

"A THRILLING EPIC OF FOUND FAMILIES,  
ANCIENT MAGIC, AND STORIES THAT LINGER."

—S. A. CHAKRABORTY, AUTHOR OF *THE CITY OF BRASS*

# THE STARDUST THIEF



CHELSEA  
ABDULLAH

THE  
STARDUST  
THIEF

THE SANDSEA TRILOGY:  
BOOK ONE

CHELSEA  
ABDULLAH



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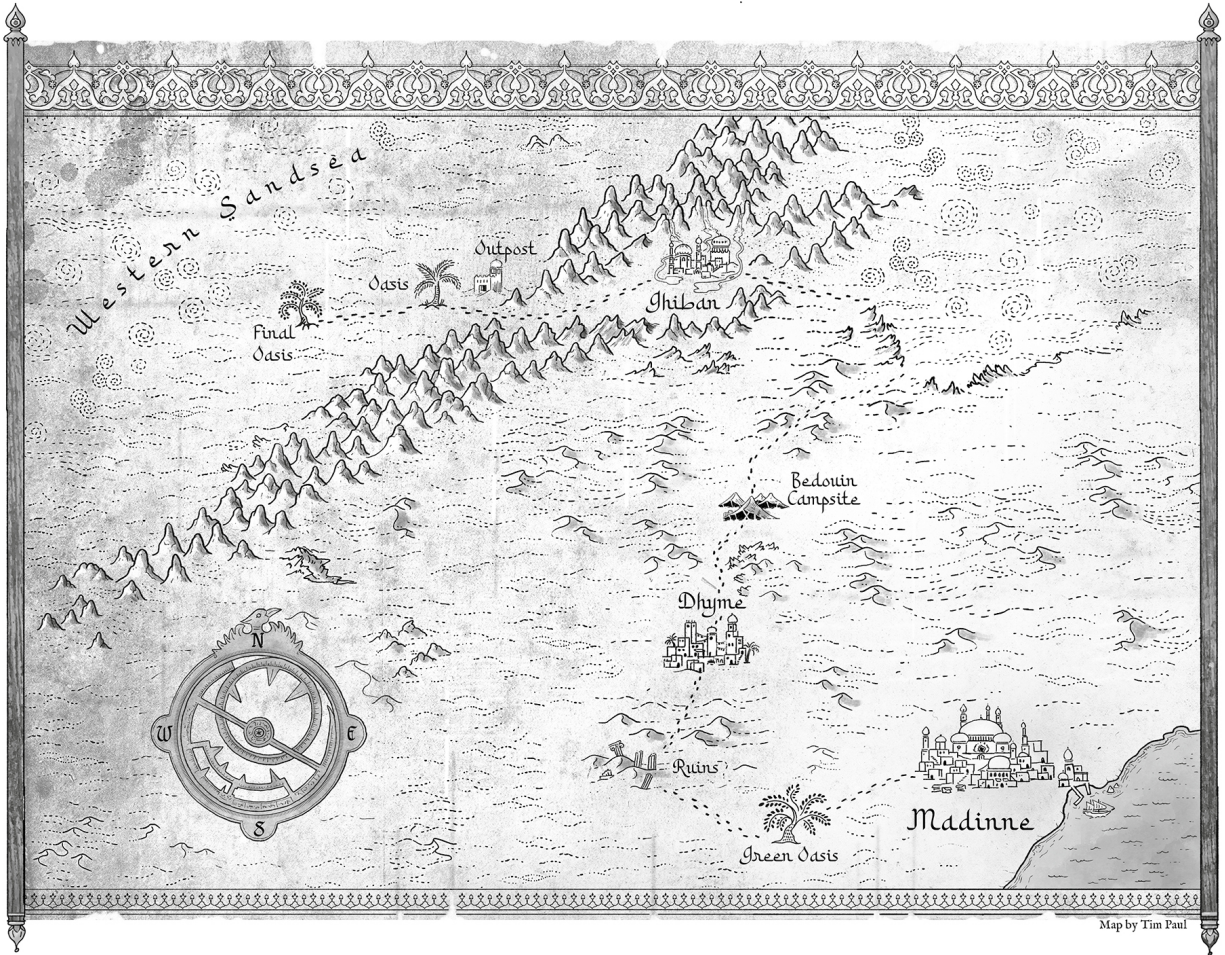
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*For my mother, who fostered my love of words and writing.  
My father, who taught me the power of remembered tales.  
And my sister, who always asked for one more story.  
This one's for you.*

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Map by Tim Paul

# The Tale of the Jinn

Neither here nor there, but long ago...

Our world belonged to the jinn, those doomed creatures who roam our desert like lost spirits. Unlike us humans, who were created from the earth, the gods crafted the jinn from an ancient flame that allowed them to live for hundreds of years and gave them the power to use magic. This is why some jinn can change shape and others can breathe fire or travel the world in the blink of an eye.

For a time, the jinn did as the gods commanded: they loved and nurtured the world they were given, and there was peace. But while most jinn were grateful to the gods, there were seven jinn kings who were dissatisfied with their meager magic, and they expressed their discontent by destroying the land. They created winds so wild they blew the water from lakes and oceans, and flames so hot they burned away fields of grass, leaving behind nothing but sand.

When the gods saw the havoc the kings had wreaked, they decided to punish them. They gave them what they desired most—they made their magic more powerful, but at the cost of it being uncontrollable. The magic was so strong it burned holes in the sand, sinking the jinn cities and causing the jinn to vanish from this world.

In the wake of their disappearance, the gods created us humans. Magicless and mortal we may be, but we are the gods' faithful servants.

There are some who believe we must use our faith to restore life to this barren world. They say the only reason we have any nature left is because there are hunters who capture escaped jinn and sacrifice them to the gods. They claim that a jinn's silver blood is

filled with life—that it can turn sand to water and make trees and flowers bloom.

But our faith need not be so twisted.

Remember, Layla, not all jinn are evil.



Louie had buried many things since her mother last told her that story.

Her name. Her past. Her parents.

But the story, she had never forgotten.

# 1



## LOULIE

When Loulie al-Nazari was told by the One-Eyed Merchant to meet on a small and humble dhow, she expected, quite reasonably, a small and humble dhow. But the dhow was not small, and it was not humble. It was, in fact, quite the opposite.

The *Aysham* was a behemoth of a ship, with full sails, a spacious deck, an impressive assortment of rooms, and a lofty crow's nest. It was, by any measure, a very nice ship. Had she been here as a passenger, she would have enjoyed exploring it.

But Loulie was not here as a passenger. She was here as the Midnight Merchant, an esteemed magic seller, and she had come to meet with a client who was keeping her waiting long past their scheduled meeting time. *I will call for you the first hour of moonrise*, his message had said. Only, the hour had come and gone, and Loulie was still waiting for him on deck, dressed in the star-patterned merchant's robe that made her stick out like a sore thumb.

She turned her back on the gawking, well-dressed passengers and focused on the horizon. There were no familiar constellations in the sky, and the night was dark and gloomy, which hardly helped her mood. For what was probably the dozenth time that hour, she sighed.

"I wish you were in your lizard shape," she said to the man standing beside her.

He angled his head to look at her. Though his stony expression barely

shifted, Loulie perceived a very slight height difference between his brows. He was most certainly raising one at her. “And what good would that do us in this situation?”

“You could sneak belowdecks and find our client’s room. You’re useless in your man shape.”

The umber-skinned man said nothing, but his silence was easy to decipher. Loulie had known him for nine years—long enough to understand all his mannerisms and magics. She was no longer surprised by his shapeshifting or by the fire that danced in his eyes when he grew emotional. Right now, he was quiet because he knew she would not like what he had to say.

“We’re offering the man magic,” Loulie said. “The least he can do is be on time for a meeting *he* proposed.”

“Don’t think too hard on it. What will be will be.”

“Sage advice, oh mighty jinn,” she mumbled beneath her breath.

Qadir’s lips twitched into a brief smile. He enjoyed toying with her—he was the only one who got away with it.

Loulie was considering breaking into the ship’s interior when she heard approaching footsteps and turned to see a man in a white thobe.

“Midnight Merchant.” He bowed. “I have been sent by Rasul al-Jasheen to bring you to the designated meeting place.”

She and Qadir exchanged a look. His deadpan expression said, *I told you not to worry*.

“It’s about time.” She gestured to Qadir. “This man is my bodyguard. He shall accompany me.”

The messenger nodded before leading them through crowds of colorfully dressed nobles to an obscure back door on the other side of the ship. He rapped on the door in a specific fashion until it was opened by a burly man, who guided them down a dimly lit corridor. At the end of the hallway, the man rapped on a different door in a different pattern. There was the sound of a lock and a key, then the messenger opened the door and beckoned them inside.

Loulie looked at Qadir. *After you*, his silence said. She smiled before ducking inside.

The first thing she noticed upon her entry was that there were mercenaries—three of them, each positioned in a different corner of the



small room. Unlike the nobles on deck wearing brilliant robes, these men were dressed mostly in weapons.

Her mind filled with images of bloodshed and murder. Of her mother, waving frantically at an empty jar, telling her to hide. Of her father, lying in a pool of his own blood.

She took a deep, steadying breath and looked to the center of the room, where a merchant dressed in hues of green sat on a cushion behind a low-rising table. True to his title, Rasul al-Jasheen had only one muddy-brown eye. The other was a glossy white orb half-hidden beneath layers of scarred skin. He had a nose that looked as if it had been broken and reset many times, and a forehead that was at once impressive and unfortunate in size. He was vaguely familiar, and Loulie wondered if maybe she'd passed his stall in some souk before.

The merchant's lips parted to reveal a shining smile composed of gold, bronze, and white teeth. "Midnight Merchant. What a pleasure to see you in the flesh. I apologize for the late summons. I was entertaining important guests." His eyes roved over her.

She imagined what he was seeing: a short, seemingly fragile woman dressed in layers of blue velvet shawls dusted with soft white. Stardust, she called the pattern. Appropriate, for it had belonged to her tribe. The Najima tribe. The Night Dwellers.

As was usual, the merchant stared at her half-covered face longer than at her robes. Most of the men in this business tried to intimidate her by looking right into her eyes.

It never worked.

"Please." He gestured to the cushion on the other side of the table. "Have a seat."

She glanced over her shoulder at Qadir, who had not budged from his spot by the door. Though the merchant had not acknowledged him, the mercenaries eyed him warily. Qadir showed no sign of being perturbed. But then, he rarely did.

Loulie sat.

The merchant offered his hand. "Rasul al-Jasheen. It is an honor."

She clasped it. "Loulie al-Nazari." She pulled her hand away quickly, wary of the way his eyes lingered on her iron rings.

"I must confess, I was not expecting you to be so... young."

*Ah yes. Because twenty is so young.*

She smiled at him pleasantly. "You are exactly as I expected. One eye and all."

Silence. Then, remarkably, the merchant started laughing. "That is where I get my title, yes. As you can imagine, it is also the reason I called you here tonight. I assume you have the magic I requested?" Loulie nodded. Rasul cleared his throat. "Well, let's see it, then."

She reached into her pocket and withdrew a coin. The merchant watched skeptically as she vanished it between her fingers. From his side of the table, he could not see the face on either side: a jinn warrior on one and a human sultan on the other. Every time the coin reappeared, it sported a different face.

Human, jinn, human, jinn.

"Must I remind you of our deal?" She held up the coin between pinched fingers.

Rasul frowned. "I already paid you in advance."

"You paid in advance *once*. Now you must pay the other half."

"I will not pay for a magic I have yet to see with my own eyes."

Loulie did her best to ignore the stares of the armed men around her. *Nothing can happen to me. Not while Qadir is here.*

She shrugged, feigning nonchalance as she reached into her merchant's bag. The bag of infinite space, Qadir called it, for it had a seemingly endless bottom. "If seeing is believing..." She withdrew a vial. It was a small thing, no bigger than one of her fingers. The minute the One-Eyed Merchant beheld the sparkling liquid inside, he tried to snatch it from her hand.

She tucked it away, into her sleeve. "I'll take the other half of my payment now."

"That could be water, for all I know!"

"And? If it is water, steal your gold back." She gestured to the human weapons lining the room. "That is why they're here, isn't it? To make sure this exchange goes as planned?"

The merchant pressed his lips together and snapped his fingers. One of the men set a pouch in Rasul's hands, which he offered to Loulie. She scanned the coins inside and, just to make sure she wasn't being scammed, flipped the two-faced coin. It came down on the human side. *Truth.*

She offered him the vial. "Your requested magic: the Elixir of Revival."

The merchant snatched it from her, and Loulie smiled beneath her scarf as he fumbled with the stopper. He was so excited, his hands were shaking.

*If only he realized how easy this magic was to find.*

Her eyes slid to Qadir. Though his expression was stony as always, she imagined a smug smile on his lips. She recalled the words he'd spoken the day she shared Rasul's request with him: *One jinn's blood is a human man's medicine.*

There was a reason humans called it the Elixir of Revival.

That reason became apparent as the One-Eyed Merchant blinked the silvery contents of the vial into his eye. Loulie watched as sparkling tears streamed down his cheek, making his skin glow. But while this effect was temporary, something more permanent was happening to the merchant's blind eye.

Darkness bloomed in the center of his iris like an inkblot spreading on a scroll. With every blink it spread, growing wider and wider until the blackness lightened to a dark brown.

*Medicine indeed.*

Soon it was not just the so-called elixir that fell from his eyes, but real tears. Even the mercenaries were unable to mask their shock as Rasul fixed both of his eyes on them.

"Praise be to the gods," he whispered.

Loulie grinned. "Worth the price?"

"Such a miracle is priceless." Rasul rubbed at his tearstained face, carefully avoiding the newly revived eye. "A thousand blessings upon you, Loulie al-Nazari."

Loulie dipped her head. "And a thousand upon you. May I offer a piece of advice?" Rasul paused to look at her. "I suggest you come up with a new title. One-Eyed is a little melodramatic."

The merchant burst out laughing. Loulie found, much to her surprise, that she was laughing with him. Once Rasul had finished heaping praises upon her and insisted on treating her to a stupendous feast later that evening, she left.

She and Qadir shared a look as they walked back down the corridor. The jinn lifted his hand to showcase the healing scab from a self-inflicted wound he'd made mere days ago.

She mouthed the words *Shukran, oh holy, priceless miracle.*

Qadir shrugged. He looked like he was trying not to smile.



Mama and Baba are dead. *The words kept cycling through her mind. Every time Layla buried them, they resurfaced, a reality she could not escape.*

*Had the jinn not been dragging her through the desert, she would have succumbed to the weight of her sorrow days ago. But even when her body grew heavy with fatigue, he pressed forward. At first, she despised him for this—even feared him.*

*But the fear eventually faded. First into reluctance, then defeat. Why did it matter where the jinn was taking her? He'd told her that the compass her father had given her would lead them to a city, but she did not care about the city.*

*She did not care about anything.*

*Many sunrises later, she collapsed. She wanted to cry, but her chest was too heavy and her eyes too dry. The jinn waited patiently. When she did not rise, he picked her up and set her atop his shoulders. She was forced to hold on to him as he scaled a cliff.*

*That night, after the jinn had started a fire with nothing but a snap of his fingers, he took a coin from his pocket and set it on his palm.*

*"Watch." He curled his fingers over the coin. When he next uncurled them, his palm was empty. Layla was intrigued despite herself. When she asked if it was magic, the jinn clenched and unclenched his fingers, and the coin was again on his palm.*

*"A trick," he said.*

*Layla looked closely at the coin. It appeared to be a foreign currency, with the face of a human sultan on one side and a jinn wreathed in fire on the other. "There are two lands in this world," Qadir said. "Human and jinn. And so there are two sides to this coin."*

*He made the coin vanish and reappear between his fingers, moving so quickly she could not track the movement. "This may be a trick, but the coin itself is magic. It will tell you the real or moral truth of any situation."*

*He set the coin down on Layla's palm. "See for yourself. Flip it, and if it*

*comes up on the human side, the answer is yes. If it comes up on the other, the answer is no."*

*Layla would not have believed it was truly magic had the coin been given to her a few days ago. But things had changed. She was no longer so naive.*

*"My family is dead," she whispered as she flipped the coin.*

*It came up on the human side.*

*She breathed out and tried again. "A jinn saved my life."*

*Human.*

*Tears sprang to her eyes as the coin continued to come up on the human side, confirming her new reality. Truth. Truth. Truth.*

*"I am alone." Her shoulders shook with sobs as she threw the coin into the air. It bounced off her knee and rolled away, back to the jinn. For a few moments, Qadir said nothing. Then he silently reached for her hand and set the coin on her palm.*

*Jinn.*

*He curled her fingers around it. "Not alone," he said. "Not anymore."*



Loulie was lost in her memories and absently making the two-faced coin vanish between her fingers when she returned to the *Aysham's* deck the next morning. The crowds from the previous night had dispersed, and the sailors paid her no mind as she wandered past them in her plain brown robes. She had traded the scarves obscuring her face for a light shawl, which she wrapped loosely around her head and shoulders to better feel the sun on her cheeks. It was a relief, as always, to doff her merchant apparel and bask in anonymity the day after a sale.

Also a relief: the familiar, hazy shape of Madinne in the distance. Loulie smiled at the sight of the city. "Qadir, do you see that?"

The jinn, now in his lizard form and humming softly in her ear, shifted on her shoulder. He made a sound of confirmation.

She drew closer to the ship's railings. Even through an orange veil of sand, the sun was bright enough she could make out the tiers of the great

desert city of Madinne. At the top was the sultan's palace, made up of beautiful white domed towers and minarets that reached for the sun. It was surrounded on all sides by colorful buildings—stone and wooden constructions both domed and flat, tall and squat. And somewhere in the midst of those buildings, nestled in a nexus of crooked, winding alleyways, was home. Their home.

“I wonder how Dahlia is doing.” Qadir's voice, made much softer by his smaller form, was directly in her ear.

“However she's doing, she'll be much better when we drop by with our rent.”

Qadir made a clicking sound—she still wasn't sure whether he did it with his teeth or tongue—and said, “Yes, because our rent is equivalent to all the coin in our bag.”

“I won't give her *all* of our earnings.”

“That last exchange was for my blood, you know.”

Loulie suppressed a smile as she looked over her shoulder at the sailors. Though the men were far from graceful, she could not help but think they resembled dancers in the easy way they went about their docking preparations.

“Would you like me to keep your blood money, then?”

Qadir hissed. “I do not need your human gold.”

“Ah, what a shame. And here I thought you'd enjoy spending it on wine or women. You know the dealers won't take your commemorative coins.” She glanced at the two-faced coin between her fingers.

“Loulie?”

“Mm?” She slid the coin into her pocket.

“I overhear talk of the sultan.”

Suppressing a groan, Loulie turned and surveyed the deck. Other than the sailors, she spotted a few scattered groups of people. She walked between them, keeping her expression blank as she eavesdropped. As little interest as she had in the sultan, she could not afford to ignore the gossip. Not when she, a criminal, always tried to avoid his men.

But while she caught two sailors trading profanity-laden opinions, heard a couple confessing forbidden love to one another, and was audience to a strange riddle game, she overheard nothing about the sultan.

She had just given up hope when she spotted Rasul al-Jasheen speaking

with a man wearing the uniform of the sultan's guard. Loulie quickly glanced away and slowed her pace as she approached them.

"The sultan's councillors are beside themselves," the guard was saying.

Rasul snorted. "Why does he not send the high prince to search for the relic?"

The guard glanced in her direction. Loulie grabbed hold of a passing sailor and asked him in her most pleasant voice if he knew where they were docking. The sailor responded, but she was not listening. Not to him, anyway.

"Could such a treasure really exist?" Rasul said.

"The rumors are that the sultan's late wife brought up the artifact in one of her stories."

She thanked the sailor and angled her head to catch Rasul's response.

"Poor man. Does he truly believe Lady Shafia's stories were true?"

The guard shrugged. "They had power enough to stop the killings, so perhaps." There was a mournful pause. All desert dwellers knew of the sultan's wife killings, just as all knew of Shafia, who had stopped them with her stories. She was as much a legend as the tales she'd told.

"His Majesty believes there is something in one of her stories that will help him claim a victory over the jinn."

"Against the jinn? They are like flies; surely you cannot kill them all." Rasul's voice died down to a murmur. By the time the wind brought the conversation back to her ears, they were speaking about something else.

"But tell me about this miracle!" the guard said. "I hear the Midnight Merchant herself delivered the elixir to you? Do you have any idea how she obtained it?"

"None. But I suppose it wouldn't be much of a miracle if we knew the how of it." Rasul laughed. "Regardless, I bless the gods for my good luck. I did not think she would so readily accept my request."

Qadir sighed in her ear. "Why do humans thank the gods for things they do not do?"

"Because they are fools that believe in fate," Loulie said bitterly. If these gods existed, they had not batted their lashes when her family was murdered.

She glanced over her shoulder at the looming city. They were close enough now that she could make out people on the docks waving at the

ship. She turned and made her way toward the bow for a better view. Behind her, the guard was still talking.

“What a shame she disappeared! I would have liked to see this legendary merchant.”

Rasul sighed. “She had a sharp tongue, to be sure, but what a rare gem she was. Had she not disappeared last night, I would have convinced her to have dinner with me in Madinne. Can you imagine it? Having the Midnight Merchant on your arm?”

Loulie thought again of how relieved she was to have slipped out of her merchant’s clothing and rubbed the kohl from her eyes this morning. For if the formerly one-eyed merchant had invited her to dinner with the intention of flaunting her, she would have punched him.

“So.” Qadir spoke in her ear. “The sultan is looking for a relic. Do you think we can find the magic before he sends his hounds to track it?”

Loulie paused at the ship’s bow and stared wordlessly up at the city. She stretched out her arms, allowing the wind to push and pull at her sleeves. Qadir had the sense to stop talking. Later, they would speak of relics and gold and magic. But for now, all of it disappeared from her mind. The world folded into a single, simple truth.

She was home.