

Safiyyah's War



HIBA NOOR KHAN



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For Sidi Abdel-Qadir Benghabrit and all the unsung
heroes who follow maps of light against all odds.

For every child affected by the darknesses
of war. May you be the last.

1

It is only in holy places of worship and libraries that you have to whisper, for they are both sacred in their own special ways. Safiyyah spent as many afternoons as she could here in the dusty stillness of the library, poring over atlases, maps and travelogues. Madame Odette, the kind librarian, never asked her unnecessary questions; she knew why Safiyyah came. Perhaps it was the same reason Madame Odette worked there. The promise of pages, the silence that seemed to shimmer.

Madame Odette would lead Safiyyah down the echoey hallway with its dark mahogany walls, her small heels clicking all the way to the World section. She wore pleated skirts and bright cardigans – Safiyyah’s favourite was black wool with tiny colourful stitches all over, as if handfuls of sugar sprinkles had been thrown across it like confetti.

Safiyyah would choose where in the world she wanted to explore and Madame Odette would roll out the right maps and pile up helpful books on the leather-topped desk. The names of faraway places enchanted Safiyyah. Some in particular seemed to call out to her from the coffee-coloured pages of old maps: Jerusalem, Manila

and Harare summoned her in sacred hushed library tones. She whispered the names of cities, towns, islands and lagoons like secrets, feeling a thirst for the world.

Not everyone was allowed into these rooms whenever they liked, you needed permission and a special pass, but Madame Odette made an exception for Safiyyah. Two years ago when Safiyyah's father had first brought her to the library, Safiyyah had wandered off and found Madame Odette sitting behind her desk, chewing a strawberry bonbon.

'Sorry to disturb you, Madame. I'd like to see a map of Algeria, please. My grandma showed me one she has but it's ripped on the Tunisia side. Everything to the right of Annaba, El Bouni, Souk Ahras and Tebessa is gone and I'd really like to see the El Kala region properly.'

Madame Odette had stopped chewing and peered at the peculiar child with curiosity. The girl was wringing her hands nervously, and thick curls had wildly escaped from her plaits. She spoke softly but fast, and Madame Odette saw a spark in her eyes. Children rarely came to this part of the library and when they did, they never asked questions like this.

'D'accord . . . Is this for a school project?'

'No, I'm going to be an explorer. My grandma is from Tlemcen in the north-west and I know from there through Oran and Chlef to Algiers pretty well, but I can't continue to the east until I have the full map, of course.'

Looking surprised and quietly impressed, Madame Odette chuckled to herself and told Safiyyah to follow her. By the time her father finally found her half an hour later, Safiyyah had six different maps laid out in front of her and was contentedly sucking a strawberry bonbon. Madame Odette marvelled at Safiyyah's interest – it was like the lines and curves of the continents joined up with the patterns of her brain! Ever since then, she allowed Safiyyah access to whatever she liked in the library, and always supplied her with a stash of strawberry bonbons.

Today, Safiyyah popped one of the powdery pink sugar balls into her mouth absentmindedly. Goose bumps appeared on her arms as she traced her finger gently down the ocean. Safiyyah wore the special white gloves that the librarian had given her in order to handle this book. Its pages felt like delicate tissue, as if they might float away if ever the book's spine came unbound. Her pulse quickened as her finger reached Manaus, in the state of Amazonas, Brazil.

She could almost hear the intense pulsing and throbbing of the Amazon, an orchestra of a million cicadas, squawking parrots and howling monkeys. The best kind of music, it filled the room, interrupted only by the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.

THE TIME! Safiyyah remembered suddenly that she was supposed to have been home ten minutes ago and leaped up in a panic. She closed the atlas and the book

with gilded pages and rolled up the maps carefully, grabbed a bonbon for the journey home and left.

Safiyyah ran as quickly as she could through the familiar streets, her schoolbag on her back. Her mother always told her to make sure she was home on time each day, and this would be the second time that week that Safiyyah wouldn't be. She wove through the streets and alleys, swerving to avoid two women wearing sunglasses and hats so huge it seemed the hats were wearing *them*. She dodged people chatting outside cafés, eating macarons and sipping coffee, shop carts laden with plump tomatoes and a hundred types of cheese.

All Safiyyah wanted was to get home and tell Setti everything she'd discovered about South America, but dread of her mother's inevitable scolding loomed like a cloud over her. Her mother hadn't always been this strict, it had only started in autumn last year when war was declared. Soldiers had dug bomb shelters around the city and handed out gas masks to families. Safiyyah knew it was only really because her mother worried, but there had been no bombs or danger or anything ever since and she longed for her to relax. She ducked beneath the low branches of a magnolia tree bursting with elegant pink flowers, panting and sweaty.

Almost in the 5th arrondissement where she lived, Safiyyah stopped to catch her breath for a minute, leaning against a lamppost. In between the noisy motorcars

spluttering and coughing out fumes, Safiyyah noticed a man standing in front of the shops on the other side of the road. He wore a black suit and had absolutely no hair on his head. He was crying silently, and the child holding his hand, not much older than Safiyyah's little sister, looked up at him anxiously. Safiyyah had never seen a grown man cry in the street like that before, and she felt bad for the young boy beside him. The whole scene disturbed her deeply, and despite the sun overhead she felt a chill in the air.

Safiyyah started running again, almost colliding with a bicycle as she looked back over her shoulder at the pair. She wished she could take them home with her, Setti would definitely know how to fix whatever the problem was. She always did. The man wiped his wet cheeks with a handkerchief, and then Safiyyah was round the corner.

2

The mosque's green roofs and white walls came into sight and Safiyyah began thinking up excuses as to why she was late again. She bounded through the doors and into the courtyard, relieved to see Setti there before she needed to face her mother. Her grandma was sitting beside the tiled fountain, a silk shawl the colour of biscuits wrapped around her shoulders. As soon as Safiyyah stepped into the serene courtyard she had known for as long as she could remember, she felt calmer. The bustle and smoke of the streets of Paris gave way to the sounds of gently trickling water and Safiyyah's footsteps on the shining white tiles.

Safiyyah breathed her grandma's scent in deeply as she sat down beside her: jasmine, musk and honey. She knew not to disturb the old lady, whose eyes were closed as she passed worn wooden prayer beads between her wrinkled fingers. She swayed slightly from side to side as she prayed, her shadow moving across the colourful, intricately patterned mosaic tiles framing the fountain.

Safiyyah looked from Setti's hands to the creamy wrinkled skin on her rounded face. The lines etched from

age onto her forehead and at the corners of her eyes looked to Safiyyah like the lines on a map, as if the voyages and paths of Setti's life had appeared on her skin. Safiyyah's mother always said Setti was beautiful once, but to Safiyyah, her grandma was still the most beautiful human she had ever met. Safiyyah closed her eyes too, the whispers of Setti's invocations blending with the fountain's gurgling, and she felt suddenly exhausted, as if she could have lain down and slept right there.

'Safiyyah, darling, are you all right? You know you're late again, don't you? My goodness, look at you all pink-cheeked. Come, let me fix your plaits, there's nothing left of them! Where have you been?'

She moved to sit in front of her grandma, allowing her hair to be coaxed back into place.

'I went to the library after school, I had barely even got started and somehow it was four o'clock already! I hope Yemma won't be too angry with me . . .'

Setti laughed affectionately. 'I know what you mean, darling, time feels like a thief sometimes. Just remember each breath you are given is more precious than a pearl. If you use them wisely, don't worry about the tricks of time!'

'Is learning maps a wise use of my breaths?'

'I'd say so, yes. Although ultimately it depends on what you intend to *do* with all that knowledge.'

'Travel the world of course, Setti!'

Setti reached the end of her second plait, and turned Safiyyah to face her again. 'A very wise plan, but only if you take me with you!'

She winked at Safiyyah, her gappy smile almost reaching the white headscarf framing her face, deepening the grooves beside her eyes.

'There will come a day when you have the choice to use what you've been given in one way or another.' Setti became serious, stern almost. 'Choose courage and goodness, my dear. Maps have led many people only to terrible darkness; look at the horrors of what the French have done to our people in Algeria . . . There is no use in a million maps unless they lead you to light.'

'But what do you mean, Setti? What choice? What day?'

Setti's face softened, her coal black eyes twinkling. 'We *all* have choices, my love, all of the time. Forks in the road, twists and turns along the way. Sometimes there is no paper map, but really, the one that matters is the one in here.' She put her hand to her heart and then reached out and wrapped Safiyyah in a hug. 'All we have to worry about is choosing the path of light.'

Safiyyah didn't really understand what Setti meant, but she hugged her back anyway, breathing in her warmth. Yemma was for ever telling Setti to stop speaking in mysterious riddles, but Safiyyah didn't mind.

Setti tucked a curl behind Safiyyah's ear and handed her a half-moon orange segment, before placing another

into her own mouth. The tart sweetness of the fruit exploded as Safiyyah bit into it. ‘Sweeter than yesterday’s, don’t you think?’

Setti nodded in agreement, holding another piece up to the light to inspect it for seeds before handing it over. ‘Oh yes, this one tastes of the Andalusian sunrise. I can tell it was picked with love.’

Safiyyah chuckled, closing her eyes for a moment to imagine golden light spilling over green hills in southern Spain. Setti had moved there with her family from Algeria when she was in her teens, and missed it dearly. Back in Algeria, Safiyyah’s great-grandparents farmed vast rolling fruit orchards, and when they moved to Andalusia, Setti’s father had taken young orange, lemon and cherry saplings with him. They had taken root in the fertile soil and so the garden of Setti’s home was shaded by trees bearing sweet fruit like glowing gemstones. Sometimes Setti talked of the trees like they were her siblings. Like her, the trees had been uprooted and planted in a new land.

For as long as Safiyyah could remember, Setti was obsessed with oranges, lamenting the fact that in the colder climate of Paris there were no citrus trees. She could easily go without a meal but made sure no day passed without a zesty orange. She savoured the peeling process, inhaling the scent from the leathery peel and often infused oil with the rinds to rub into her skin.

Yemma joked that Setti had orange juice running

through her veins instead of blood! Baba teased that Setti could live without him but not without her fruit. She seemed to be able to produce them at will, there were always one or two in the deep pockets of her long dresses, and Safiyyah had recently seen three in Setti's gas mask case. Setti claimed to be able to tell where the orange had been grown by tasting it, always ready with a commentary on the balance of tang with sweet, the ratio of acid and sugar.

Safiyyah often thought that for Setti, her beloved oranges had come to hold everything she had loved and lost in her life. Her parents, her memories of home, her husband, even. A million moments, a thousand emotions wrapped up in this fleshy round fruit that burst when you bit into it. Perhaps that was why Setti could taste things in them that no one else could.

'Another!' Setti pushed a second orange piece into Safiyyah's hand. Setti had tried for years to save the orange seeds to plant them at the mosque, but it hadn't ever worked. A few times seeds had germinated and grown, but they stayed small and never got close to bearing fruit. She still hadn't given up though, and saving seeds was as much of a habit for Setti as grating the fragrant rind into yoghurt or stirring steaming pots of pulp into marmalade.

'SAFIYYAH! Where is that girl? My god, why does she torture me like this!'

Yemma's voice was shrill, panicked almost, arriving in the courtyard before she did. Safiyyah leaped up just as her mother appeared, and thankfully Setti came to the rescue.

'Sara, she's with me, don't worry, she is fine! I was fixing her hair.'

'Oh thank god, thank god.' Yemma breathed a sigh of relief, and so did Safiyyah. 'I thought you hadn't come home yet. Safiyyah, come on up, you need to get washed and changed before we eat. You can help me with the salad, Ammo Kader will be joining us for dinner.'

Safiyyah's eyes lit up at the mention of her father's dearest friend visiting them that evening. He wasn't really her uncle, but she called him Ammo as a mark of respect. She loved his company, he was always attentive to her and told the best stories. Safiyyah hoped she might get the opportunity to mention what she'd discovered about the Amazon jungle at dinner.

She followed her mother out of the courtyard and up the steps towards their apartment, trailing her hands along the hanging moon and star paper decorations she had helped to make the week before. She had glued gold glitter onto the shapes that her neighbours Ayah and Hafsa cut out to make them shine. They strung them from tulle ribbon and hung them outside their apartments for the festival of Eid. The three-day festival ended a few days ago, but Safiyyah still felt the sparkle of celebration

in the air. A pile of gifts she'd received lay beside her bed, a heavy magnifying glass from her parents and tiny gold earrings from Setti among her favourites.

The children from the madrasah had a party in the grand prayer hall, playing games on the soft green carpets and eating pastries soaked in rose syrup. Now Safiyyah checked quickly through her pile of presents to make sure her burglar of a little sister hadn't stolen anything. Fatima was for ever toddling around taking Safiyyah's things and stashing them beneath her cot. Today it seemed she had chosen the bouncy balls Safiyyah had won during a party game. She made a mental note to re-steal them once Fatima had been put to bed.

The fragrances of cumin and mint filled the little kitchen as Yemma stirred the tomato and lamb stew she'd been preparing. Safiyyah chopped bunches of parsley, red peppers and wedges of lemon for the salad before laying out the big stripy mat across the living room floor, where they would eat dinner. She straightened the orange tassels at its edges and had almost finished assembling the intricately patterned plates and jugs on it when Ammo Kader arrived with her father.

As she went to hug them both, she immediately sensed tension in her father. Perhaps he'd had a stressful time at work, Safiyyah thought, but he'd be back to his cheery self once he relaxed and had dinner. But even

half an hour later, with Setti, Fatima, Yemma and Ammo tucking into their food, Baba remained on edge, distant and anxious. His mood perturbed Safiyyah, as if his worries had crept across the room and gripped her too.

‘What have you been up to, Safiyyah?’

Ammo’s question startled Safiyyah, who had been pushing tiny beads of couscous around her plate for the last ten minutes.

‘Ummm, in the library today I learned that there are beetles in the Amazon jungle that are even bigger than my hand.’

Ammo smiled and then pretended to shudder: ‘Make sure you don’t bring any of those back here when you go exploring!’

‘Our Safiyyah is going to be the greatest explorer yet. And she said she’ll take me with her! The next Marco Polo.’ Setti winked at Safiyyah, grinning.

‘Ibn Battuta travelled even further than Marco Polo,’ Ammo replied, and then turned to Safiyyah. ‘But you will go further than both of them.’

‘Ah yes, Battuta! He was Algerian, wasn’t he?’

Yemma chuckled affectionately at Setti’s claim. ‘No, he was from Tangiers, a Moroccan. Setti would claim Abraham Lincoln as Algerian if she could!’

Everyone laughed, including Baba for the first time that night, though within a minute all traces of joy had vanished once again.

Once everyone had eaten, he helped Yemma clear away the dishes and then set a tray of small cups of sweet mint tea down on the mat. Baba sat down again beside Yemma, placing his hand on hers. He took a deep breath with his eyes closed, bracing himself.

‘The Germans entered France today. They finally crossed the border through Ardennes.’

Yemma gasped, fear flushing her face. Setti closed her eyes and mumbled a prayer. Safiyyah felt strangely numb and cold. She remembered the man in the suit and the chill that had swept through her.

‘I saw a man weeping in the street today, Baba.’

‘Perhaps he was Jewish.’ Baba looked down at his hands sadly. ‘We don’t know what the invasion will mean for us as Muslims yet, but one thing that *is* certain is what it will mean for Jews.’

Safiyyah had a thousand questions circulating her mind, but she was told to go to bed early as the adults had important things to discuss. Fatima had already fallen asleep on Setti’s lap. Her podgy little face was peaceful, entirely oblivious to the world changing around her.

In her room, Safiyyah pulled on her pyjamas in a hurry. What *did* this mean for Jews? Would there be bombs? Would people be hurt, or worse, killed? What was it that had brought the man to tears?

Safiyyah realised she’d buttoned her shirt up all wrong as she jumped into bed. She wasn’t even remotely tired.

Her blankets, her pillow, everything felt cold. She tried to distract herself with thoughts of the humid rainforest, the heat of the Amazonian sun, but no warmth came. All she could think about was the little boy who had been holding the crying man's hand.