

The Embroideress

January 1947

The Jerusalem sun bounced off Aziza Yunani's farewell thobe as she stepped onto the train platform, bringing its light patterns and navy-blue accents to life. The orange blossoms that adorned the Qamar bloomed through the dress and shuddered in the trapped morning air, gasping. The birds locked within the flower cage and facing away from one another, departing, looked ready to break free. But it was the navy-blue hints that made her think of home the most. Blue was the color of sadness and the color of the sea outside her window.

Once on the platform, she looked around for Omar, and not seeing him made her panic. Suddenly the world was too large, too loud. She glanced toward the city of Jerusalem and its craggy fortress walls of white limestone turning yellow in the sun, gray in the shade. At the center of that mighty wall, a massive dome of blackened lead captured her vision. It looked like the head of a beast, resting above the stone walls which unfurled around it, wings poised to beat, the city about to take flight. There was something cold about that charcoal hue, as if the building had died decades ago or was still dying. In her mind, two thoughts occurred simultaneously. First, Jerusalem wasn't what she'd pictured from the stories of the travelers who'd come to visit them in Yaffa, not like the palace she'd wished for when her prospects were still naively optimistic, but it was just as massive. The longer she stared at those walls, the larger they grew, expanding endlessly up and around, snaking through the old buildings and the new, past the noisy streets crowded with vendors and the occasional car that teetered precariously leaving behind trails of black smoke. The second thought she'd had was that the city was different than

her coastal hometown, where she'd left her teary-eyed parents, three sisters and brother. It was louder, somehow, as though the people here had no control over their voices. And the accents, the many tongues...they were so guttural and foreign and angry. Coastal people were demure and quiet, like the sea, raging only when prodded and stirred by calmless winds.

In Yaffa, her mother had said, where the land was exposed to the endless sea, anger was expelled seaward, never to come back. In the landlocked city of Jerusalem, on the other hand, air rolled down the mountains and swirled around the city's labyrinthine streets, circulating all the displeasures and diseases of man, and when it tried to escape, it couldn't. So it remained trapped within the mountains, inside the lungs of its people.

She glanced around at the people exiting the train, all of them seemingly in a hurry, moving in a determined direction, toward purpose. Jerusalem was, after all, a city at the heart of the world. And she was searching for Omar, her husband as of yesterday, with her heart in her throat because she felt so small and insignificant among the crowd. She breathed and forced herself to calm, thinking he couldn't leave her there. Perhaps she'd lost him in the bustle of bodies buzzing like bees in every direction. Her heart steadied when she found him lugging two large trunks stuffed with her clothes and personal belongings. The one that contained her embroidery was colored a dull yellow to avoid the suspicions of pickpockets --none of whom she'd encountered on the train-- but they were more likely to be around now. The other luggage, the one she ought to have worried about because it contained her jewelry, was painted a salacious red, inviting any and all eyes.

He smiled when he caught her gaze, looking a bit shabby from the trip, for he'd attempted to sleep but couldn't manage it over the churning of the train as it trundled over the French-built rails. The duration of that trip, each passing second, she spent learning about Omar, quickly

warming to his proximity and touch. A marriage blooming through smiles and nods and little talk. She smiled back, fighting against the temptation to panic at the overwhelming unknowns that lay before her, concealed within those walls. She wanted to embroider. To wrap her fingers around her needle, the only constant in her everchanging life, feel its tiny cold against her skin before sinking it into the canvas. She exhaled this new city and her new stranger husband, spinning them into string, weaving them into the fabric of her mind until they became a reality, and her memory of her family pained her less and less. Omar was her husband. Her husband. Hers. Jerusalem was her home. Her home. Home.

When he drew close, she still left a foot between them. His cologne, which he wore profusely, smelled of wood and water. Omar had told her there were shops of perfume in the Atareen neighborhood that were centuries old. It made sense, seeing how his scent lingered in the Jerusalem air too, mingling with the smog, rot, and endless cacophony.

Omar gazed outward, at the unending wall and nodded. "What do you think of my home?"

She cleared her throat and said in her most excited tone, "It's lovely. Quite big too." The rush of it all, and the magnitude pulsed through her veins.

Omar puffed his chest out. "It's my home. I know we don't have seas, and spacious white houses, but we have something more valuable."

She waited for him to say something else. He seemed to wait for her to lean in. When she didn't, he did. They were in this dance since they boarded the train, Omar trying to impress her with a guessing game and Aziza waiting to be impressed.

"History. Thousands of years of history. Civilizations started and fell here. Kings too. Religions were born within these walls. And they still stand strong." He inhaled the glory of the

sight and exhaled it, as if it was all new to him too.

Promptly, as they stood there, their words nascent and warm, a group of nuns draped in long black dresses and Rabbis in black suits hurriedly passed them. Even a few British soldiers, imported to maintain law and order after the fall of the Ottoman empire, looked her up not withholding eastern decorum.

There was so much blackness in that city.

She wasn't allowed to wear a black thobe, her mother insisted, but navy blue was necessary for farewells and temporary sadnesses.

"It's such a large city. So many people."

"You'll get used to it soon."

As soon as her lungs flooded with the poisonous air too, she thought.

She reached out for her trunk, to help ease his burden, for she'd lugged many embroidered dresses and undergarments and shoes among other heavy equipment, but he stopped her with an almost offended glance.

"You won't." A gentle smile crossed his lips. "You should be relaxed. You're my bride and guest."

He was being chivalrous and she appreciated the gesture, but she was taught to help even when it wasn't requested.

"Are you sure? They're quite heavy." She really was tired, but she wanted to make good first impressions; burdensome girls lived burdensome lives.

"What kind of a man would I be if I let you do the dragging? What would people say?" He pointed to the pedestrians, Jews and gentiles, as if they even knew who he was. "I would carry these over my head if I had to."

Then he started toward the Damascus gate. As the walls grew and the dome shrunk behind its might, she spotted the observation slits near the very top where she imagined faces poking through, looking back at her, measuring her every step.

"How many people live here?" she said, her voice echoing through the dark, vaulted gate.

"About a million," Omar said, sweat breaking from his forehead. "Give or take. We have people from all over the world here. Civilians, pilgrims, tourists."

There was so much space in that gate to fit a thousand people. Street vendors pushing carts poured through, screaming prices at the top of their lungs. And the space echoed.

5 kilos for ten fils. 5 kilos for ten.

For a long moment, they were swallowed by the gate, the cacophony, and Aziza made out the sound of her heels clicking against the smooth tiles, counting down to the major reveal. The wooden doors were propped along their hinges, the brown wood, curdled and breaking apart was a slab from the past.

An older gentleman coming through lifted his red tarboush cap and bowed at Omar. Omar bowed back with a grin of recognition.

"Mabrook, mabrook, my boy." The man congratulated Omar and shot a hospitable smile at Aziza.

"Thank you, uncle." Omar replied. But neither one of them stopped to chat. The man carried on with his excursion in the same calm stride, hands knit behind his back.

"You know that man?"

Omar made a sound between a chuckle and a scoff and puffed his chest like a rooster. "You don't call your elders aunt and uncle in Yaffa? No, I don't know him. But your husband is a big deal in this city, you know," he said, pausing at the end of the gate to catch his breath. He

smiled tepidly, waving off her advances to help. Aziza's eyes fixated ahead, at the half oval emerging through the shadows of the gate.

"Is that so?" She knew he was a who's who in town, but there was no harm in teasing the man or testing his limits. A day after Omar's proposal, her baba approached her for her opinion, highlighting Omar's status as if that would be enough to sway her. Not his looks, nor his attitude, nor his love for her. But she knew better than to overlook a man's reputation. A good man with a good name and fortune spelled a good future. Then there was the prospect of moving to another city and the chance for an adventure and starting a new life.

Although her father seemed convinced of Omar's proposal, he looked as if he'd aged within minutes. As the second oldest daughter, she'd been the closest to his heart. Or at least that's what he confessed to her in secret that day.

"He's in line to become the key bearer of the city's holy churches."

It didn't mean anything to her at first, not until she recognized the key pattern her mother had sewn into her wedding thobe.

Upon walking through the Damascus gate to the other side, they'd stepped into another world. Where civilization and all its vices ruled the one outside, tranquility was the dominion of this one. An air of peace lingered, smelling of incense, nine spices, and wood. Conversations dimmed and vendors, loitering outside their stone-walled shops, drinking tea and coffee, spoke in near whispers as they passed, nodding at her husband, deference twinkling in their gazes.

Maybe it was the sanctity of the city itself that muzzled the people. Maybe it was the high walls preventing the noise from leaking through, smearing everything into discord. Or maybe it was God. Whatever it was, Aziza welcomed it. The galleries and streets, labyrinths

folding in on each other, reminded her of her embroidery. Of the squares within squares, and circles within circles that she stitched into fabric, leading her eye forward, and her mind everywhere.

"You could get lost in these streets if you aren't careful," Omar warned, turning them down a street with unwavering determination. It was as if he'd been led to his home by instinct. Although the names of the streets were painted with such care into tiles and plastered into the walls, Omar never regarded them. She wondered if she would ever be allowed to navigate the city on her own if such a need rose. "Of course, you'll let me know when and where you're going and we can see about how to get you there."

She couldn't tell then if Omar was attempting to be nice and playful, or if he was serious. Surely, she would have to leave her home to buy cotton or dye, or canvas or food ingredients. Maybe he would allow her even to travel back to Yaffa to visit her family. She waited for him to initiate the dance move, to lean in and explain himself, but his focus was forward. Overhead, a vaulted stone roof covered parts of the alleys. Where there were no roofs, nets and mesh wires covered the rest, strewn with loose paper, tree leaves, branches, and all sorts of human debris. A toy horse with a fractured leg smiled down at her. Through that mesh cage, she made out clear and color-stained windows of the homes perched atop the shops in the souks. Curious heads sometimes poked through those windows at the passersby, and the songs of children and mothers cracked through the relevant quiet. The intermittent sweep, sweep of brooms brushed through the near tranquility, adding a beat to the songs.

The neighborhoods and souks, Omar clarified, varied from street to street, each preserving a tradition since ancient times. The families that occupied those neighborhoods, to her delight, loyally clung to the professions of their ancestors. An example she appreciated and

wished to follow for her own progeny.

"There's Hayy al-'Atareen, the perfumers and incense makers, Hayy al-Lahameen, where all the butcher shops are located. Hayy al-Qataneen where you can buy your clothing." The road went up sometimes and down again. Doors poked through the walls, like entrances to dwarf holes, small but elegant. And every now and then, a bush forced itself through the solid walls. Trees grew through the crags and in small potholes. Mulberry and fig, and olive too.

After a twenty-minute walk --Aziza counted in her head-- they arrived at his home, her home. A gentle flight of stairs to her right climbed to a white-painted door. A tile above the door included Quranic script blessing the residents above the name of her husband. Omar Qanna.

"Finally," Omar said, sighing. He swiped his sleeve across his forehead, raining sweat on the threshold and when he retreated his arm, his sleeve was drenched. "It's like I've been gone for years."

"Is your family here?" she asked, hoping he would say no. She wanted some time to relax before they barraged her with questions and commands. She expected more of the latter. There was still the uncertainty that this new family, and by extension, her own, may not enjoy her cooking and the liberty with which she spiced her foods, or her desserts, or how she liked to squeeze a little lemon into her rosewater syrups, or how she liked to add orange blossom to her tea. Those thoughts buzzed in her head until she shook them silent. They came in the form of his mother and sister-in-law, the vultures she would endure as they swooped around her throughout her days. Omar promised they wouldn't be a nuisance as long as he was around.

As long as she adapted, she would avoid their wrath. The people of the sea were very adaptable.

Omar reached into his hand satchel and pulled out a bundle of something wrapped in

white paper, the oil seeping from the matter turning the paper translucent. She caught its yeasty scent. "We can't allow you to step in without adding your touch to the house," Omar joked and she watched him unwrap the gooey dough inside the wrapper, wondering if he was going to make her eat it, but he didn't. Smiling, he reached out to the jasmine bush clambering down the wall to his home and plucked a stem.

"Care to do the honors?" He said, sticking the fragrant jasmine stem into the dough. Growing through the wall to her new home was another mulberry and she wanted to ask him for a single leaf to add to the dough. Instead, she smiled, almost giggled at his gesture. "Is it necessary?"

"It's tradition. Brings good fortune. Just stick it on the threshold."

She took the fleshy globule of dough, and found it covered in oil. It wouldn't stick. Omar pointed to a spot near the door, a little above her head. "Here." He pantomimed a slam against the spot of stone.

She smacked the amalgam where he pointed and it stuck, only for a moment. Omar rejoiced. "Good luck indeed. I knew you had it in you."

She wished she could've stuck one of her threads in there too.

Because no sooner had they opened the door, then the amalgam plopped to the ground, collecting dust and dirt, and misfortune.

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