

Yann had begun to fade —

not from Oscar’s life,

but from his shadow.

Oscar didn’t quote him anymore.

He quoted himself.

But Yann watched.

Always watched.

And on the night before Oscar’s graduation,

they sat by the river,

a bottle between them, untouched by Yann.

Oscar had spoken for nearly an hour —

clever, brilliant, dazzling.

Yann had said almost nothing.

And then — when Oscar finally ran out of breath,

Yann looked at him,

with a sadness he would never explain,

and said:

“You’ve built a cathedral out of mirrors, Oscar.

Just be careful no one throws a stone.”

Oscar laughed.

He didn’t understand.

Not then.

…

Yann watched the change as a sailor watches the stars —
not to interfere,
but to know which way the world is turning.
Oscar no longer walked.
He glided.
Not because he tried to,
but because he had learned to move like a man who knew he was being watched.
His clothes became more deliberate.
Still Oxford.
Still within the bounds of decorum.
But each detail told a story —
a flash of colour in the handkerchief,
a subtle flare at the cuff.
He had grown into his name — Wilde —
not by accident,
but by will.

Yann never said much.
But he saw it all.
The parties.
The invitations.
The women who adored him.
The men who adored him more, and feared they shouldn't.
The way Oscar spoke in rooms now —
as if words were wine,
as if each phrase was the last one he might ever be allowed to say.
And the laughter —
it followed him like a choir trained to his pitch.

But Yann also saw the pressure behind the eyes.

The quiet flickers — doubt, hunger, something tender and unspeakable —
that surfaced only when Oscar thought no one was watching.
Except Yann was always watching.
And one afternoon —
years after the boat,
years after the upside-down Virgil,
Oscar gave a speech in the Union Hall that left the room breathless.
Even the dons clapped.
Even the ones who feared him.
Yann stood in the back —
coat draped over one shoulder,
a cup of tea cooling in his hand.
Oscar saw him through the crowd.
Their eyes locked for only a second.
And Yann —
with nothing more than a nod —
told him:
You've done it.
You've become everything I saw in you.
And more.
And Oscar —
just for a flicker —
smiled like a boy in a boat.

…

The candle had gone out.
The ink was dry at the tip of the pen.
But Yann hadn't moved.
Outside, the light was shifting —
late afternoon drifting into the blue-gold hush of evening.

Somewhere beyond the cracked shutters,
the river moved without ambition,
still refusing to ask for anything but presence.
And across the narrow path from the villa,
she walked.
The Beautiful Girl.
Her black scarf wrapped not in mourning, but in dignity.
Her dress the colour of pressed olives and clean earth.
She walked with no sound but the certainty of grace.
Behind her, the children followed —
four of them, in perfect rhythm.
Not rehearsed,
not forced —
just in tune.
One boy, slightly taller, held a stick like a sword.
One girl, the youngest, skipped every third step.
The other two moved like shadows of each other.
They were a painting come to life.
A procession of innocence and order,
as if God had decided to make a moment purely for the sake of loveliness.
To the villagers,
they were a blessing.
To Yann,
they were a punishment wrapped in mercy.
Because he had nothing to offer them.
No protection.
No name.
Not even his presence.
And still — they passed the villa every day.
Always at the same hour.
Always with her leading.
Never with a glance inside.

Except once —

when the youngest girl turned,

just for a second,

and looked straight at Yann through the slatted window.

And smiled.

Not for him.

But because she knew he was watching.

The next day —

and every day after —

he sat in the doorway of the villa.

Not out of strength.

Not out of habit.

But because there was nothing else to do when you were too tired to die,

and too stubborn to stop watching the sky.

He looked like an old man.

Bent, faded, half-swallowed by his own stillness.

But he was not old.

He was just broken in ways that could not be stitched.

And mourning — when it grows teeth — has a way of chewing through the body long before it ever touches the spirit.

In front of him: a small bowl.

Inside: figs.

Not many.

Just enough for four children.

He never said a word.

Never smiled.

Never called them over.

But each day —

as the Beautiful Girl passed with her four ducklings in tow,

the bowl was there.

And each day,

the children would pause, look to their mother —
and when she gave the faintest nod,
they would hurry forward,
pluck the figs from the bowl with hands sticky from life,
and eat as if figs were forgiveness.
Yann didn't look at her.
Not properly.
But he saw the shape of her —
her walk, her stillness,
the way she stood slightly apart,
as if trying not to be included in something she already carried in her breath.
And she saw him.
Every day.
Not as the villagers did —
a recluse, a shadow, a foreigner worn thin.
She saw a man living through fire,
without asking anyone to put it out.
And so she let the children eat.
Because love begins where judgement ends.

That day, as she passed the villa,
the light was unusually soft —
as if the sun itself had lowered its voice.
Her children walked behind her,
four ducklings in a perfect line,
feet landing in unison with her hope.
She did not look through the window.
She never did.
But she felt him.
The man.
The sailor.
The one who sat like furniture carved from grief.

The one whose pain sang through the shutters like incense.

She felt it — not as pity,

but as a calling.

And that day,

she couldn't walk past.

Not in the way she always did.

She stopped.

Just slightly.

Just enough.

And she thought of Dr. Eric —

her teacher, her Sufi friend.

The one who never answered questions directly,

but always left her with better ones.

She did not speak aloud.

Not even a whisper.

But inside her soul, the plea unfurled like a white scarf in the wind.

He needs help.

He doesn’t know it.

He won’t ask.

But he’s drowning.

And I — I don’t want to save him.

I only want to clean his house.

Would that be alright?

Is that allowed?

Ya Allah… may I?

She turned her head slightly toward the sky.

The children waited, still and quiet, as if they too knew this was not an ordinary pause.

She looked inward —

to that place Sufis call qalb, the heart behind the heart.

And there —

not in words, but in warmth —

she felt the answer.

Not yes.

Not no.

Just permission.

The door of the soul unlocking itself.

She turned gently.

Continued walking.

And the next day, she came back.

Not with words.

Not with charity.

Just a cloth, a broom, and the kind of reverence only silence can carry.

The morning air held the hush of something waiting.

She rose early. Dressed in silence. Braided her daughter's hair while her mind circled a truth it couldn't yet speak aloud.

She walked the children to school with the usual care —

pausing at puddles, adjusting collars, giving the smallest girl a kiss that lingered longer than it should have.

None of them asked why.

And when the blue gate closed behind them, she stood a moment longer than necessary,

as though waiting for someone to tell her she didn't have to do what came next.

But no voice came. Only the memory of Dr. Eric —

his soft smile, his maddening way of never giving answers,

only opening the doors behind questions.

So she turned.

And walked back the way she came.

Toward the villa.

It wasn't just unusual, what she was about to do.

It was wrong.

By every measure she had been raised with, every law of land and spirit,

it was haram.

Not just in the religious sense —

but in the sense of trespass, shame, scandal.

To enter the home of a man, alone, uninvited?

It was the sort of thing women were whispered about for decades.

The kind of act that turned a name into a warning.

She knew all of this.

And still — her feet did not stop.

Because something deeper had been given.

Not permission by paper or by voice —

but a sacred kind. The kind that comes from the unseen places.

From qalb.

From God.

So she walked toward the villa, wrapped in a silence that felt like both sin and sanctuary.

There was no gate.

No guard.

No chain to break.

Only a door — plain, wooden, painted once in green, now half-faded by the sun.

It wasn't locked.

It didn't even creak when it opened —

just sighed, like it had been holding its breath since yesterday.

And she stepped in.

Not boldly.

Not guiltily.

Just completely.

The air inside was cooler than expected.

Not empty —

not even quite still —

but reverent.

And it surprised her.

She had imagined dust.

Decay.

A smell of loneliness thick in the walls.

But instead, she felt… received.

As if the house had known she would come.

Books leaned in quiet arguments against the walls.

Scrolls curled like sleeping cats on a low table.

A violin, untouched but well-cared for, rested near an open window.

The scent of ink lingered — old ink, not fresh — like memory had been written here over and over,

and still wasn't finished.

She looked down the hallway.

There he was.

The sailor.

Not in bed, but in a chair, half-lost in sleep.

One hand resting on his lap.

His chest rising slow, the way grief teaches a body to breathe.

She didn't dare step closer.

Didn't speak.

But something passed between them even in sleep —

a kind of awareness that was not waking,

but not ignorance either.

She stood in his presence and felt the weight of something ancient.

Not because of who he was,

but because of what he had allowed himself to become.

Not a man.

Not a myth.

But a silence that had stopped resisting its own depth.

And yet, somehow —

in the midst of all that sacred stillness —

she felt more welcome than she ever had in any home.

Not because the space invited her.

But because, for the first time, she didn't need an invitation.

She stepped further in, slowly, like her breath might bruise something.

The room was… quiet, yes —

but not empty.

Not forgotten.

It was a space thick with the gravity of thought.

Every surface carried intention.

And dust.

Not the heavy, grey neglect of abandonment —

but the fine, golden kind that settles like memory,

as if even time had been asked to sit still here.

The desk was wide.

Wooden.

Worn in the way only time and truth can wear a thing.

A candle stub rested in a saucer of wax.

Beside it: a small knife, used for trimming quills.

And a bowl — ceramic, chipped, still holding the curl of orange peel.

There were books stacked in deliberate disorder,

some upright, some open, others with delicate slips of linen holding their place.

Notebooks with cracked leather spines.

Scrolls, half-unrolled, their parchment darkened by breath and oil and age.

She looked around, broom in hand —

and paused.

How do you begin to clean a room that feels like scripture?

Where dust itself seems to be part of the story?

She had cleaned homes before.

Washed floors, scrubbed walls, aired out shame.

But this —

this was a sanctuary.

Not because it was tidy.

But because it had been lived in by a soul who wrote instead of wept.

And then her eyes fell to the desk again.

They weren't journals.

Not diaries.

Not letters, at least not to anyone still living.

But writing.

Page after page, laid out with no concern for secrecy.

The ink was faded at the edges, but alive in the centre.

The hand — elegant, foreign, spiralled with strokes of a forgotten alphabet.

It wasn't Arabic.

Nor French.

Nor anything she had seen since—

She blinked.

Leaned closer.

Ancient Greek.

She knew it.

Not fluently.

Not publicly.

But enough.

Her fingertips hovered over the edge of the parchment, and something stirred in her chest.

A name, buried in longing.

Baba.

Her father had taught her.

Not just stories, not just prayers —

but language.

Dangerous language.

In a village that warned girls not to read too much,

he had taught her to decipher ancient riddles by candlelight.

They would sit on the rooftop, under stars so clear they felt like calligraphy,

and he would draw alphabets in the dust between them.

"These are the bones of the old gods," he would say,

"Learn to hear them sing."

And she had.

Quietly.

Hungrily.

With a devotion that terrified her mother and delighted her father.

He had risked everything.

Because he saw her mind —

sharp, luminous, uncontainable.

And for a little while, before the whispers came, before the imam visited,

before her mother's eyes went grey with fear —

he let her fly.

And now, standing here in a stranger's house,

in the stillness of a forbidden act,

her eyes scanned the letters like old friends returned from war.

She did not touch them.

Not yet.

Just stood there,

feeling the ache of recognition,

and the sting of a father's voice long gone.

This was no ordinary man, this sailor.

And this was no ordinary dust.

It was the kind that needed not to be swept away —

but understood.

She didn't reach for the paper at first.

She reached for the chair.

His chair.

It was not grand.

Not carved or cushioned like something meant to impress.

But it held.

And the moment she sat, it felt like she had sat in him.

In the echo of his thoughts.

In the curve of his spine.

In the quiet ache he left behind every time he rose from this place.
It wasn't theft.
It wasn't trespass.
It was… inheritance.
By accident or by fate.
She looked at the pages before her — scattered but intentional,
as if they had been placed not to be found,
but to be waited for.
She picked up the first page and turned it over —
not like a thief, but like a curious young girl, that only she knew she still was.
And she read.

One page became two.
Then four.
Then she stopped keeping count.
Each morning, after dropping the children at school,
she returned to the villa.
Always entering without knocking.
Always sitting in the same chair.
And always beginning again —
wherever the last line had left her heart hanging.

At first, she read with caution.
Like handling delicate silk soaked in rain.
But soon, the caution gave way to curiosity.
Then to captivation.
Then to something even deeper —
something that had no name,
even in her language.
She was learning from him.
Not just facts —
though there were plenty of those.

Stories, languages, histories wrapped in prose so elegant she sometimes forgot to breathe.

But more than that, she learned him.

The rhythm of his doubt.

The shape of his sorrow.

The way he used metaphor as both shield and offering.

Some days the writing was like fire —

furious, wild, devouring.

Other days it was like a lullaby left on a windowsill for someone who never came home.

She became besotted —

not with the man, exactly.

Not with the sailor who still rarely stirred when she entered.

But with his words.

They unfolded her.

Exposed rooms inside her she didn't know had doors.

Sometimes, she laughed aloud.

Sometimes, she wept — quietly, wiping her face on the hem of her scarf, as if the tears might leave stains on the pages.

And other times, she simply sat there,

long after she'd finished reading,

holding the paper like a relic,

her lips barely moving around his words —

as if reciting them aloud might summon him.

But she never spoke to him.

Not yet.

Not even when their paths crossed —

briefly, once or twice, when he emerged for figs or firewood.

They nodded.

Nothing more.

Because something deeper than conversation was already happening.

She didn't know what to call it.

Not love, not in the way her people meant.

Not Ishq, not yet —

but something close.

A prelude to it.

She was under a spell.

A spell she couldn't name.

And every day, she sat in that chair,

touched the pages he had once touched,

and read the man

before she ever spoke to him.

He wrote.

And he wrote.

Each night, as the rest of the world folded itself into sleep,

he unfolded.

At the desk.

Candle burning low.

Pen dancing across the page like it had been waiting all day for this hour of solitude.

He didn't write for her.

He didn't know she was reading.

But something in him seemed to know someone might, one day.

And that was enough.

Each word was a surrender.

Each line, a breath.

And every night, just before dawn —

he stopped.

Not from exhaustion.

But completion.

The kind of stopping that happens when the soul finally exhales.

He would leave the page where it lay.

Ink still drying.

Thoughts still warm from the fire of his mind.

And he would sleep.

She arrived as the sun rose.

Not like a guest.

Not like a thief.

But like habit — the sacred kind.

She let herself in.

She stepped softly.

She brewed tea, never touching his.

And she went to the desk.

Always the desk.

And there it would be —

a new page.

Waiting for her.

Written in the dark, but glowing in the light.

She read.

As if it were prayer.

Not rushed. Not casual.

But line by line,

as if each word had weight and wings.

And every morning, something in her shifted.

She never left a trace.

Never moved the papers from where he left them.

But sometimes, when the writing faltered —

when the sentences curved too sharply, or the ink blotted with emotion —

she would whisper a line aloud.

Just once.

Just to the room.

As if returning it to the air might help him find his way again.

And this morning was no different.

He had written deep into the night.

The candle now a pool of wax.
The pen resting like a soldier after battle.
And she came.
She sat.
She breathed.
And she read.
And in the quiet of that villa,
in the sacred exchange of silence and ink,
two people who had never spoken
had already begun to know each other more deeply than most ever do.

She did not mean to read aloud.
Not at first.
It began one morning with a line too beautiful to keep inside.
A sentence so sharply true it cut her breath in half.
“A soul does not survive by hiding. It survives by unfolding.”
She had whispered it.
Just once.
Into the stillness of the room.
To no one.
To everything.
And the silence… shifted.
Not broken.
Not disturbed.
But changed —
as if the room itself had inhaled.

So, she began to do it more often.
Not every day.
Not in performance.
But when the words asked to be spoken,
she spoke them.

Softly.

Sacredly.

With the cadence of someone holding a secret that wanted to sing.

He never stirred.

Not with movement, not with voice.

But in his sleep, something in him leaned closer.

He didn't dream clearly —

not of her, not of words —

but of the feeling of being… held.

As if the night had stopped being a void,

and become a vessel.

And in the hours between ink and rest,

his mind, unguarded, began to recognize a rhythm he hadn't written alone.

And something began to change.

Not in his hands —

they still held the pen with the same tired grace.

Not in his words —

they still wandered, wounded and bright.

But in the space between the sentences.

He started leaving pauses.

Room.

As if waiting for someone's voice.

Not because he knew she was reading them —

but because some part of him felt it.

And when he woke, hours later, he never remembered dreams,

but he did rise with the sense that he had been understood.

He didn't know she was there.

Not fully.

Not consciously.

But he knew — the way a bird knows the wind,

or a stone knows the weight of silence.

Something had shifted.

His creation was no longer alone.

And that made him write more.

Write better.

Not for approval.

Not for admiration.

But for connection.

Because somewhere in the house,

the words he bled onto paper were finding a home.

A voice.

A soul.

And he felt it now — not like a thought,

but like a pulse beneath the floorboards.

The way the ink flowed more easily.

The way the silence around him had shifted shape.

It was no longer emptiness.

It was presence.

And presence changes everything.

So that night, after the candle had guttered low and the figs outside had gone soft on the branch,

he did something he hadn't done before.

He didn't write an entry.

Not a parable. Not a reflection.

Not even a veiled question disguised in metaphor.

He wrote a truth.

A page, set apart from the rest.

Clean.

Still.

And he wrote:

I know you're here.

I know you're reading me.

I don’t know who or what you are,

but I think I love you.

He didn’t reread it.

Not because he was afraid of what he’d written —

but because he knew if he did,

he might write more.

He might unseal what he’d kept locked for nearly a year.

The thing he still didn’t dare speak aloud, even in ink:

That if he hadn’t stopped on the way back from Kashmir —

hadn’t made that choice, taken that detour,

paused just long enough to be too late —

Oscar might still be alive.

That was the thought that haunted him now.

The shape of his nights.

The reason he didn't drink before, but drank more now – as he never had before, didn’t laugh, didn’t answer letters.

It wasn’t just grief anymore.

It was responsibility.

And the deeper he sank into it,

the more clearly he saw the lines between his delay and his friend’s grave.

So he didn’t reread it.

He folded it once.

Gently.

Exactly.

As if closing a wound.

Then he left it on the desk —

not as an offering,

but as the first step into a darkness he knew he had to walk alone.

The candle had gone out.

The page sat on the desk, folded once.

And somewhere just beyond the skin of the world —

in a space where breath is thought and thought is smoke —

he watched.

The Djinn.

Not of fire.

Not of wrath.

But of pattern.

Of thread.

He had been with the girl since before memory —

long before Marrakesh, before the schoolyard, before the prayers whispered over figs.

And he had watched the sailor, too —

silent as the ink that stained his hands.

He did not interfere.

He did not need to.

Because the rhythm of love, when it is real, needs only the faintest nudge —

a breath here,

a hesitation there,

a delay of exactly twenty-four hours that will never be understood until the final moment.

He had not caused Oscar's death.

That sorrow belonged to the sailor alone.

But he had allowed it.

Because love does not come clean.

It arrives wounded,

or not at all.

And now — in the house that held them both, one by ink and one by silence —

the Djinn moved.

Not visibly.

Not even consciously.

But in the small things:

A breeze that left the door ajar.

A fig placed where fingers would find it.

A dream that echoed the words just written.

He did not push.

He pulled — gently, deliberately, as one would draw silk through a ring.

Because love, in its highest form, is not collision.

It is alignment.

He stood at the window.

As he often did.

The cracked green shutters open just wide enough to let the river remind him that time was still moving — even if he wasn't.

The water had no memory,

but he did.

And some days, like this one,

the river's silence felt cruel.

Because for him, every ripple,

every curve of light across the current,

was a mirror.

And every mirror showed him Paris.

It was never far.

Not really.

He had made the crossing,

left the city behind,

buried his past beneath languages and fig trees and endless ink.

But it followed.

It followed him in the sound of shoes on stone.

In the shape of a folded coat.

In the weight of late afternoon light when the sky went gold and grey at once.

It followed him in the way the paper curled when the ink dried too fast.

In the pause before he dipped the pen again.

It followed him in the chair where he sat each morning,

waiting for nothing —

but writing as if everything still needed to be said.

And today,

as he watched the river move without regret,

he felt it again.

That pull.

That undertow.

Not memory.

Not quite.

Something deeper.

The moment before the wound reopens.

And suddenly — without warning —

he was there again.

He blinked.

The river was still there.

Still moving.

Still uncaring.

But he was no longer watching it.

Not really.

He was standing in a room filled with pages —

filled with words he had written to outrun that moment.

But it was still there.

Folded into him.

Like the page he had left on the desk last night.

Folded once.

Neat.

Unread.

At least — he hoped it had been read.

And in that moment —

between the window and the desk,

between the river and the past —

he realised:

He had never left Paris.

Not really.

And maybe —

if the girl with the black scarf had read his words,

and understood the weight they carried —

then maybe, for the first time,

he would not have to carry it alone.

It was November 1900 and he hadn't been to Paris in over a decade.

But that morning —

as the train hissed into Gare de Lyon and the fog lifted like a stage curtain —

he felt young again.

Not foolish.

Not naïve.

Just… Excited...

He stepped off the train with a small bag and a full heart.

Oscar was here.

In Paris.

Alive, though fading.

And waiting — perhaps — for him.

He hadn't planned to delay.

The moment the letter arrived — scrawled, misspelled, unmistakably Wilde —

he had packed and begun the journey home.

Back from Kashmir.

Back from meditation, exile, silence.

But in Ankara, just a few days before the crossing, he had made a choice.

A small one.

A single letter to send.

A friend to thank.

One more night to sleep, to reflect, to rehearse what he would say when he saw Oscar again.

He told himself it wouldn't matter.

One day.

What harm could one day bring?

But Paris was not kind to those who believed in timing.

He walked through the city like a man approaching a miracle.

Down the rue des Beaux-Arts,

across the cobbled stones slick with morning rain,

a soft wind trailing perfume and chimney smoke through the alleys.

He carried a pear in one hand.

Bought it at a stall — not because he needed it, but because Oscar would've made a joke about it.

Something indecent and clever.

He rehearsed the greeting.

"You haven't changed a bit, Oscar — except that you're now entirely French and somewhat translucent."

He laughed aloud.

His own joke.

Ridiculous.

He felt happy.

Giddy.

The kind of happiness reserved for people who believe the worst is behind them.

The concierge at the Hôtel d'Alsace didn't look up when he entered.

She was making notes in the register.

A curl of steam rose from her cup of tea.

"Je viens voir Oscar Wilde," he said, careful with the name, as always.

She paused.

Not with surprise.

With that particular stillness reserved for truths too heavy to speak.

"Il est mort, monsieur."

"Hier matin."

He didn't speak.

Didn’t move.

Just turned.

Walked out of the hotel.

Back into the light that had suddenly turned cold.

He wandered, without destination,

down toward the Seine,

past flower carts and café chairs being stacked for the day.

He reached the Pont Neuf and stood at the centre.

Opened his hand.

The pear dropped into the river.

Soft, useless.

Gone.

He watched it disappear and didn’t blink.

He did not leave Paris.

He escaped it.

He didn’t attend the funeral.

Didn’t speak to anyone.

Didn’t write back to the friends who had begged him to come.

Because what could he say?

“I was on my way.”

“I stopped to rest.”

“I thought I had time.”

He walked the streets until the soles of his boots cracked.

Until the rain came down not in sheets but in something closer to absolution.

But nothing was forgiven.

Not by God.

Not by Oscar.

Not by himself.

He left the pear in the Seine.

He left his name in a hotel registry he never signed.

And he boarded the next train south with no ticket, no plan, and no intention of ever returning.

The trains blurred.

The days blurred.

France became Spain became Morocco,

and by the time he reached the red edge of Marrakesh,

he was no longer running —

he was dissolving.

There was a villa.

White walls.

Cracked shutters.

A view of a river that had no memory and no destination.

He paid a man in silence.

Took the key.

Locked the gate that didn't exist.

And stayed.

Why Here?

Because no one knew him here.

Because the sun scorched thought.

Because in Marrakesh, guilt became sweat and ink and not much else.

And because the river never asked him who he was mourning.

He unpacked nothing.

Hung no paintings.

Left every letter unwritten.

And he wrote.

Not to forget.

But to remember, with precision, every second he had waited too long.

Every step that should have been taken sooner.

Every moment in Paris he had spent rehearsing instead of arriving.

And now — in the stillness of that villa,

with the scent of figs and fire in the air —

the words had found a reader.

And with her came a quiet horror:

That someone else might know what he had done.

What he hadn’t done.

And worse still —

that they might forgive him.

…

To be continued …