

CHAPTER ONE

Mayasin



Month of Separation 23, 1361 A.H. (4 September 1942 A.D.)

‘Mister! Mister!’

Abdullah is walking backwards in front of two English officers, trying to get their attention. Every day, after returning their shoeboxes to Mr Darwish’s store, he and Ghulam go deeper into the city. They go to Alhawtah and try to get as near as they can to the Mayasin Palace Hotel, the grandest hotel in the city, where they try to make a little more money.

‘Mister! Mister! You buy cigarettes?’

He holds the packet out in front of him, but one of the officers responds by smiling, shaking his head, and showing the pack he is keeping in his own pocket. He has a very red head; like most Englishmen, he is not used to the Beledarian sun.

‘American! Good quality! Good price!’ Abdullah says, but the man shakes his head again.

Not taking no for an answer, Abdullah puts the packet back in his tunic and takes out a bottle.

‘Arak?’

The officers speak to each other, but they use many words he doesn’t understand. Even if he had known the words, they would

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still be speaking too fast for him. By the gesture one of the officers makes, and the look on his face, it appears he is explaining to the other what arak is, but Abdullah isn't sure.

'This arak, real good!'

Both men laugh, and the red man asks, 'How much?'

'Ten,' he replies.

The men laugh again. 'One,' the red man counters.

'Eight,' Abdullah says. Had he known the English word for nine he would have said nine. He could use his hands, but then he would have to put the bottle away and during his short time as a street trader, he has learned it is vital that customers are able to keep their eyes on the prize at all moments.

'Two.'

'Seven,' he counters immediately. Experience has also taught him that in the beginning of a negotiation it is best to come with counteroffers quickly. That way you can get your buyer invested before he knows what's happening.

'Two and sixpence.'

This is going too well. They've added a coin worth half a shilling to their offer. He makes a mental note that he has to learn to pronounce the name of the coin himself so that he can use it in future negotiations. If he can add a couple more pennies, he can buy some food for himself and still have enough left to pass on to his mother. It is time for some theatrics.

'I like you! King George, Vera Lynn, very good!' he says. 'I like England, and I like you, so five. Special price for you: five!'

The men look at each other, before the red man responds, 'Three.'

Maybe Abdullah will buy a pastry for himself at Pervaiz's cafe. He can almost taste it. Silently he thanks God and tells himself to remain cool while pretending to be physically hurt. 'Three is too cheap! I lose money, and no food for me!' He pauses a moment

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for effect, then sighs very deeply. 'Because Vera Lynn, four. Only for you. Four!'

'Three and sixpence.'

'You ruin me!' he replies, shaking his head.

Is it wise to repeat his offer? If he takes this, he can buy a pastry, and his mother will never suspect that he did not pass on all the money. But if he makes another half shilling, he can take home real goat meat. What a surprise that will be for his mother! And for his little brother, Samir, who loves goat meat, but never gets it. If Abdullah succeeds, he can make him so happy!

Will these men kill the deal over half a shilling? They are officers in an army that controls half of the world. They do not care about half a shilling more or less. And if they do pull back, it will not be a complete disaster. In less than a week the Month of Burning will start, and although Abdullah hates it when he is not allowed to eat and drink between sunrise and sunset, he vividly remembers how generous everyone was the previous year.

'I have baby sister; she must eat or she dead. Four!' he repeats, his heart racing.

The soldier glances at his colleague, who shrugs and once again speaks words Abdullah does not understand. Then the officer looks back at him and says, 'Okay.'

Abdullah, who has been walking backwards the entire time, stops so abruptly he almost falls over. After receiving the shillings, he hands them the bottle.

'Thank you,' he wants to say, but before the words have left his mouth, the two soldiers are walking again. He falls down to his knees and thanks God instead. His mother is going to be so proud!

He gets up and starts to walk, wondering how he can learn more English words. Trading will be easier if he gains a better

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grasp of the infidels' language. He doesn't just have to learn the half a shilling word; he has to learn all the words.

Submerged in his thoughts, he does not watch where he is going and bumps into a policeman. This is not good news, and the rat immediately grabs his arm.

'You know it's illegal to beg here, right?'

'I wasn't begging, sir. I was selling something.'

'Really?' There is something in the voice of this policeman that Abdullah does not like.

'Yes, sir. I sold two English officers a bottle of arak. If God wills it, go ask them.'

'Why would I, when I know all about lying vagabonds like you?'

'Because they will tell you that I'm not lying,' Abdullah snaps, following it up with a slightly late 'sir.'

Ten yards away from him, his friend Ghulam is slowly making his retreat. The boy catches his eye and shakes his head, indicating that Abdullah should keep his calm, but with the great injustice that seems to be coming his way, that is not easy.

The rat brings his face very close to Abdullah's. Clearly, this man does not mind a little arak himself.

'Maybe you did not lie about that, but how in the name of God did you get a bottle of arak in the first place? Did you steal it?'

'No, sir.'

Abdullah tries to free himself, but his effort is unsuccessful. Instead, the policeman pulls him even closer.

'Admit you stole it!'

'I didn't steal it, sir.'

Clap!

Tears roll down his face. Abdullah doesn't mind the pain; it is his anger and the fear of losing his money that causes him to cry, and he hates the rat even more for it.

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Some of the people who pass by give them a short, inquisitive stare, but nobody intervenes on his behalf or pauses to watch what will happen. In 1361 Mayasin, few people have problems with police officers slapping the boys that swarm the streets. Someone will have to raise the boys, and often it's not going to be their fathers.

'Do you know what happens to thieves?' The rat is now seriously hurting his arm.

'Yes, sir.'

Officially, thieves get their hands chopped off, but in reality that hardly ever happens. Ghulam was once picked up from the street and accused of stealing. They took him to a dark hole and dumped him back on the streets two days later with a scar that would mark him forever. But what worried Abdullah even more than his friend's scar was the fact that after Ghulam was released, he started to tell everyone who would listen that there was no God. Abdullah does not want to become insane like his friend.

'Where did you steal the bottle?'

The rat is now shaking him. Out of the corner of his eye, Abdullah sees Ghulam returning with a stone in his hand. Silently, he thanks God, while he replies, 'I didn't.'

The rat raises his hand again, and at that exact moment Ghulam's stone hits him in the face. The man screams in pain, and his grip loosens.

'Thanks be to God!' Abdullah exclaims as he pulls loose his arm, turns around, and runs.

He has caught the rat by surprise, and for a second the man is in doubt about whom he should follow. When he comes back to his senses, Abdullah hears him shout, 'Stop him!', but he is already a dozen yards away.

If the rat catches him, he will also be punished for the stone Ghulam has thrown; he'll be lucky if all he loses is his hand. He

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runs as fast as he can. He sees a corner and turns, and then goes straight around the next.

‘Stop him! In the name of God, stop him!’

The sound is getting more distant. Another corner and another street. He looks over his shoulder; he’s lost the rat. He slows his pace, and suddenly a man swings an arm around his chest. Abdullah looks up: a new rat.

God, what did I do!? This is not his lucky day, after all.

‘Why are you running, boy?’

‘I was just playing with my friend, sir.’

The policeman gives him an intense stare, and Abdullah knows the man doesn’t believe him. ‘You stole something, didn’t you?’

He shakes his head. ‘No, sir.’

‘Empty your pockets.’

Abdullah sighs and grudgingly does as he is told. Out come the cigarettes, the shillings, and a handful of pennies from his morning’s labour.

‘Where did you get that money?’

‘I shine shoes in the morning, and this afternoon I sold a bottle of arak to an English soldier, sir.’

‘Where did you shine shoes?’

‘The business district, sir.’

The majority of men in Mayasin wear traditional garments, but in the business district, following the example of the English businessmen who visit the city, most self-respecting businessmen have exchanged their long white robes and sandals for dark suits and black leather shoes.

‘And where do you get your gear?’

‘Mr Darwish’s shop, sir. At the edge of Juban and Dhamar.’

‘I know Mr Darwish’s store,’ the rat sneers, apparently offended that Abdullah felt the need to clarify the location. ‘Did you pay taxes on your sale?’

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'I bought the arak with my own money, sir.'

'I understand, but you do know that when you sell something, you have to pay taxes?'

'What do you mean?' Abdullah has never heard about taxes.

Clap!

The second slap in fifteen minutes, yet this time he has no trouble controlling his tears; he had not been focused. 'What do you mean, *sir*?'

'Everyone who makes money in this country pays a little bit of that money to the emir. This money is called *tax*. When you do not pay taxes, you commit a crime. In our situation, you are the merchant and I'm representing the emir, so you pay your taxes to me. If you don't pay your taxes voluntarily, you go to jail. However, considering you didn't know this and that I am a God-fearing man, this time I will let you get away with a small fine.'

Outrageous! Why does the emir get his money? He has not worked for it, and besides, the emir has money enough; one only needs to look at his palace to see how rich he is. Abdullah feels his blood rising again, but if he does not get away soon, paying taxes and a fine will be the least of his troubles. He nods, and as calmly as he can, he replies, 'Thank you, sir.'

The rat takes his arm from Abdullah's shoulder and waves it. 'Your fine is five shillings. Pay me, and we forget all about it.'

Five shillings! Abdullah sighs before realising this is going to be a problem. 'Sir, I do not have five shillings. I have four and some pennies.'

'All right.' The policeman actually manages to sound gracious. 'I am in a good mood today, so I will let you go if you give me three. However, you must swear by the Quran that the next time you sell something and you are on my streets, you will come to find me, and you'll give me one quarter of your revenues. Do you swear it?'

'I swear it, sir.'

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He hands over the shillings and wants to set off again, but there is a new arm on his shoulder. He is too late!

‘Nadir! You’ve caught him! Thanks be to God!’

Abdullah turns his head. The first rat has appeared again, breathing heavily.

‘Rizq,’ says the officer to whom he’s just paid his taxes. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I followed him.’ Rizq is now standing next to them, still panting, and points at Abdullah. ‘He stole a bottle of arak and then he ordered his friend to throw a stone at me. We need to take him to the prison; they will know what to do with him.’

‘This boy is a tax-paying citizen. You accuse him of theft and abusing an officer of the law. Do you have proof?’

‘Look at my face!’ There is a bruise where Ghulam’s rock has hit him.

‘But you just said that he didn’t throw the rock, did you not?’

‘I said he ordered his friend to throw the rock.’

Nadir raises his eyebrows. ‘Can you prove that? Maybe it was just some kid who didn’t like your face and figured he’d brighten it up a bit!’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’

‘I am saying you are as wise as a baboon born without a head; it is written.’

If Abdullah wasn’t scared and angry, he could not have stopped himself from laughing. As it is, he has no problem controlling himself, which, he realises, is probably a good thing.

‘You’re the son of a donkey!’ There is a foul look on Rizq’s face, but it does not intimidate Nadir. On the contrary, Nadir takes a step toward the other rat. They are so close now that their noses almost touch.

‘I would be very careful if I were you,’ Nadir says. ‘You are on my street.’

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Rizq snorts and steps back, taking his hand off Abdullah's shoulder before almost pricking his finger in the boy's eye.

'You are lucky today, piece of filth. God willing, someday soon we will meet again, and that day Nadir won't be here to protect you. I will be looking forward to that!'

Then he laughs, a high sound that makes Abdullah shiver.

'It was God's will that we met today,' Nadir says to Abdullah when Rizq is out of earshot. 'This street is mine, and on my streets you can sell anything you want, if you remember your oath. Forget your oath, and I will personally deliver you to Rizq. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir.' Abdullah bows his head.

'Until the next time then,' Nadir replies, and Abdullah walks away. He has had enough of this day, and while normally he hates being home, right now there is nothing he wants more than to curl up in his blanket against the wall and close his eyes until darkness has come and gone.