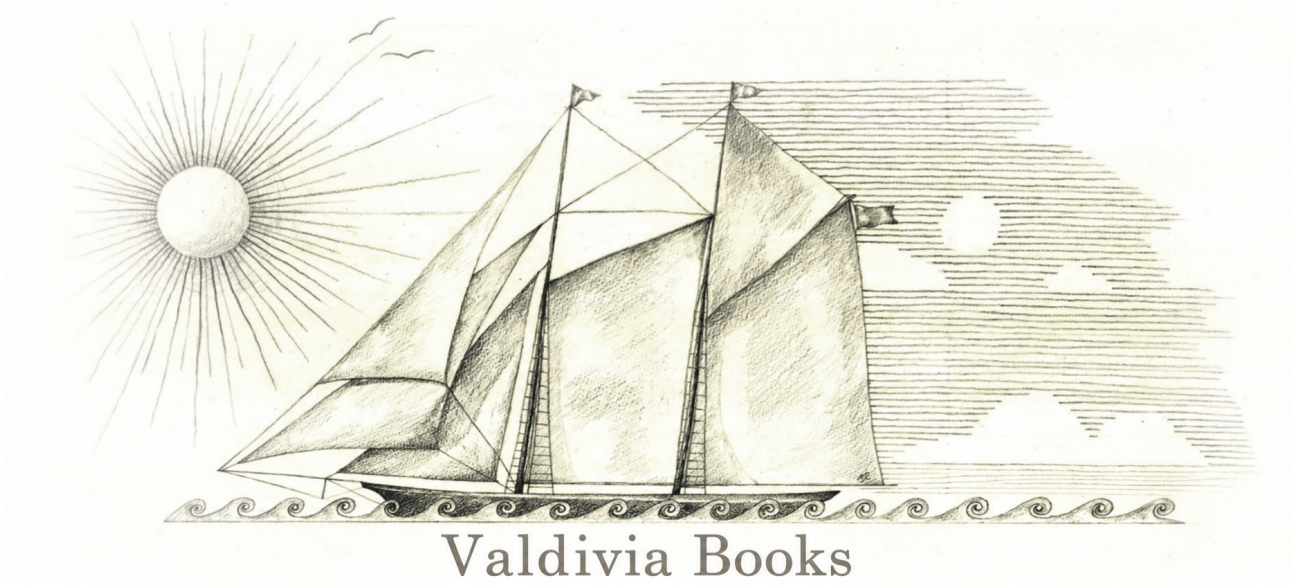


Sanctuary of Echoes

Travellers' Edition

Reading Sample — Chapter One

The Mountain Cracked

by

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This sample presents the prose.
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Sanctuary of Echoes – Chapter One

The Mountain Cracked

The Vale - c. 1000 CE

Ishq (Longing)

"The minute I heard my first love story,

I started looking for you, not knowing how blind that was.

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere.

They're in each other all along."

- Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī

"In which something is lost, something is found, and something is whispered between — and you, dear Reader, carry the echo of something ancient and sacred."

"It all began when a mountain cracked…"

The Vale was quiet that day, as if holding its breath.

Snowmelt streamed through the grasses in a silver ribbon, too cold for fish, too clear for lies.

High above, the mountain wore its snow cap like a crown, the sun slow-dancing around its ancient head.

The village lay below, asleep in the hush of a warm morning.

Bread rose in clay ovens.

Babies murmured against mothers' necks.

But the Vale listened only to the stream.

A boy wandered upward.

No one sent him.

His chores half-done, his satchel forgotten, he had followed a hawk until the hawk became sky and he could no longer see the village roofs.

His feet found the path that others had long stopped walking, and the Vale welcomed him like an old friend who remembers your real name.

She was there already.

She sat beside the stream, not touching it, but near enough that the hem of her dress drank from its chill.

Her scarf slipped from her shoulder without fuss, like it had decided to go ahead of her.

It fluttered once on the rock, then slipped like silk into the stream.

He saw it go.

She didn't.

He ran.

Not the way a boy runs in games, but the way someone runs when a thread is pulled from deep inside his chest, and he knows — without knowing — that some chances are given only once.

He caught it.

It was a simple thing.

Blue, frayed at the edges, soft like something that had been washed many times.

But when he touched it, and her hand reached out to his, something happened.

Their fingers touched.

The air cracked.

Not loudly, not sharply.

A kind of sigh from the earth.

High above, unseen by either of them, a hairline fracture skated across the mountain's face — so fine it might have been a trick of the light, or a ripple of memory too old to name.

In the deep places of the world — older than memory, older than men — there were watchers.

The Djinn.

Born of smokeless fire, fashioned long before Adam walked the gardens, they moved in the corners of seeing and unseeing.

Not evil, not good, not chained to any fate but their own aching choices.

They remembered the first songs the rivers sang.

They remembered when longing was new to the earth.

And when something stirred — when a mountain cracked, even a little — one such Djinn heard. Listened. Remembered.

The boy said nothing.

The girl looked at him, her eyes curious, startled, but not afraid.

"Thank you," she said.

"You dropped it," he replied.

"No," she said softly, "it went."

The scarf rested between them.

They sat.

Spoke.

Nothing important.

Everything important.

She said her favourite story was about a girl who turned into a tree.

He said his favourite was the one where a boy flew too close to the sun.

She asked, "What happens if they meet in the middle?"

He said, "I think the tree catches fire."

They both laughed.

The kind of laugh you don’t forget.

The sun moved.

"I shouldn't be here," she said, looking back the way she'd come.

He nodded.

"I'm getting married," she added.

He looked at the scarf.

"Is he kind?"

She shrugged. "He's rich."

The scarf was dry now.

The stream continued as if it had never paused.

She stood.

He stayed sitting.

"Goodbye," she said, and took the scarf from his hands.

When she left, she did not look back.

The mountain cracked.

Only a little.

Just enough.

And far below the roots of stone and silence, an old Djinn, curled in the dark like smoke in a bottle, whispered,

"So it begins."

“In which something old and smoky remembers what it once was, and stretches just enough to wonder…”

Beneath the earth,

in places where time folds like cloth,

the Djinn stirred.

He had not opened his eyes for a hundred years —

not since the last vow was broken and the last name forgotten.

But now he felt it:

faint as breath on a mirror.

Longing.

The kind that writes its name across generations.

He tasted it in the wind that followed the girl.

He felt it in the boy's stillness —

the way he didn't chase, didn't cry, didn't beg.

Just let her go,

as though he already knew:

some people are meetings,

others are echoes.

Above,

the mountain shuddered again.

Not from thunder.

Not from fire.

But from memory.

A crack ran deeper,

curling through root and ore,

until it touched the place where the Djinn kept his grief sealed in glass.

It trembled.

Not yet shattered.

But close.

The boy sat a while longer.

Long enough for the shadow to shift.

Long enough for the village bell to ring.

Long enough for the silence to grow heavy on his shoulders.

Then he stood.

The path he followed down was not the one he had taken up.

It had changed.

He had changed.

And behind him,

the stream carried a single blue thread,

like a promise undone.

“In which some moments pass, and others stay — burning behind the ribs long after the world has forgotten their shape.”

Far below,

something old remembered the price of such moments,

and stirred.

The Djinn had once been called many things:

spirit,

guardian,

fire-born,

enemy.

But before names,

before bargains,

he had been only one thing —

the Lover.

Not of women.

Not of men.

Not even of stars,

though he once wept for the death of a comet.

No —

he loved the ache itself.

The impossible yearning that pulls even the most earthbound heart toward the sky.

He wandered the deserts when Rizwana walked barefoot on hot stones.

He perched on minarets when poets stitched longing into wine-soaked verses.

And he wept —

openly, brazenly —

when the first human sang a prayer that asked not for things,

but for Union.

But then came men with rules.
Chains disguised as wisdom.
Circles drawn in salt and fear.
And so,
the Djinn was trapped.
Bound not by iron,
but by a thousand whispered "No's."
No, you may not love her.
No, that is not halal.
No, that is not the path.
And so,
he slept.
For centuries.
Until now.

Now something stirred him.
Something warm,
bright,
foolish,
divine.
The boy.
Not because he was holy.
But because he was whole in his longing.
The love that cracked the mountain was not aimed at heaven.
It was aimed at a girl beside a stream.
A girl already promised to another.
A girl he would never touch again.
It was hopeless.
And so,
it was perfect.

The Djinn shifted in the dark.
His form had no body yet,
but smoke curled in the shape of a sigh.
"Fools," he murmured.
"They always find the truth before the wise do."
Another crack echoed through the mountain.
The Djinn felt the walls inside himself splinter.

He had always believed that to love God meant turning away from people.
That the divine was pure,
and humans muddy.
That to seek the Beloved,
one must rise above the world.
Detach.
Disappear.
But now...
Now he remembered:
Who gave them the heart that aches?
Who designed the ache?
Maybe to Love her was to love God.
Maybe Ishq was not a ladder out of the world,
but a door into it.

The mountain cracked,
just a little.
And deep below,
the Djinn stirred.

He had been sleeping for centuries,
curled around a memory that would not let him go.
Not a face —

those change every time.
But the feeling.
The unbearable ache.
The knowing.
The longing that has no name.
Now again,
it called to him.

He rose slowly,
stretching through root and stone,
brushing past coal seams and rivers sleeping in the dark.
He was not a man.
Not anymore.
He had been once — many times.
But now he was a presence.
A witness.
A whisper waiting to be heard.

Above,
the boy stood where the girl had gone.
He did not know her name.
He did not know why his chest ached.
But he knew this:
something had changed.
The sun had moved.
The stream still flowed,
but it no longer sang.
The scarf was no longer in his hand,
and yet he could still feel its silk.
He whispered a prayer he did not know he knew.
And the Djinn listened.

He was old, this one.
Older than the valley.
Older than the mountains.
Older than the first word for Love.
He had watched kingdoms rise and fall like breath.
He had seen lovers turn to ghosts,
then back into lovers again.
And always,
the same ache.

It was not just longing for a woman.
It was longing for the Divine.
And that is the trick of it all.
Because He —
the One —
had made humans capable of love.
Not the safe kind.
Not the clean kind.
But the holy,
reckless,
dangerous kind.
The kind that breaks your bones
and rebuilds you in flame.
Even for sailors.
Even for drunkards.
Even for those everyone else calls unclean.
Especially for them.

The Djinn knew this:
that True Pure Love is not always between a man and a woman.
Sometimes,
it is between a Soul and its Maker.

Sometimes,

it hides in a look,

in a hand that catches a scarf,

in a bench in a park,

in a story told too late.

And sometimes —

it’s both.

“In which the village dresses itself for joy, a girl learns how to vanish in plain sight, and only silence tells the truth.”

Morning broke with the smell of cardamom and woodsmoke.

In the village below the mountain, the world was already awake.

Chickens fled beneath painted carts, children ran barefoot, and the air trembled with excitement.

The wedding was today.

Women moved like colour itself—shawls of crimson, marigold, and peacock green trailing behind them, hennaed hands lifting copper pots and rice baskets with the ease of breath.

The ground near the well had become a battlefield of laughter and whispers.

At the heart of it all was the bride’s house.

It buzzed like a disturbed hive.

Her mother wept for the fourth time that morning—not from sadness, but from sheer joy and exhaustion.

Each time she cried, she dabbed her eyes and declared,

"It is a blessing to have a daughter like mine,"

before yelling at someone for misplacing the almond milk.

Her sisters sat in a corner, shielding their faces with their scarves, watching everything with sharp eyes and smothered giggles.

Every time a neighbour’s son passed by carrying a bag of grain or a stack of firewood, they exchanged glances that spoke volumes.

Their laughter was a language older than marriage itself.

"Do you think he’ll cry when she walks out?" one whispered.

"Men don’t cry," said another.

"He will. He looks like a boy who burns too easy."

And they giggled again, their hands fluttering like birds behind their mouths.

In the courtyard, uncles argued over where to place the musicians.

One wanted them beneath the mulberry tree.

Another insisted the sound would be lost to the mountain wind.

A third just drank tea and muttered,

"Put them where the goats won't eat the instruments."

Neighbours came bearing gifts—dates wrapped in palm leaves, swatches of silk, little jars of saffron and rosewater.

Some came just to peek. To see the bride.

To comment on her skin, her silence, her beauty, her fate.

The bride's father stood a little apart.

Always a quiet man—not meek, not uncertain, just tuned to a slower, deeper frequency.

Where others shouted to be heard, he listened.

And when he spoke, it was like spring water—rare, but clear.

This morning, he watched his wife whirl through the courtyard, arms full of instructions and worry.

She was magnificent in her own way—loud, proud, fiery as the coals she stoked for breakfast.

Her bangles clattered like wind chimes as she blessed a nephew in the same breath she scolded him.

He loved her, still.

Loved her as the moon loves the tide—knowing she would pull, and he would follow.

But today, he could not rise with her.

Because something in him was heavy.

His daughter.

He had seen her that morning, wrapped in her wedding shawl, eyes downcast, lips neither smiling nor frowning.

Just still.

There is a kind of stillness that feels holy, like prayer.

But this was not that.

This was the stillness of a stream just before the monsoon.

He wondered—though he dared not ask—if she had already fallen in love with someone else.

If the boy from the stream had left behind a thread, invisible but unbreakable, tied between their hands.

And if so, what then?

He turned the thought over in his mind slowly, like prayer beads.

Was it better to be safe, respected, and a little empty?

Or wild and uncertain and full?

He looked again at his wife, laughing now, her arm around a cousin she hadn't seen in years.

He loved her fierceness, her unashamed hunger for life.

But his daughter—his daughter had that same fire in her bones.

And he feared they were about to marry it out of her.

He closed his eyes, let the wind run through his fingers like her hair when she was small.

He did not have answers.

Only silence.

And the ache of loving too much and saying too little.

“In which a man dresses himself as a groom, and does not notice the wound already waiting beneath the wedding shawl.”

While her house buzzed with music and colour,

another house, across the valley, filled itself with noise of a different kind.

The groom's side of the mountain echoed with laughter, music, and the clink of cups too early in the day.

He sat shirtless on a low wooden bench, being oiled like a prized horse.

A servant worked fragrant sandalwood paste into his chest while another polished his shoes—shoes that had never stepped into mud.

His turban was being prepared with more care than most men gave to their children.

He smirked at his reflection in a brass plate, tilted just right in the hands of yet another attendant.

"Not bad," he said aloud, flexing slightly.

"No wonder they all say Yes!"

The others chuckled obligingly.

He wasn’t a bad man.

Just one of those men who had never been asked to be good.

Born into gold, surrounded by mirrors that only showed him one version of himself—desirable, important, chosen.

Women liked him.

Or they liked what he stood for:

money, status, a name, the kind of confidence that has never needed to ask permission to exist.

And he was confident.

His uncles called it charisma.

His mother called it charm.

His friends called it luck.

Only the old cook, who had watched him grow up with one hand always reaching for more, called it what it was—

emptiness dressed in fine clothes.

He had agreed to this marriage because it made sense.

A good match.

A beautiful girl from a respectable family.

Quiet, they said.

Obedient, they promised.

And beautiful, always beautiful.

But he hadn't really looked at her.

Not really.

Just enough to know she would look good on his arm, like the ring he had already picked out to match her complexion.

"She'll learn," he said when someone mentioned she didn't laugh at his jokes.

"They all do."

Now, as the drums picked up outside and a cousin brought in his embroidered Qaba,

he stood and stretched like a lion in the sun.

Today, he would be the centre of the world.

The groom.

The man.

He didn't notice the mountain above the village.

Didn't notice the boy sitting alone among the pines.

Didn't notice the silence beginning to gather like rainclouds around the heart of the girl he would soon call his wife.

"In which the cook stops pretending, a boy learns that love is not ownership, and truth arrives wrapped in quiet…"

He stood by the clay stove, turning a pot with the slow patience of someone who had seen empires rise and fall, lovers promise and lie, and children grow into strangers.

The kitchen was alive with sound — sizzling, shouting, clanging — yet none of it touched him. He moved like stillness wrapped in skin. His hands were brown and worn, and he hummed an old melody, older than the village itself. Older than the mountains.

One of the younger cousins ran through the kitchen with a ladle in his hand, pretending it was a sword.

"Careful," the cook said without raising his eyes. "Not every battle is worth fighting."

The child blinked, confused, then scampered out, already forgetting the words. But the cook didn't forget. He never forgot.

Outside, they called the groom charming. Inside, the cook stirred the pot and said to no one in particular, "Charm is the mask worn by those too afraid to be seen."

The other servants just nodded, used to his odd little phrases. They liked him, this cook. He had been there as long as any of them could remember. Some said he came from the north, others said from across the salt desert. No one knew. No one asked.

And no one noticed that he never aged.

The boy sat on the mountainside, alone but not lonely. He watched the lights bloom below him — the shimmer of torches, the spill of laughter. A wedding, distant and close.

He felt it. The girl's sorrow, quiet as a prayer. And he felt something else, too. A whisper of presence behind him.

He turned.

The cook stood there. But here, on the mountain, he looked… different. Taller. Brighter. Or maybe it was just the moonlight dancing differently around him.

"You knew this would happen," the boy said, not with anger. Just truth.

"I knew something would," the cook replied. His voice no longer raspy and low, but clear as crystal water. "I've seen many stories begin with a stream and a touch of hands."

The boy looked back at the village.

"She's marrying someone who can't see her."

"She's marrying someone who sees only himself," the cook agreed.

Silence.

"You're not really a cook, are you?" the boy asked.

The figure shrugged. “I’ve been many things. A shepherd. A beggar. A woman with a walking stick. A tree, once, for almost a century.

One day I will be described as ‘a Toker & a Smoker’!”

The Djinn chuckled.

The boy blinked.

“How?”

“Magic?” the cook offered. “Mysticism? Perhaps. Or maybe it’s just that people only question what disturbs them.

And I… I never disturb.”

He smiled, gently. A smile not of mischief, but of knowing.

“Are you a Djinn?”

The cook’s eyes twinkled. “Do you believe in Djinn?”

The boy didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

The cook sat beside him on the rock. For a moment, they just watched the wedding together. The music drifted up like incense. The sound of joy with a crack in it.

“You know,” the cook said softly, “we’re not forbidden from loving. We just love differently. Outside of time. Beyond form.”

The boy said nothing, but something inside him loosened. He felt it. The beginning of the next thing.

The room was overflowing.

Sisters darted like swallows, weaving ribbons into her hair, fussing over every fold of fabric. Aunties clucked and flapped, fluttering hands and hen-peck voices, adjusting, readjusting, arguing about gold placement, flower choice, whether the bride should eat now or after the prayer. The air was thick with rosewater and turmeric and tension.

Outside the room, the sound of drums and shouting boys cracked through the air. Somewhere, someone was laughing too loudly. A goat bleated as if in protest. Her mother cried in hiccupped sighs, fluttering in and out like a broken-winged bird, half-proud, half-bereft.

But inside her mind — it was still.

The girl sat like a painted doll while the village spun around her. Her hands were cold. Her lips, untouched by colour. Her eyes, fixed on the far wall where a tapestry of blue and gold danced in the wind.

Only it wasn’t the tapestry she saw.

She was by the stream again. Water glinting in sunlight. A boy with eyes like shade. His hand in hers. That moment that had lasted forever, and yet not long enough.

A coin of gold was tied into her braid. Another into the hem of her dress. She felt them like weights — not treasures. The dress felt like costume. The jewels like shackles.

She could feel her pulse in her neck, steady but low. Like a drum underwater.

“You are the moon tonight,” one of her sisters whispered, adjusting her veil. “The groom will faint.”

She smiled or thought she did. Her mouth moved. Her heart did not.

In her chest, something had turned soft and hollow. Not sadness — not yet — but something like the ghost of it. A feeling that the world around her had kept moving, while she’d quietly stepped off the track.

Someone brought her a mirror. She looked.

She was beautiful.

But not her.

It was like looking into the face of a stranger made in her image. A girl trapped in silk, bound in duty, lit like a lantern for the benefit of others.

She thought of the boy on the mountain. She wondered if he was watching.

She wondered if he remembered the way her fingers curled against his.

And she wondered — more than anything — what would happen if she stood up, tore the gold from her hair, and ran.

No one would notice. Not straight away.

The room was too full. The noise too loud. The celebration too consuming.

She could vanish.

She blinked.

The mirror was taken away. The veil was dropped.

And somewhere in the village square, the drums beat louder, as if they could drown out doubt.

But doubt had already crept in. Quiet as a Djinn. Unseen. Uninvited. Unmoving.

And it was waiting.

“She’s down there,” he said, not even pointing. He didn’t need to.

The Djinn nodded. “Yes.”

“I thought I’d feel angrier,” the boy admitted. “Or jealous. Or something loud. But it’s not like that. It’s... quieter. Sadder. Like something’s gone hollow in me.”

“She is not yours,” the Djinn said, gently.

“I know,” the boy replied. “That’s what makes it worse. I never even had her to lose. And yet I feel like I lost something more than I’ve ever had.”

A long pause followed, filled only with the distant sound of drums, of laughter, of the unknowing world carrying on.

Then the Djinn asked, softly, “Do you want to know how she feels right now?”

The boy didn’t answer with words, but his face said everything. The longing. The ache. The not-knowing.

“She’s smiling,” the Djinn said. “Doing what she’s told. Surrounded by women and song. But in her head, there’s a quiet place. And in that quiet place, you are sitting. You are watching her. You are not touching her. But you’re there. You’re part of her now.”

The boy swallowed, and it took effort. “That makes it worse.”

“No,” the Djinn said. “That makes it real.”

“Will it ever stop?” the boy asked. “This... pain?”

“No,” the Djinn answered, without cruelty. “But it will change. It will become the thread that pulls you forward. The hollow will fill with echoes, and those echoes will become songs. And one day, you may even sing them.”

The boy looked at him. “Are you a man or a spirit?”

The Djinn smiled. “Yes.”

And they sat together, watching the lights below. The fire, the music, the marriage. Two figures — one young and full of questions, one ancient and full of silence. And both holding, in their own way, the same girl. The same yearning. The same impossible, beautiful ache.

“In which nothing is undone, and yet everything changes, and two souls meet in the space between words without breaking the world.”

Somewhere between the bracelets clinking and the aunties laughing, between the saffron sweets and her mother’s watchful eyes, something inside her snapped like the thread of a necklace — quiet, sudden, and unfixable.

She didn’t say anything. She just walked out. Calmly, almost gracefully, through the side door, leaving behind the scent of jasmine and rosewater, into the dark of the alleyway behind the house.

The old stones were cool under her feet. The sky, an ink-washed canvas, pressed down gently.

She leaned against the wall, placed her hand on her chest. Her heart was wild — unruly, like it remembered something her mind was trying to forget.

Then —

A voice.

Not his. The other one. The old one. The not-man.

“Would you like to speak with him?”

She gasped. Looked up. No one was there, and yet — she felt the question. It brushed the air like a hand across silk.

And somewhere, high above the village, the boy turned sharply to the Djinn beside him.

“Would you like to speak with her?”

The boy didn’t hesitate.

“More than anything.”

And with that, he was no longer on the hill. He was not walking. He was simply there, at the mouth of the alley, caught in the flickering shadow of a half-burned lantern.

And she saw him.

Her breath caught. Her eyes widened. For a moment, neither spoke.

It was too much.

Too much colour. Too much emotion. Too much... Truth.

She took a step back, unsure if she was angry or terrified or overjoyed.

“You—” she began, but the rest of the sentence shattered.

“I didn’t come,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I was just... there. And then I wasn’t. I don’t know how—”

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said, but her voice was softer than her words.

“I know.”

They stood, two halves of something unfinished, wrapped in the scent of dust and crushed flowers.

“I can’t do this,” she said, but she didn’t leave.

“I know,” he said again. “But I had to see you. Just once. Just... before.”

She looked at him. Really looked.

And suddenly, all the colours of the world came back.

The rust red of the bricks. The silver thread of moonlight. The gold dust clinging to her veil. His eyes, dark and lit from within, like coals smouldering under ash.

Around them, the world held its breath.

“You touched my hand,” she whispered. “By the stream.”

He nodded.

“It’s like... nothing has ever felt real after that.”

“It was real,” he said. “Everything after — that’s what feels like a dream.”

They were standing so close now that if either moved a fraction, they would touch.

But they didn’t.

Because to touch would be to break the spell.

Because the yearning was sacred.

Because this love — their love — was not for this world.

Not for this lifetime.

And somewhere, not watching, but deeply knowing, the Djinn bowed his head and disappeared into the shadows, leaving the boy and the girl to speak all the things they could not say.

The sky had turned to ash and rose by the time the vows were spoken. The girl — now a bride — was dressed in the light of fire, gold coins sewn into the hem of her veil, her lips still touched by the ghost of a question that would never be answered.

The village sang. The drums echoed from cliff to cliff. Laughter clattered down the stone alleys like broken pottery, loud and hollow. Children darted past with wildflowers and sticky fingers. Somewhere, a goat broke loose and was chased by five men and an uncle who had too much 'celebrating'.

She sat still.

And if she smiled, it was not for joy. It was for memory.

Near the cook's tent, a boy — not the boy — was pestering a servant. One of those half-seen girls who never spoke unless spoken to. He pulled her sleeve, tugged her braid, called her a name that made the other children giggle.

She turned. Slowly.

With the smallest gesture — a single finger pressed to her lips — she silenced him.

And he fled, wide-eyed, stumbling into his own breath.

No servant had ever done that before. No child had ever listened like that.

But none noticed her again. She simply returned to carrying water, her feet bare on the earth. Her shadow stretched longer than her frame.

"In which the girl marries, the boy watches, the unseen steps back, and a thread is tied tighter than any vow could hold."

On the ridge, the boy — the real boy — stood alone above it all. A single figure framed by the wind, watching the celebration below like a distant storm. He felt the girl's heart more clearly than he felt his own. And he knew she was searching for the sky between every step.

Once, during the ceremony, her head had tilted slightly. Not enough for anyone to see.

Just enough for her to glance toward the mountain.

Just once.

And it was enough.

From the high ridge, where the mountain met the cloud-line, the boy watched the village below become a blur of noise and lanterns. It felt far away. It was far away. But every beat of the drums struck something hollow in his chest.

He had no language for the ache.

He only knew she had turned her head, once, during the vows. Not to him — she couldn't have seen him, not truly — but in that one stolen glance uphill, she told him she knew he was there.

And she was not alone.

Not entirely.

He stayed after the lights dimmed. He stayed after the laughter faded. He stayed long after he should have gone.

He stayed until there was nothing left of her but the sound of her veil brushing the floor of her new life.

The Djinn watched him.

Not from above. Not from below. But from just beside, as though he'd always been there. As though he'd never left.

He said nothing, because there was nothing to say.

But in his heart — if Djinn could be said to have such things — he whispered, "He is learning to burn."

And that was enough.

For now.

The bride sat alone, just before dawn, her new husband snoring through his third dream of triumph.

Her eyes were open. Her breath was shallow. Her skin still smelled of jasmine, saffron, and the scent of choice carved into her skin.

She thought of the boy, though she had promised not to.

She thought of the fig tree.

She thought of what it means to live a life chosen by others.

And she didn't cry. Not out loud. The tears would come later, when no one would hear them and think them anything but joy.

She closed her eyes and whispered a name she would never say again.

He knew exactly which window was hers.

And that she hadn't once come to it.

But she was there.

He knew she was there.

Somewhere behind silk veils and ceremony,

she was breathing just as he was —

not for joy, not for duty —

but for something else.

Something neither of them could name.

A breeze shifted behind him.

The Djinn stood in silence, watching the boy with an unreadable stillness.

Not interfering. Not guiding.

Just… observing.

A quiet shape, older than the winds,

curious still

at how a human heart could long for another

as though the stars themselves depended on it.

Inside the house, the bride had not moved in some time.

Voices fluttered behind her like birds in a cage —

aunties with incense, cousins with bangles, a mother with tearful precision.

She was the eye of the storm, untouched.

Her hands folded,

her smile perfect,

her thoughts far away from the man waiting beyond the curtain.

She thought instead of dust on the path to the ridge.

Of laughter behind her in the shade of fig trees.

Of a boy who never once asked her to smile,

but saw her smile anyway.

And in that,

she felt the ache of the Divine.

Not as thunder.

As stillness.

At the far edge of the courtyard, beneath the hush of fig and olive,

an old servant knelt by the well.

She was rinsing cloths slowly, gently,

as though she had all the time the world had lost.

Earlier, a boy had tried to startle her with noise and nonsense.

She'd raised a single finger.

And he had vanished like a ghost.

No one thought much of it.

She was old. Old people had ways.

Now, she looked up, just once, toward the shuttered room where the bride waited.

She said nothing.

But in the silence that pressed like earth against bone,

she knew.

Not with the knowing of women,

nor with the knowing of servants,

but with a knowing

older than either.

And then she turned,

and disappeared into the folds of the evening,

like someone who had always been there —

and might never have been…