

PROLOGUE

"Long ago, Parus, there was a man named Samad. He lived in a village not unlike ours, although his village was larger and further into the desert. It was surrounded by sands as far as the eye could see.

"The village and its occupants grew up together in close proximity. It was organized by a group of elders who made decisions that affected the entire village. They relied upon a well and farmed the arid land. All were known to each other.

"Samad had a son, and his name was Ionus. Samad adored his son, much as I adore mine. Ionus was a bright little boy. His mother had died during childbirth, and Samad raised him with love in his heart.

"One morning, Samad awoke to a terrible discovery. When he opened his eyes, he felt a blade in his hand and found his hut tainted red. He crawled upon the floor, looking for his son, and when he found him, Ionus was dead in his cot, lying in a pool of his own blood.

"Samad fell backwards, sitting upon the floor silently, staring at Ionus's body. He reached out to touch his son's head, but as he saw blood on his own hand, he retracted, terrified.

"Murder was unknown in their village, and when Samad was found, he was wandering the outskirts of the town aimlessly, calling out for his son. They brought him back to the village where the elders questioned him to discover what had happened.

"And though they questioned him, his answers were confusing. His own explanation came in the description of a nightmarish vision, and he was certain he had violently taken his own son's life in the middle of the night.

"He began to speak less as the situation was investigated further, and by the end of the inquisition sat mute before the elders, saying nothing. It was decided that he should remain isolated in his hut until he was able to remember what occurred that night, and that in his odd, comatose state, he would be cared for by the remainder of the village until that happened.

"After some time, however, Samad disappeared from the village. He had vanished in the middle of the night, and

though the other villagers feared his whereabouts, they worried for him, as all were kin to each other. As time passed, his hut was occupied by others, and the mysterious story of Samad and his son became eerie lore they shared late at night.

"It was later heard, however, that he had become a homeless man in a nearby city. During a trade route, one villager claimed to have seen him and questioned others about him. He discovered that Samad had the strange habit of begging during the day and disappearing at night, wandering the darkness of the desert till morning."

"What did he do in the desert, jahi?"

"No one knows, Parus. I believe he would look for his Ionus . . . that he would call out his name in the hope that he would return to him."

"Will you ever hurt me, jahi?"

"No, Parus! This is just a story, a tale. My father told it to me, just as I am telling it to you. He spoke of it while we traveled from ocean to ocean upon a caravan long ago."

"Were you scared when you heard it?"

"I was, just as you are. But it is just a story, child. A story to teach us, to entertain. I remember the caravan enjoying my father's story. One traveler in particular . . . I still recall his face."

"What about him, jahi?"

"I remember sitting in my father's embrace . . . all of us watching him, listening to him. This man was quiet . . .

calm . . . for the entirety of the trip, he spoke very little and seemed to observe everything . . . as a Saifa. But when my father spoke of Samad, his eyes began to tremble. And afterwards, I saw him weeping at the back of the caravan. It was strange to me, as I had never seen such a man cry."

"Why did he cry, jahi?"

"I do not know, child. Perhaps it was pain, or perhaps it was beauty. You will learn, as you get older, that a man can cry for both."