

## The Ink of a Feather Pen

Fragrant dukhoon curls rose and slipped through the ornate lattice window into the humid air. Zara sat against the cool stone of the walls in the seating area of her room, overlooking the city of Nuqtah. The markets stretched across the streets as it triumphed above the horizon in the distance. The markets were filled with colourful fabrics and Persian rugs, heaps of fragrant spices, and gleaming jewels and trinkets that sparkled under the evening stars.

Zara's nikkah was tomorrow. Her stomach began to twist at the thought. She gripped the tassels of the satin-lined pillows, but nothing could steady her. The nausea clawed its way up her throat, and before she could stop it, she turned away and retched. The bitter taste clung to her tongue, reminding her of the day Baba had told her that she was to be wedded.

Baba had become a wealthy merchant alongside his childhood friend, Faizel. They built a thriving business in fabrics and textiles, selling carpets and clothing to far-off lands Zara had never heard of. Baba always gifted Zara the finest silks from his collection. But that day, he brought something truly remarkable. It was a deep olive-green abaya that was softer than the petals of a desert rose. It was embroidered with gold patterns that shimmered like the treasures of the sultan's palace. It was then when Baba had told her that she was to marry Faizel's son, Qais.

"I am setting you free." Baba said with slow cadence and a voice crack. His eyes softened with brimming tears. Zara had never seen Baba cry before. She couldn't believe that the man of her life, the beacon of strength, was broken by her mere reluctance. Baba's words weighed down her heart like a camel beneath its burden. Was it really that important that she get married?

Zara let out a forlorn sigh as she looked out her window. Her room was a quiet sanctuary at the top floor of the house. The floors were covered with plush, handwoven carpets and the windows were covered with wooden lattices that shaped the sun rays. In the corner stood a dresser with a pearl-framed mirror and a treasure box brimming with jewellery. But in all its luxuriousness, Zara longed for something less materialistic.

Books.

Only Baba was allowed to keep books. Only Baba's presence allowed Mama and Zara into his office. He used to say that the only book a woman was to read was the Quran. But every Friday, Baba would leave the key to the office with Mama for cleaning. She would wait for him to go to work, clean the room and leave the office unlocked for Zara to snoop around, never failing to lock it before he came home after night prayer.

That was how she had read her very first poem from the book 'Poems of Al-Mutanabbi'. As she opened it to a page, with curiosity metamorphosing, the words lifted her as her heart soared with every line. Whatever curiosity that had first led her there created an insatiable hunger for more.

All Zara wanted to do was ease her heart again. She needed to write. The call to prayer echoed, conquering all other sounds, and Baba briefly left for night prayer. She waited for the bang of the front door before pacing to the office and slightly closing the door behind.

Baba's office was the smallest room of the house. The air was thick with the overpowering scent of Baba's attar that clung to the wooden bookshelves filled with books and manuscripts that lined the walls. A dark wooden table with burgundy seats was placed under a brass lantern that hung from the domed ceiling. Baba's desk was filled with scrolls tied with delicate silk ribbons and parchments with ink splatters from his feather pen. Zara ran her fingers across the leather-bound books stitched with gold threads, eager to serenade herself with its contents. She pocketed one of the ink pots from the table into a fold of her abaya and looked for parchment. Amongst a pile of scrunched up papers and outdated atlases, she saw the title of a story by a familiar name.

Raiz. He was the only person who ever understood her love for words.

Long before Baba locked the office door, Raiz, her paternal uncle, had gifted her stories and atlases. He was a travelling scholar who spoke of far-fetched tales that sounded fictional to Zara. Regardless, she adored his stories and never once questioned their authenticity. She would rather be a fool to believe. It was Raiz who had planted the love of literature in her heart. But it was a love that Baba tried to root out.

Baba had found Raiz and Zara crouched in the musalla, lost in the words of a book Raiz was reading to her. He argued that Raiz was "was filling her head with nonsense" but Raiz always believed that there was no need to cage Zara. But nothing could convince Baba otherwise. In a fit of rage, he tore the pages of the book from its binding and threw them into the fountain. After that, Raiz was gone without a farewell. That was the last time she ever saw her uncle. A ghost of Raiz's long forgotten stories lingered in her mind, and in her heart, the literature she longed for.

Her fingers curled tightly around the torn parchment when she realised that Baba had returned home. But Baba wasn't alone, two unfamiliar voices drifted through the halls. In a moment of panic, Zara hid behind one of the bookshelves crouched next to the trashed manuscripts and scrolls. She pressed herself against the wall and braced herself just as Baba, Faizel and Qais entered the office. Their words were spoken in a dialect she couldn't comprehend. There was only one word she recognized before Baba switched to a language Zara understood.

Dowry.

Faizel handed Baba a bulging sack which sang a chime that usually put a smile on Baba's face. A chime sung by gold coins.

"Tomorrow is an auspicious day" Baba said, patting Qais on the back with a smile which for a second, showed Baba's dimples. Qais nodded, hiding his blushes.

“How did you manage to part this news of marriage to Zara?” Faizel asked, comfortably seating himself.

Before Baba could answer, Mama walked into the office with a silver tray of small glass teacups. She bowed her head and steadily placed the tray on the table. As Mama looked around the room, she spotted Zara’s eyes glowing in the dimly lit room, peaking through the gaps of the books on the shelves. Mama covered her gasp with her veil and swallowed hard. Before she could attempt to come up with an escape plan, Baba ushered Mama out, closing the door before her. Zara grasped her stomach and remained as still as she could.

“She’s a real gem. She understood her father’s wish. I mean, how could she not, with the sincerity pouring from my eyes.” Baba said, gazing into the distance outside the window.

There was a moment of silence before they all burst out into laughter like laughing doves. Zara couldn’t understand why she felt a sharp pain in her chest. Hot tears ran down her cheeks, but she couldn’t make sense of her lungs tightening. When she saw the look on Baba caressing the gold-filled sack, confusion gnawed at her. She thought of the feeling when Baba’s hands caressed her cheeks, but it was only anger that boiled within her. Zara swallowed her screams and watched them humiliate her.

The meeting ended. Baba bid adieu to the guests as they departed. Zara softly exhaled. He waited for the sounds of their footsteps to completely fade before he slouched over his desk.

“The smell of dukhoon lingers in this room.”

Zara froze. She held her breath hoping to disappear along with the dukhoon smell.

Baba’s tone was calm. He didn’t yell. He didn’t scold. He turned towards her with a despondent glare as Zara stepped out of her hiding spot with trembling hands.

“Be seated.” He gestured Zara to the chair where Qais had sat moments before. Baba sat across from her with clasped hands. The silence was as suffocating as the smell of attar gave Zara a subtle headache.

Baba let out a deep and tired sigh. “You eavesdropped on my business, my dealings. You will never understand what truly matters. You disrespected me after all that I do for this family.”

Zara swallowed hard but remained quiet

“Honor is what matters.” Baba continued.

“God gave me a daughter. And with that comes certain duties. Do not forget yours.”

Zara remained still with her pulse hammering against her ribs. She glanced at the teacups, touched with the faint traces of lips.

“Your mother could not bear a son to inherit my name nor my legacy.”

“A daughter is not a disgrace”. Zara blurted as she watched him focus his glare onto her with a tightened jaw. Baba, appalled at her defiance, scoffed.

“A woman can be more.” She contested.

“More? More than a daughter and a wife?”. Zara could hear the rhetoric in Baba’s tone but still decided to answer,

“Yes”.

“You wish to squander the opportunities I give you and forsake your duties for what? A foolish dream? I have gone out of my way to secure your future, this family’s future, for generations to come.”

“But Baba-.”.

Without warning, a sharp crack reverberated through the room as Baba slammed his palms against the table, rattling the teacups between them.

“Zara, you speak of things you do not understand. Happiness is fleeting and yet you would rather chase it than secure your future?”

“I understand enough that you sold me.”

"For the sake of this family's honour!" Baba screamed with a force that could shatter the glass around them.

“I can do anything just as well as a son. I can be your heir, Baba.”

“I would rather *die* than allow such a thing.” He concluded.

“You can leave now.” Baba said coldly as he turned his focus onto the papers in front of him. Zara remained seated as if Baba's vow had hypnotized her. It reminded her of a snake charmer and the way he controlled the King Cobra, turning it into a puppet for amusement. Zara stared blankly, feeling like the cobra. The smell of Baba's musk-attar began to nauseate her. She quickly walked out Baba's office, attempting to leave with some dignity.

The sun rose early. Distant voices of Baba commanding the event coordinators to set up the wedding ceremony echoed from the courtyard. With all that was happening, nothing would wake Zara up. The sound of footsteps grew heavier and louder towards Zara’s room, matching the rhythm of an old song.

Baba sat beside Zara. “I’d like to see your beautiful dimples today.” he said, caressing Zara’s cheeks like a quiet plea. He placed the wedding abaya at the edge of her bed. His footsteps retreated into the hum of the household preparations. Her eyes opened slowly, looking at the abaya. She closed her eyes and willed herself to disappear within the sheets.

Mama sat her before the mirror, combing through the dark strands of her hair with oiled fingers as the dukhoon smoke soaked her hair. Then Mama dipped the stick into the small pot. As the cool powder of kohl traced her waterline, Zara rapidly blinked her lashes like a fluttering, trapped moth. Zara remained silent. She did not protest nor move. She simply sat by her dresser, letting her mother dress her, paint her and mold her into something beautiful, something obedient.

A bride.

Guests entered the riad ululating. The nikkah was nothing but an amber-hued blur to Zara. She moved where she was led, stood where she was placed, and sat where she was told. Only two words cut through the haze.

"I accept."

The feast followed the wedding ceremony, stretching long into the warm night. Long tables housed trays of saffron-spiced rice, roasted meats and sweet and honey-glazed pastries. Laughter and clinks of glasses rang whilst Zara sat still with the weight of her abaya and jewels shackling her down.

She looked to her mother who was setting out on silver platters. It was time she accepted her fate. Zara walked to the table and began scooping out loose leaf tea and fruit bits into each cup. She poured and stirred the hot water, endlessly staring at the tea contents following the motion of the spoon. Zara reached into a hidden fold of her abaya and pulled out the pot of ink. She closed her eyes and emptied the ink into one of the cups, only for it to dissolve into the blackness of the tea.

Zara approached the main table and served her in-laws and father, lowering her gaze as everyone took a cup of tea. Zara's game of fate was in play. The poisoned cup was only God's choice to determine. As Zara sat down, Baba walked over to her attempting to crack Zara's nonchalant expression with him with a softened gaze.

"Mubarak, my princess". Baba congratulated.

She looked at her father and in one sip, quaffed the tea. She felt the hot tea burn as it moved down her throat and walked away into the house to avoid any comments about her uncivilised gesture.

The warm tea turned cold in Zara's stomach, sinking like a stone thrown into a pond. Echoes of Qais's voice bounced across the halls but was drowned out with the bang of the front door. Zara looked ahead, kicked her sandals off her feet and sprinted.

Zara's bare feet pranced through the streets, making sure no point of exhaustion stopped her even when she felt her lungs tighten. She breached the town's boundary, ignoring the voice that followed her. The heavens were aglow with shimmering stars. The pale moon shone like a silver shield in Nuqtah's night sky as Zara ripped her necklace off. She laid across a desert dune, digging her fingers and toes in the warm sand, a stark contrast to the chill in her veins. She looked at the stars and exclaimed,

"Alhumdulilah"

Her vision starts to blur at the edges, feeling the freedom of the abyss above. A quiet relief settles in her chest as her heartbeat slows. A fleeting smile ghosts her ink-stained lips as Baba's shadow above her dissipates. She smiles, her nose crinkling slightly as her dimples prevail.

“I am finally free.”