

The night is only beginning to grow old. I show up early to the Café Riyadh that, despite its name, is a high-class restaurant on the tip of the index finger of the Fourth Hand. Moonlight pours through an exposed hole in the ceiling like a pot of spilled honey and the air is dry and cool. Chandeliers tastefully hang from marble pillars that ache to touch the sky. Patrons chat at the bar and dance to the band's ambient music that drifts through the restaurant; I seat myself at a pearly stone table and wait for Nadia to arrive.

The voices and the music simmer in the atmosphere, and I slowly allow myself to relax. I finally spot Nadia entering the Café Riyadh, greeting a group of waiters as she walks by. She makes her way over to the table, somehow holding two red wines in one hand. She wears a shimmering sleeveless dress bright and white enough to make the constellations above envious.

Nadia smiles. "How are you?"

"Well enough," I lie. The past week has been stressful to the point that I no longer wish to get out of bed. I don't tell her that I've decided to retire within the month after operating on Aya. Things have been changing too fast in Jubilation for an older woman like me to keep up.

I can tell that Nadia sees right through me; she always does. She leans across the table and places a warm, carefully manicured hand on mine. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Another lie. I meet her emerald eyes with my own and find a challenge. I don't back down, and a minute passes.

"Okay," Nadia relents, dissatisfaction sparking on her face, "if you don't want to talk, I won't force you."

I nod, and the conversation dies for a moment. I watch the couples glide across the stone like butter in a hot skillet and, for a moment, remember what it felt like to dance. It was easy, back then, to challenge men to keep up with me, to keep up with the fire blooming in my delicate footsteps as I'd spin around the room to a surge of electric song and ancient poetry. It was easy to toy with the hearts of many and break them with no regrets. Back then, everything was easy. I know now that underneath that thin sheet of gleaming white stone lies cold, hard metal that remains untouched.

Nadia follows my stare and brings me to the present with a tap on the wrist.

"Come," she says, standing, "come dance with me."

I look at her tall, willowy figure that dwarfs mine in comparison. "I've not for so long."

"Today is as good a time as any, Aisha." She shrugs. "You're not getting any younger." She extends a jeweled hand toward me and I, hesitating for only a second, accept it.

I stumble over my own feet in a display that would've embarrassed my younger self to no end. Nadia laughs a deep, booming laugh, taking my other hand in hers and spinning me around the room. The crowd pays us no mind, only taking care to make room for the new pair on the dance floor. I glance at Nadia's sleek, silver hair and how it dances down to her lower back with ease. I look at her genuine smile that reveals two sets of perfectly imperfect teeth. And I am suddenly stricken by her beauty.

The music swells before slowing, and our steps through the Café reflect it. Nadia pulls me closer to her chest. The moonlight soaks into her shoulders and pours down.

"You know," she whispers, her voice dark and smooth like coffee, "maybe in another life, it happened like this."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe I didn't meet Sherine first, and it was you instead."

"Oh," I laugh, "you're not saying you regret meeting her?"

Nadia laughs too. “No. Of course not. But maybe this could’ve happened years ago. And then I would’ve proposed to you instead of her. I could’ve settled with you instead of her.”

“Sherine was a good woman,” I say, unsure if what Nadia had said could be perceived as anything but selfish. “Better than I am, in any case.”

“I can settle with you,” Nadia answers with a wink.

Blood rushes to my ears, producing long-forgotten sensations. “You must be joking.”

“Not at all,” she says. Her accent is heavy and thick.

Three seconds pass but they feel like eons. Instead of responding, I choose to embrace Nadia. I feel her stiffen against me then relax. Her arms wrap around my back and we sway to the ambient music. The chilly air tangles itself around us but I feel warm enough. I feel Nadia’s breaths settle into a rhythm and, for this one moment in frozen time, my heart is full.

Then I feel Aya’s presence beckon me to come home. A familiar dread seeps its way into my bones that, only seconds earlier, were glowing with emotion. What if she’s been injured? What if she’s bleeding out on the floor now with death creeping upon her? I feel the now familiar panic ready to set fire to my brain. Nadia feels my tension and pulls away.

“Aisha. What’s the matter?”

I shake my head. I haven’t told Nadia about Aya and I can’t bring myself to do so.

“Aisha, look at me.”

Her eyes are bright against the night. I open my mouth to speak, close it, and open it again. No words can form. A haze forms in my mind, threatening to explode at any second. Tears form inexplicably and begin to pour; Nadia, alarmed, pulls me away, but I still cannot talk. I feel the stares of the couples around me waiting for the opportunity to tear me apart.

“Do you need to go home?” I nod.

Nadia walks me to my house, wherein I find Aya already asleep safely on the couch. I can tell she’d like to come in, but I don’t extend the offer. I bid her farewell and she does the same.

She does an excellent job at masking her disappointment.