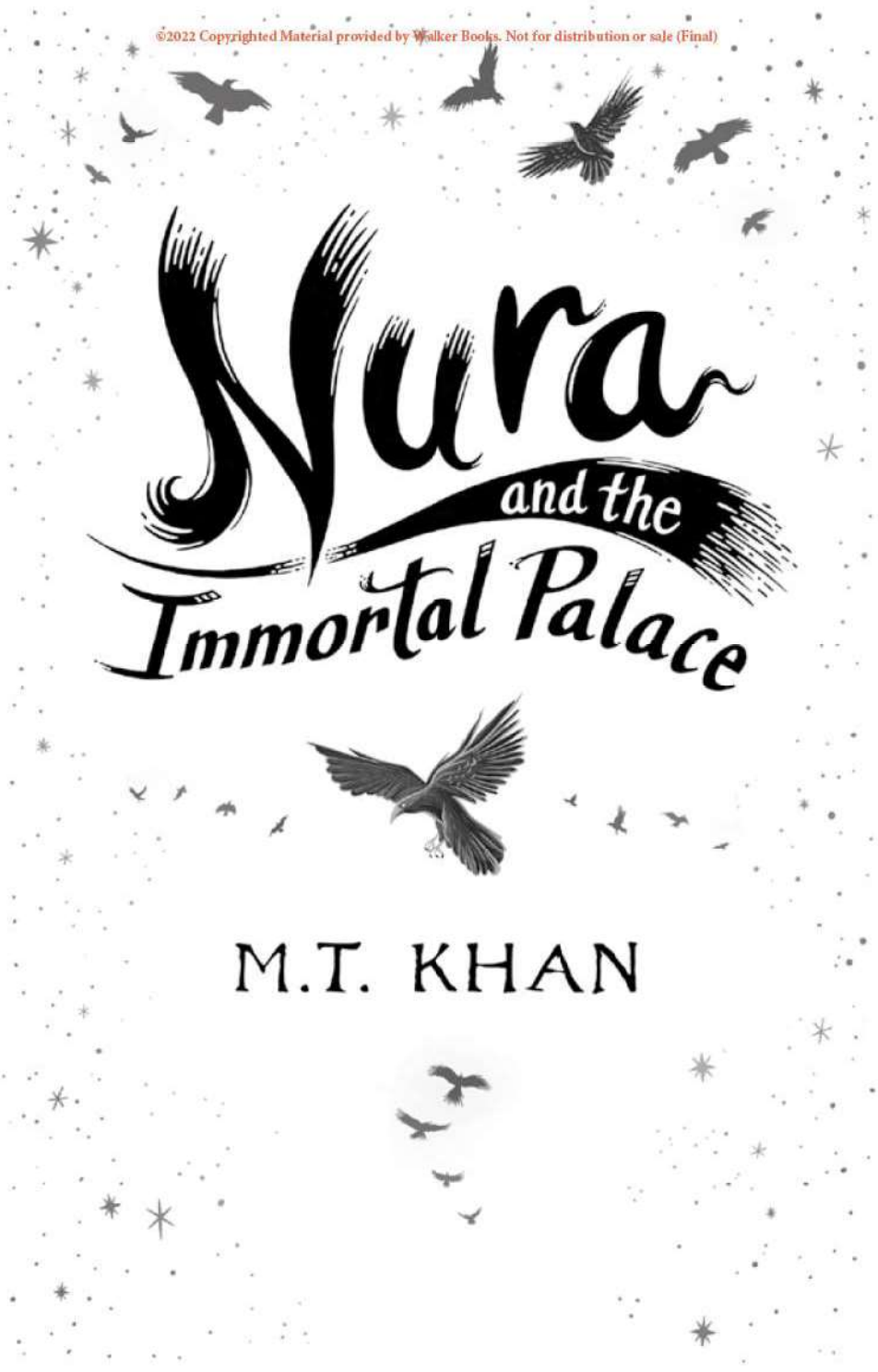
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First published 2022 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2022 Maeeda Khan
Cover and interior illustrations © 2022 Hazem Asif

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This book has been typeset in Badger, Berkeley Oldstyle, Beta and Beyond the Mountain

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data: a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0349-4

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To my parents
for teaching me the value of education



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CHAPTER 1

Sparkles in the Dirt

A lot of people dream of being buried by their money.

If these tunnels collapse, I might just get that wish, except none of the mica that's packed into the walls of this mine belongs to me. With my teeth gritted and two hands around a shovel, I strike the dirt wall in front of me. The earth splits apart and crumbles to the floor like an offering, flakes of mica glistening in a pool of orange sunlight.

I crouch, my trousers matted in dust, matching the grime that stains my body like a second layer of skin. I brush my fingers through the pile of dirt, sifting for the precious flakes and dropping them into a basket.

"It's not big enough. None of these are," I mumble. Where is the Demon's Tongue?

My stomach growls. I wonder if a tiger lives in there with how hungry I always get. As my thoughts fade into

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images of syrup-covered jalebi and juicy gulab jamun sweets, I leave the worthless pile and stumble deeper into the dark throat of the mines.

"W–wait, Nura! Don't go so deep," comes a whine from beside me. "It's d–dangerous—"

"I know," I grunt, cutting off Faisal's annoying warning for the third time today. "But Mr Waleed sells gulab jamun on Tuesdays, and if I don't dig enough mica today to earn me the rupees to buy one, I'm going to blame you."

If anyone says that they work for passion or world peace and not the delicious food on their plate, they're lying. There's only one truth in this world: everyone's got a hungry monster in their stomach that roars if they don't satisfy it.

And I know well enough to satisfy mine.

It's why I'm searching for the Demon's Tongue, a legendary treasure buried deep in these mines. Maybe it's just a rumour invented by kids to spark some life into a boring job, but I swear I've heard even the contractors talk about it. It's money like no one has ever been able to grasp – it's magic, it's unearthly... Maybe it can't even be seen. Maybe it's not even real.

I chase its myth as I creep forwards. The tunnels are narrow – only fit for a kid's body. My baba used to

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work in these same mica mines, but when the tunnels tapered into thin paths as deep as three hundred metres, contractors learned that adults weren't the best people for the job. It's why a twelve-year-old like me and the other neighbourhood kids are hired to dig up the mica scraps scattered underground.

The sharp clang of hammers against stone rams through my eardrums like the ticking of a clock, and the fading sunlight tells me I don't have much time left before we call it a day. I'm here from sunrise to sunset, from the moment my eyes crack open to the last second before my muscles scream at me to stop.

A sparkle flashes in the corner of my vision and I can almost taste the sweet gulab jamun on my tongue. My lungs protest – this deep underground, the air supply is low. I don't know much at all about science, but I can *feel* it, the chains around my chest that squeeze tighter as I lurch another metre below.

The mine is similar to a human. We enter through its mouth, dive down its throat, and then explore its dark belly. I fold my arms and duck my head into a slender tunnel. I'm just about to approach one of its arms.

"Nura," Faisal calls. "The sun's a–about to set. You w–won't be able to see any more."

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Faisal's always cautioning safety, but me and all the other kids threw safety into the sea when we accepted this job. The deeper the tunnels we dig, the greater the chance they'll collapse. And I've heard the horror stories too – about all the kids who never came back.

"Nura—" Faisal tries again.

"I'll be quick." If I don't reassure Faisal, he's going to talk my ears off. Giving warnings is one of the only times Faisal ever pipes up – his stutter is deeply ingrained and a constant source of mockery for the others. One kid is already glancing at him, but I'm not afraid to stomp my feet if they dare insult how Faisal talks.

"I can't let Ahmed beat me today," I say as I chase the glimmer of the mica shard. It's not the Demon's Tongue, but it has to be at least the size of my finger – a big catch that'll turn my haul into the largest one yet.

Sometimes if we dig up a promising collection of mica, the contractor pays us by the kilogram. It's a game for us, for all the kids who've never been to school or had the chance to glide on swings and play with dolls. If I can buy gulab jamun and beat Ahmed for the biggest haul today, then I'll risk it.

My bare feet slap against a muddy puddle as I hop down a ledge. I tuck my shovel under my armpit and crouch, just barely small enough to crawl through the

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tunnel and enter another cavity. Here the mica is more stone than it is dirt, reserves not yet touched. The walls shimmer, streaked with green, white and gold. It's like I'm sitting inside a jewel – a really hot and stuffy jewel. With air that's been torched to forty degrees, my shirt clings to my skin. The heat is a smothering blanket.

"You found my favourite spot."

I crane my head to the side and see Aroofa, a scornful smile tugging at her lips. She flicks the end of her dupatta over her shoulder as she strikes a large stone against a smaller one, combing through the debris that bursts from the collision. Her younger sister Sadia is busy beside her, hammering clumsily away at the smaller rocks Aroofa throws towards her.

I sigh. Aroofa would be better and quicker with the hammer, but looking at the cuts and scrapes along her fingers, I know why she yielded the tool to her little sister. With so many people in the business, there's not enough equipment for everyone. You get here early and swipe a hammer or shovel, or settle for one of God's greatest gifts: your hands.

"Won't be yours for long," I reply, pointing to the kids that stumble inside the cavity, a smile creeping across my lips. Some of them are always following me, trying to copy my handiwork. When it comes to the

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largest hauls, I'm second only to Ahmed, and he tends to disappear the second he hops down the mines. Me, on the other hand, I don't mind a little attention.

Aroofa's scowl deepens as the kids surround me, pretending to hack at the walls while their eyes stay glued in my direction. I roll my shoulders back. The stage is set. If they want a performance, I'm about to give those Bollywood actors a run for their money.

I narrow my eyes and catch the sparkle of the crystal. The shard is farther than I thought, a flash of white stuck in the folds of a crevice around a metre deep. I grunt as my arm reaches out. My cheek is squashed against the dirt, and the crowd of kids whisper to each other, curious about my overzealous efforts. I can almost feel Faisal's disapproval thicken the tension in the humid, grimy air, but I push forwards, sliding my body into the narrow slot shaped like a crescent moon.

The light is fading. My vision goes blurry. Someone gasps behind me – I've scratched my shin against a rock. I can't even feel the trickle of blood down my ankle when the mica shard is so close – close enough that my fingers brush the smooth surface. One more grunt, and I dig my nails into the dirt around it, clasping the shard in my hand as I shout in glee.

"Got it! Out of the way," I yell as I pull backwards.

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The crowd behind me parts, their gazes locked on to my closed fist. I swat my shoulder-length hair out of my face as I stumble back into the mine's arm, up its throat, and leap towards the entrance of the tunnels. All around me heads are turning, and I can just make out Faisal's wide eyes as he joins the group chasing after me, shouting to show the treasure. But I want to see it shine.

As I climb out of the tunnel, my eyes narrow against the embrace of a bright sunset. Compared to the darkness of the mines, the surface is like a different world – one where golden rays wash over me and light the dirt on fire. Tiny, immeasurable shards of mica are littered across the ground, each one holding a flame.

I swallow gulps of fresh air, and it feels like my lungs grow three sizes bigger. The kids above ground who are sifting through baskets of dirt glance over as I raise an arm to the sky and unravel my fingers – the mica in my hand shimmering against the amber sunset.

There's awe pouring from the surprised gasps. Some clap, others whistle. I lower the mica shard down to eye level, and the light shines off it like a wink. It's the biggest piece anyone's found in weeks.

Most of the kids don't know why we dig these tunnels or what mica is used for, but I've overheard

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plenty of conversations from the contractors to know why this streaky, colourless mineral has the world in a frenzy. It's used in paint and cosmetics – to make things sparkle.

I trudge towards my basket and drop the crystal into it.

I'm left with just the dirt.