

The Bayk's Zar

The jinn had claimed yet another victim and, once again, it was a woman. Sheikha Halima made the announcement and like a plume of desert sand, the news gusted from one mouth to another, doorstep to doorstep and balcony to balcony. A name slipped through the passing words, whispered, as if an afterthought. Zayna Al-Balushi. The fairly new wife of the town mayor Balut Bayk.

Such a kind, God-fearing woman, her neighbors had said. Too beautiful and young to be possessed by a master of the jinn, or perhaps, their words speculated, those enviable traits were her downfall.

But such things happened in Al Arish more often than not, especially to women and girls, and the typically disadvantaged. It was only a matter of time before a new victim was claimed and declared by the Sheikha. Halima, the designated traditional healer and exorcist, was privy to these unfortunate revelations, and as such, spreading news and drawing crowds was how she earned her living. She wasn't a witch, but a Sheikha, anointed by the religious authorities for her gifts of seeing into the worlds beyond. Dabbling in witchcraft was a serious and fatal offense, but she was perched on a precipice between two realms, seeing into both at once, or so she liked to claim. Who could prove her wrong?

A day earlier, she and her associate Buthayna, had convened with Zayna, the wife of Balut Bayk, and determined that the young madam was indeed afflicted with a most powerful Sayed of the Jinn, that of the red variety. Red being the color of fury and wrath, and unsurprisingly, of envy. When she delivered this diagnosis to Balut Bayk, he seemed quite shocked that a woman of his wife's stature – an extension of his own – would ever be possessed

by the unseen powers that afflicted the poor, ugly, and unfortunate. But even the Bayk was wise enough not to question God's will nor his creatures, especially the ones that lurked unseen.

“There is no God but Allah,” he said, shaking his head. “How can you be certain, Sheikha?” His tone was doubtful. His eyes were on Buthayna and her silent presence.

The jinn were elusive creatures of God that materialized in this world often through humans, she explained. Everyone knew that, but only she could detect their presence from the subtleties of changed behaviors; abnormal actions, disease, and, in the worst cases, outright insanity. That was why Balut Bayk allowed her in his home, she figured, near his wife. He allowed her to propagate the news too, to entrench his name as a leader of the faithful and an upholder of traditions.

Some accused her of disliking women by exacerbating a harmful tradition that portrayed her sex as unstable, and it stung. She learned about this accusation not from the mouths of the provincial women who came to her for treatment, but from outsiders who approached her abode with calculated reluctance, as if they were committing a crime; women who slipped away from their mundane lives and burdensome husbands to get a glimpse into their futures, demanding respite from the angry men who lorded over them. Often they came requesting non-traditional treatments to incurable afflictions that happened as a result of living in large cities. She always offered them a solution if only to lift their hopes.

Buthayna affirmed this to her again and again, reminding her that she wasn't harming those women, but offering hope as a service, God willing. The men of Al Arish tolerated her presence out of a sense of religious conformity, but the women understood her ulterior motives and welcomed her and Buthayna as sisters.

The morning of the Zar ceremony, after making her rounds to deliver the news, Halima took to the unpaved roads, passing on the largest home in town, that of mayor Balut. The man, like his house, like his oak tree namesake, was fierce, sturdy, and larger than life. As such were the attributes God graced him with, no man nor woman dared deny, he was nominated to lead by vote of the tribal council. That privilege was concentered with a dash of his ancestral pedigree that saw his father and grandfather in similar positions, both professionally and physically. But Balut Bayk was also a brute, too quick to anger, and this was what the Sheikha was hoping to avoid as she headed toward his home to prepare his wife for the Zar.

Along the way, as she crossed paths with other women in the street, balancing water urns atop their heads or babes upon their hips, she greeted them and they greeted her, then she reminded them of the ceremony that would take place at night. It was by invitation only and only women could attend.

“At the diwan, of course,” she added, pointing in the general direction of the provincial conference building that sat on the outskirts of town. The women smiled and nodded, acknowledging the invitation. “Don’t forget to bring whatever foods you enjoy...and drinks.” She lingered on those last words.

The healer troupe of musicians and songstresses were also women of various skin tones and talents. Buthayna, for example, was a Nubian songstress who escaped her home after her father tried to marry her off to a man forty years her senior. Buthayna sang about her past often, the good and the bad, and her voice was a cool breeze on a burning summer day. Diversification made Halima’s ensemble more credible in the eyes of the simple peasants who knew nothing of the histories and talents of the worlds beyond Al Arish.

Around her, the narrow yellow passages ran between small huts of limestone and sunbaked sand bricks. In the distance were the fields of wheat and barley and the bank of the Red Sea. The town always smelled of salt and dirt, as did its inhabitants.

The women didn't have to ask for specifics on time, the Zar always happened after the isha prayer when night was darkest.

A high wall of white-painted bricks enclosed Balut Bayk's estate, guarded by a simple doorman dressed in an off-white garb and white turban. He balanced a rifle expertly in his hands. Talib was a loyal man who owed his life to the Bayk, making him an efficient doorman. He was also wieldy with his rifle, thus doubling as a bodyguard.

"Good morning, Talib," she said, approaching him, looking into his wide, smiling eyes. He was handsome, but modest. The women he managed to seduce said he was blessed in more ways than one, that a rather heftier weapon dangled beneath his garb, and this was what she thought of whenever she encountered him.

He bent his head in reverence. "Your morning be better, Sheikha. Madam Zayna is waiting for you in the foyer." He stepped away from the gate, allowing her to pass into the garden. The Bayk's garden was a slice of heaven, brimming with all sorts of herbal life and trees he'd imported from nearby Syria and Lebanon. The Bayk was a man not only of physical fortune, but material, a fortune he often wielded against the people of his hometown as a whip.

The little servant girl met her at the door to guide her to the foyer, but she brushed her off kindly as she was familiar with its location. Once there, she found Sitt Zayna in a fetal position, her eyes facing the wall as if it were her only friend. Trails of tears were carved into her face, black with the kohl she wore in hopes of fending off the eye of envy.

Always the eye catches its target, she thought. The poor girl had no chance of escaping it.

And how could she? Even from a distance, even under duress, she was breathtakingly beautiful. Like the trees in his garden, the Bayk had acquired her from a trip to Beirut where his trade caravans of incense and pottery were shipped off to Europe. The women gossiped that Zayna had fallen for Balut Bayk, but that didn't seem true to her. Women had little to no choice in matters of love and life.

“Peace and blessings, Sitt Zayna,” she said to announce her arrival, emphasizing the honorific. If that didn't do the trick to grab the woman's attention, her golden bracelets did, rattling with every slight motion. The servant girl stumbled into the foyer and found her footing again. She acknowledged the Sheikha and her mistress and was off to where she came from.

Madam Zayna al-Balushi, who could have passed as her daughter, had she chosen to marry and have children, wiped tears with the sleeves of her immaculate dress. The Sheikha found herself studying its vibrant colors and embroidered shapes, wanting it for herself. It was impossible not to envy.

The signs of possession made no evidence on Zayna's face or her body, except where the skin sagged in immense sorrow. A deep purple bruise blemished her right undereye and Zayna covered it with a shaky hand before letting her hand fall again. The young woman was on her feet, lanky, thin, and as pretty as a jasmine stalk, moving as if broken. Halima approached her in the customary way, leaning in to kiss her on each cheek, but was surprised when the girl took her in an embrace.

“I want the jinn out of me,” she stuttered in between contained sobs. “He's making me miserable.”

The Sheikha caressed Zayna's chestnut hair, calming her with short, but helpful invocations of God's name. She stared at the purple bruise, sliding her fingers across it. Zayna winced. *This was no deed of the Jinn.*

"He wants me to get better, too," Zayna said, looking into the house, as if its entirety was the manifestation of Balut Bayk.

She nodded. "By tonight, the jinn will be gone."

Zayna pulled away from her. "You think I'll be able to get pregnant then?"

"Inshallah," she vowed, willing the ceremony would help revive the girl's spirits overall. "Let's go get you cleaned and ready."

Balut Bayk was nowhere to be seen in the palace, possibly out on his daily errands to bolster his image as a competent mayor. In Balut Bayk's world, he was the master of all sciences; the enforcer of law and its practitioner. He arrived as soon as she prepared Zayna for a bath, draped from head to toe in a fine dress of white and gold thread.

He grinned when he saw the Sheikha, but it was an expression of mere acknowledgment. His acknowledging look, however, was angled downward, as if she existed at the tip of his nose. "You're costing me lots of money, Sheikha. Is this really how you go about curing your patients? Or is this an excuse to rob me blind to feed your little troupe birds?" She pictured Buthayna as a small, black bird, pecking at seeds from her palms.

"This is the will of Allah, Bayk. If you don't like the barter, take it up with him." She held back a smile because he didn't deserve the effort she would have to put into her facial muscles. She wouldn't be his lackey. Before her, Sitt Zayna cowered and collapsed in on herself,

gazing at the ground, shivering beneath her touch as her husband tried to take a peak of her semi nakedness.

“Istaghfurullah,” he whispered, beseeching God’s forgiveness, as though her words were sacrilege. “But you claim the devils have spoken to you asking for gold and wine and cigarettes and money. Forgive me, Sheikha, but this sounds not like Allah nor his demands.”

She turned to him then, and feeling like she could be his mother, or perhaps his first wife, found a strange satisfaction in his eyes and said, “When you pay your alms to Allah, is that not you offering money in His name?”

He said nothing, but the triumphant light in his eyes diminished. They were the eyes of her father, dark and small. Eyes that looked down at her and her mother before he beat them. Eyes of the devil.

“It better do the trick, then. Otherwise, you can keep Zayna. What use is she to me if she can’t bear me sons? Maybe she can dance for you and your colored gypsies.”

“Inshallah, I will do my best, Bayk,” she told him, biting back a further retort, and watched him leave with relief. Zayna’s tension melted away and her shuddering stilled.

She smiled warmly at the girl. “It seems the Jinn distances himself from you the farther you are from your husband,” prompting a reluctant smile from Zayna.

“He wants sons. I miscarried three since I married him.” Zayna’s eyes flitted everywhere and nowhere. Her voice quavered. “It’s not his fault that I’m cursed.”

She helped Zayna undress, revealing soft and pearly skin. She was a porcelain doll, untouched by humans. “The eye of envy, my dear, is very powerful. Whoever cast it against you meant more malice. But praise be to Allah I made it here in time.”

She wasn't surprised by the marks on her body, the purple bruises ripe and on the verge of opening, like the one beneath her eye. They were wounds of blunt force.

The rosewater infused bath was lukewarm when she started the ritual of wiping her down from head to toe, reciting the holy verses that ought to enflame the spirit of the red jinn, but instead, they prompted tears from the fragile Zayna.

"I'm so tired. I don't feel happy about life anymore. I used to be so vivacious and hungry for fun," Zayna explained, smoothing her skin as if to erase the dread and misfortune from it. "Ever since I moved to this backwater, I've been wanting to die." Sheikha Halima waited for the young woman to point out the reason behind her dismal living, but Zayna seemed adamant to keep mum. Secrets went unspoken among the women of Al Arish, hidden behind good intentions and happy demeanors. The secrets were locked doors and the women were its protectors and key bearers, but none dared to use the keys to unlock those doors. That was why Sheikha Halima congregated them for the Zar; to unleash without restrictions.

Halima was not a woman who let fear cripple her. She dared stand up to her father when he knocked her mother to the ground and beat her, or when he pulled his belt off to whip it against her flesh. The leather left burn marks that reminded her of why she fought for the voiceless. She once believed that jinn and devils sometimes compelled humans to hurt one another. That true pain and evil were not a part of the pure human spirit. But with time, she wondered if man and jinn were one of the same.

"You have what many envy, my dear. Remember God's name whenever you can, especially in public," she told her. They were not new words, but ones she'd repeated a hundred times before to hundreds of other women, battered and unfortunate alike. "But we'll have a cure tonight for you. Tonight will be a night for you to release. Your jinn craves excitement and gold.

He's a greedy one," she teased. It was an assessment aimed against Balut Bayk's fortune, towards the unfortunate.

Zayna turned her eyes upward to meet Halima's eyes and there seemed in them a glimmer of hope and traces of youthful obtuseness. "You think it'll work?"

The gold offerings, she calculated, would be enough to keep every member of her troupe fed and clothed for months. But she wouldn't keep it all, of course. The larger portion would remain in Zayna's keep, not to be shared with Balut Bayk even if he coerced her, which he would. But she stipulated these conditions yesterday when she sat to discuss the rules of the Zar with him, inflicting him with as much monetary pains as she could muster, claiming they were the demands of the jinn. And if he chose to disobey those demands, he himself would be the target of the Jinn folk. In the end, Balut Bayk relented.

"Inshallah," she told Zayna, and the girl deflated.

Before Zayna slipped into a red dress – meant to reflect her afflictions with child-bearing – Halima anointed her with musk-infused olive-oil. She then placed the multiple pounds of gold Zayna would be adorned with – meant to provide the master of the jinn with the proper vestiges of wealth – in a ceremonial box of mother-of-pearl. Where the jinn would hypothetically extract the metaphysical value of the treasure, she and Zayna, and the rest of her troupe would reap its hard and proper worth.

Balut Bayk arrived in his monstrous, hulkish majesty to assess Zayna's transformation with visible bitterness. He seemed eager to relieve his wife of her riches, her dress, and all semblance of happiness. Halima focused on his eyes and the raging spirits within them.

"Your master jinn sounds like one greedy son of a bitch." He wagged an accusatory finger at Halima. Perhaps he saw through her plan, she thought, and she didn't care. She wanted

him to pay. Zayna's skin shuddered under her touch. "If this doesn't work, I expect a full refund, Sheikha."

She nodded with professional ease and confidence. "And you shall have it, Bayk."

The women gathered at the diwan for the Zar. It was a squat, dilapidated edifice of yellowed stone, one of a few stone buildings in town, owing its importance to matters of masculine conference and politics. But that night, Sheikha Halima and her troupe of women swept the floor with palm leaf brooms to make room for the gathering, dancing women. Her musicians, mainly drummers, situated themselves on the floor mattresses that surrounded the central square. The humidity inside the room intensified with the squeezing, breathing women, prompting many to fashion makeshift fans from chopped palm leaves. Buthayna, the songstress, who would recite the healing songs, sat elevated above the drummers so that everyone could hear.

As night came to be and the muezzin called for Isha prayer, the women established themselves into the small room, filling it with chit chat and laughter. Halima thought of keys turning in locks. Gas lanterns hung above and around the windows to provide lighting. The overwhelming smell of sweat and amber and flowery incense saturated the air.

Halima ushered Zayna into the center of the room. She gave Buthayna a nod to signal they were ready.

"Tonight, we gather to the aid of one of our beloved sisters, Madam Zayna al-Balushi, who is near and dear to our hearts." The women nodded and anxiously readjusted their veils. Many removed them completely, seeing that they were among the company of their own sex and

used them to swat flies. “She has been afflicted, you might have learned, with a red jinn who is preventing her from bearing children.”

The women murmured their discontent, a few gasped.

Zayna’s eyes were on the ground, on her pale feet, as if her jinn, to whom she was enslaved, was glancing back at her. She wiggled her toes, for Halima had explained that those were the portals from which the Jinn escaped.

The women transitioned into a flurry of incantations until it sounded like an unintelligible hum. Bees of a hive, working together as one.

Istaghfirullah. Audhubillah. Bismillah. La Illaha Illa Allah.

God’s name linked their prayers, the tool with which they would exorcise the devil from their friend and sister, Zayna.

“We’re gathered tonight to support her through her trials and see her to the other side. We will give this master of jinn what he seeks of riches and forbidden pleasantries, but we will equally drum him out of our sister’s body and out of our holy town.”

The women nodded and clapped and prayed. Some were tearful, others stern and anticipatory.

Buthayna smiled at her and she smiled back, giving the final signal to begin the ritual.

The steady percussion laid the foundation to Buthayna’s song, one she’d recited countless times and forged out of her past abuse. She’d infused the song with lamentations of man, masking them as prejudices of the hidden realm of the jinn. That was why she loved Buthayna like a sister, because they shared a past of grueling treatment in the shadows of a father or brother or uncle or grandfather.

Halima danced and lifted Zayna to her feet. She circled the timid young woman while flailing her arms and flipping her hair to the beat, nudging her to dance along. Simultaneously, she adorned Zayna's body with gold; necklaces heavy with ancient Ottoman coins, bracelets of green emeralds and blue lapis, a ring of pearls, a crown of ruby yaqut. Zayna's receptive body eased into the rhythm, bringing a smile to her lips. She looked free, and young, and vivacious.

"You're a strong woman, remember that" she whispered to Zayna with every golden piece she added to her finger or neck or wrist or feet. "You can do anything." She showered her with words of affirmation, hoping they would open Zayna's eyes to her own power and autonomy. "You give birth to a man. You can shape a man in your image. You can destroy him too. The gold I bestow upon you tonight is yours to keep and yours to do with as you please."

Zayna nodded with every droplet of wisdom, her smile widening.

Around them, the women enjoyed the vices with which they were forbidden at home and beyond the walls of the diwan. They sipped wine and barley beer. They inhaled smoke through hookah tubes and passed them down like they would trays of food. They ate more than they ought. They did everything without restriction, without control. They laughed. They live.

Buthayna sang her laments and the drummers beat their drums until the universe outside of the diwan melted away into the night. Zayna's reluctant smiles turned to laughter. Where her muscles tensed and shuddered before, now they were deliberate.

All the while, Halima urged the troupe to beat the drums harder, faster.

And they danced throughout the night.

"I feel he is gone," said Zayna, whose body rang with the beating of golden pieces against one another. "Sheikha Halima, he is gone. He is gone."

Suddenly, the doors to the diwan thrashed open, dimming the flames of the lanterns, and the music stumbled to a halt. The women turned, once laughing, now stone-faced, to see the hulking figure of Balut Bayk silhouetted against the night.

His eyes were bloodshot. His face, contorted into a beastly expression. Halima had seen this expression before, in her father. Buthayna clamped up too, possibly seeing the reflections of her past ghosts.

“Men aren’t allowed here tonight,” Halima told him, moving in his direction. A number of women surrounded her. Yet, the Bayk seemed physically away from the door, as if it had come off by mere force. And when he glided toward her slowly, but surely, she saw that his feet weren’t touching the ground.

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