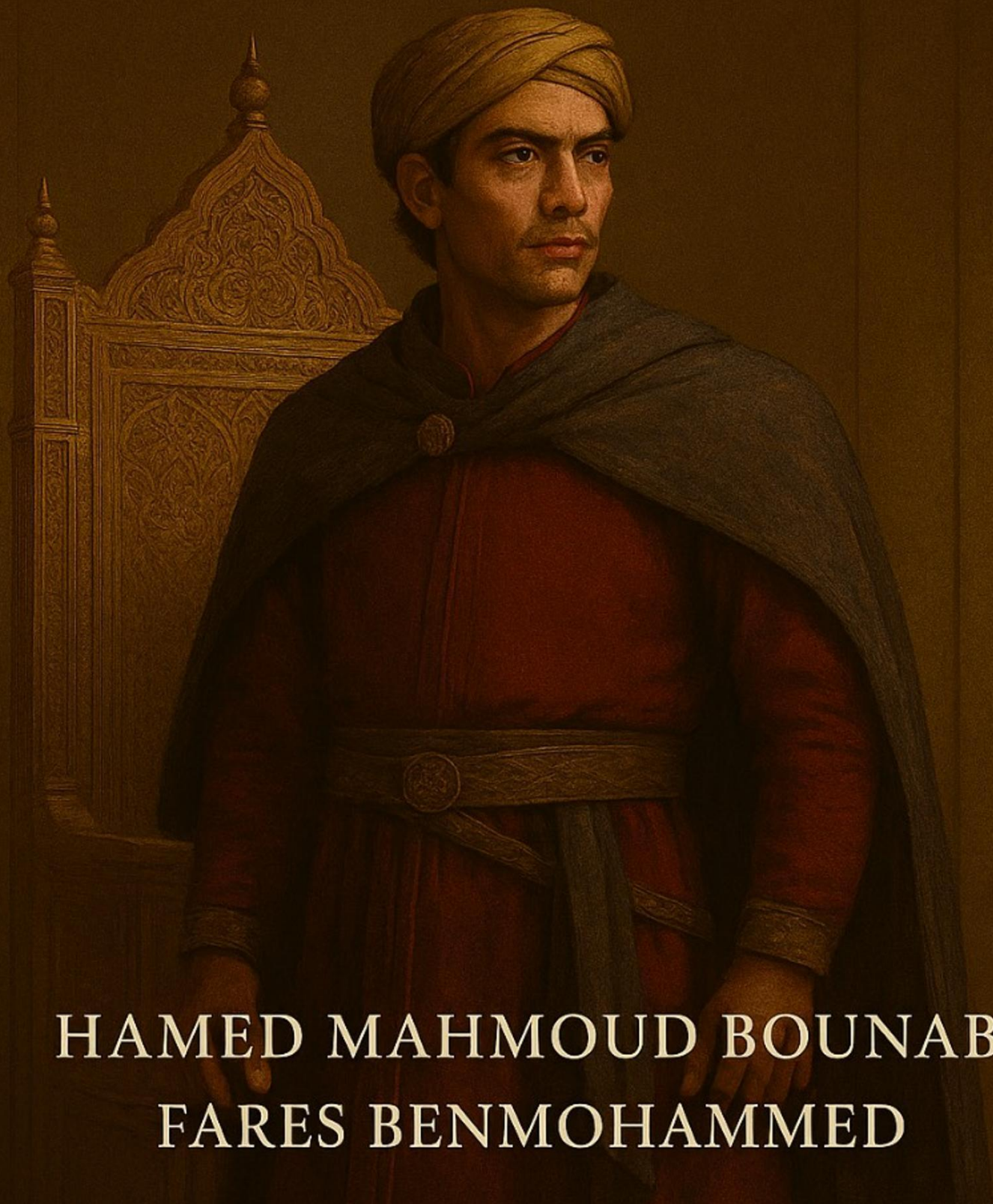


AMIR'S JOURNEY TO THE THRONE



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Archaeologist becomes king of crumbling jinn realm; must unite tribes with modern queen against nihilistic cult. Epic fantasy romance.

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Chapter 1: Awakening in the Dust

The sun over the Hadhramaut was a hammer, and the dust was its anvil. Amir Khan wiped the grime from his brow, his trowel scraping against a piece of pottery that was, for the tenth time today, utterly mundane. Five years of doctoral work, two published papers, and one soul-crushing personal loss had led him here: to a scorching grid-square in Yemen, chasing whispers of a lost trade route for a university that had already forgotten his name.

“Find anything besides heatstroke, Doctor?” called Karim, his site foreman, from under a makeshift canopy.

“Just more evidence that the ancients had better pottery glue than we do,” Amir replied, his voice tight. The title still stung. It reminded him of his mother’s proud smile, now two years gone. She was the reason he dug into the past, seeking connections. Now, it just felt like digging graves.

As the sun began its descent, painting the cliffs in hues of blood and gold, the other workers departed. Amir stayed. He was chasing an anomaly on the ground-penetrating radar scan—a faint, circular discontinuity that didn’t match the stratigraphy. A flaw in the machine, most likely. Like the flaw in his own life.

He worked alone, the silence broken only by the sigh of the wind. Then, his trowel hit not clay, but something metallic. Gently, he brushed away the centuries. A disc, no larger than his palm, emerged. It was neither gold nor bronze, but a dull, greyish metal that seemed to drink the fading light. At its center was an intricate seal: a six-pointed star within a circle, inscribed with script so fine it looked like strands of hair. It was Old South Arabian, but something about it was... off.

As his fingers closed around it, the world dropped away. Not a vision, not a sound. A knowing. A rush of serene, terrifying wisdom flooded his mind—the weight of a mountain, the patience of a forest, the justice of a perfect scale. He saw glimpses: a magnificent throne that commanded the wind, conversations with creatures of smoke and flame, the solemn duty of judgment. And beneath it all, a profound loneliness, the isolation of a crown that understood the language of all things but the simple tongue of the heart.

He gasped, wrenching his hand back. The disc—the Seal—now glowed with a soft, internal light, pulsing like a heartbeat. The script swirled, rearranging itself into Arabic he could understand: “For the one who seeks not to possess, but to understand. The Inheritance is yours. The Danger is awake.”

A cold that had nothing to do with the desert night shot down his spine. This was no artifact. It was an address. And he had just opened the door. The crunch of gravel behind him was deliberately loud. Amir spun, clutching the Seal to his chest. Three figures emerged from the twilight, dressed in rugged tactical gear, out of place in the archaeological site. The leader, a man with eyes like chips of flint, smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes.

“Dr. Khan. A remarkable find. We’ve been monitoring this frequency for a long time.” His accent was unplaceable. “The ‘Miftah al-Quds.’ The Key of the Sanctuary. Hand it over, please. It’s too... significant for a mere academic.”

“Who are you?” Amir demanded, his mind racing. The Seal’s warmth seeped into his skin, the whispers of ancient wisdom now a frantic buzz.

“Consider us... collectors. Of unique energies.” The man took a step forward. “The old world left behind batteries. We like to drain them.”

Amir backed up, his heel hitting the trench edge. He was trapped. Panic, hot and acidic, rose in his throat. But beneath it, the Seal’s calm pulsed. A whisper, not in his ear, but in his mind: “He commands not by force, but by permission. Ask. The wind listens.”

It was madness. Sheer madness. But as the lead collector lunged, Amir didn't think. He threw out his free hand, not in a fist, but with his palm open, the ancient script on the Seal flaring. He didn't shout a command. He asked, with every fiber of his terrified being, pouring the strange new knowledge into a single, desperate thought: "Stop him."

The desert wind, which had been a gentle sigh, obeyed. It coalesced in front of the attacker into a visible, shimmering wall of compressed air with a sound like a hundred sheets ripping. The man slammed into it and was hurled backwards as if hit by a truck, landing in a heap ten feet away.

Silence, absolute and stunned, fell over the other two collectors. Amir stared at his own hand, then at the Seal, now glowing like a captured star. The whispers in his mind solidified into a single, clear, resonant voice, deep and ancient: "The Line of Sulaiman is restored. The Diwan awaits its King. And the shadows have found you."

From the darkening wadi, a new sound arose—a skittering, rasping noise of many legs on stone. The two remaining collectors looked past Amir, their faces draining of color. They turned and fled, dragging their unconscious leader. Amir looked behind him. At the edge of the dig site, silhouetted against the indigo sky, stood a creature. It was vaguely scorpion-like, the size of a large dog, but wrought from shifting sand and obsidian shadows. It clicked its mandibles, and a voice like grinding stones echoed in his mind.

"King-that-was-and-is. The Vizier sends me. Your palace is in ruins. Your enemies are at the gate. Come. The wind will carry you, if you permit it."

Amir Khan, PhD, orphan, seeker of dead things, stood in the trench with a god's whisper in his mind, a monster of legend at his back, and the crushing weight of a throne he never asked for settling onto his shoulders. His old life was ashes. His new one was a storm. And he had just taken the first step into the eye of it.

Chapter 2: The Crumbling Diwan

The journey began with a scream trapped in his throat. Amir stood frozen as the sand-scorpion creature—the jinn—advanced. Its form wasn't solid; it shimmered like a heat haze over asphalt, grains of sand perpetually falling from its shadowy carapace only to be drawn back up again. It stopped a few paces away, and the grinding-stone voice resonated once more in his skull.

"Permission must be granted. The old ways bind us. Will you ride the wind, King-that-is?"

Amir's grip on the Seal was so tight his knuckles ached bone-white. The metal was no longer cold or even warm; it felt like a living extension of his palm, its pulse syncing with his racing heart. The whispers had settled into a low, constant hum at the base of his mind, a library of silent knowledge waiting to be opened. He commands not by force, but by permission.

"What... what are you?" Amir managed, his voice a dry rasp.

"I am Rukh, a servant of the Diwan. A Keeper of the Threshold, wrought from the sands of Ubar and the shadows of regret. My form is what you see. My function is to bring you home."

Home. The word struck a dissonant chord. His home was a small, book-cluttered apartment in London he hadn't seen in eight months. Not a phantom palace whispered about by a creature of nightmare.

"And if I say no?"

Rukh's obsidian pincers clicked, a sound like stones cracking. "The ones who fled will return with greater numbers and different tools. They are the Voidless. They seek to unmake what they cannot understand. You will be a beacon to them now, whether you hold the Seal aloft or bury it in the deepest trench. The Inheritance is not a physical object. It is a covenant. It has been activated. You are its vessel."

The logic was inescapable, a cold equation written in the language of myth. He had touched the Seal, and it had touched him back. There was no undo button. The three hunters—the Voidless—were proof. He looked at his hand, remembering the wall of wind. That power hadn't come from

him. It had flowed through him, from some vast, ancient reservoir. To stay here was to die, or worse, to let that power be harvested by those “collectors.”

He took a shuddering breath, the desert air suddenly thin. “Alright. What do I do?”

“Hold the Seal. Speak your consent. And do not fear the path.”

Amir lifted the disc. In the moonlight, its glow was ethereal, casting dancing, star-shaped shadows on the trench walls. He felt foolish, theatrical. “I... I consent. Take me to this Diwan.”

The Seal flared. Not a flash, but a deep, thrumming vibration that passed from the metal into the air itself. The sighing night wind stilled, then reversed, pulling inward towards Amir. Sand skittered across the ground, spiraling around his feet. The air pressure dropped, making his ears pop. Rukh dissolved. Not in a puff of smoke, but in a cascade of sand that joined the growing vortex. The grains didn't fall; they flowed upwards, weaving together into a shimmering, opaque funnel that enveloped him. The world of the dig site—the grid lines, his discarded trowel, the distant lights of the workers' camp—smeared like wet paint, then vanished.

There was no sense of movement, not as humans understood it. He was still, and the universe rewrote itself around him. Colors bled into sounds—the deep hum of the Seal became a rich purple, the sigh of the wind a streak of silver. He felt weightless, timeless. Glimpses flickered at the edges of this non-space: a vast desert under a green sun, mountains that moved like slumbering beasts, a city of crystal spires reflected in a calm sea. Then, they were gone.

His feet found solid ground with a gentle firmness. The swirling sand settled, falling away to reveal not sand at all, but fine, sparkling dust that vanished before it touched the floor. Amir stumbled, his legs watery. He was in a chamber so vast the ceiling was lost in gloom. The air was cool, dry, and carried a scent he could only describe as old—stone, incense, parchment, and the faint, clean ozone of a high altitude. He stood on a circular dais of white marble, inlaid with gold and lapis lazuli in patterns of staggering complexity: constellations he didn't recognize, geometric proofs that made his head ache, flowing calligraphy that seemed to shift when he didn't look directly at it.

The chamber was a symphony of ruined grandeur. Soaring arches of pale stone carved to look like intertwined trees framed the space, but several had cracked, their halves held together by glowing veins of golden light that pulsed sluggishly. Tapestries that might once have depicted glorious histories hung in faded, tattered rags. A huge, crescent-shaped window on one wall was spider-webbed with cracks, and through it, instead of a sky, swirled a perpetual, gentle nebula of muted blues and violets. And it was silent. A deep, waiting silence that pressed against his eardrums.

“Welcome, Amir, son of Aya, to the Heart of the World. Or what remains of it.”

The voice was human, weary, and came from directly in front of him. A man stood at the base of the dais. He appeared to be in his late sixties, with a neatly trimmed grey beard and kind, exhausted eyes. He wore simple, elegant robes of dun-colored wool, a far cry from the splendor implied by the room. The only hint of the extraordinary was the staff he leaned on—a length of dark, polished wood topped with a clear crystal that held a single, floating mote of silver light.

“Who are you?” Amir asked, descending the dais steps. His voice echoed in the emptiness.

“I am Zafir, Vizier to the Throne of Sulaiman, peace be upon him. Keeper of the Diwan in its... interregnum.” He offered a shallow, formal bow. “For three hundred and forty-seven years, I have maintained the wards, balanced the ledgers, and arbitrated the petty squabbles of a crumbling court, waiting for the Seal to choose again. I had begun to think it never would.”

“The Seal... chose me?”

“It responds to a resonance of the spirit,” Zafir said, turning and gesturing for Amir to follow. His footsteps made no sound on the magnificent mosaic floor, which depicted a great tree whose roots plunged into darkness and branches cradled stars. “A capacity for justice tempered by mercy. A yearning to understand, not merely to possess. The bloodline is a factor, but a faint one after so many millennia. It is the heart the Seal tests. Yours, it seems, passed.”

Amir followed, trying to take it all in. They passed through an archway into a long gallery. Statues lined the walls—figures of regal bearing, humans and jinn alike, some with features of animals or elements. But many were damaged: a head missing here, an arm sheared off there. One statue of a woman holding a scale was entirely encased in a translucent, amber-like substance. “What happened here?”

“Time. Neglect. And the slow leak of power,” Zafir sighed. “The Diwan exists in a fold of reality, sustained by the covenant of Sulaiman. It is a place of judgment, of learning, of balance between the seen and unseen worlds. But without an active heir on the Throne, the covenant weakens. The power that holds the walls firm, that keeps the libraries illuminated, that commands the respect of the seventy-two tribes of the Jinn... it ebbs. We have been running on reserves. And now, the reserves are nearly gone.”

They entered a smaller, more intact chamber that served as Zafir’s study. Scrolls and strange, crystalline tablets were stacked on shelves. A large, circular table dominated the room, its surface a living map. Miniature mountains rose and fell in slow respiration; tiny rivers of mercury flowed across it; pinpricks of light denoted cities, both familiar and impossibly alien. “Sit, please,” Zafir said, lowering himself into a worn chair. Amir took the one opposite. “You have questions. Ask them.”

Where to even begin? “The Voidless. Who are they?”

Zafir’s face darkened. “A cancer. In the ages after Sulaiman, some humans learned fragments of the binding arts. A cult grew, believing that the power of creation—the divine *Ilm* that Sulaiman wielded—was a resource to be mined, a fuel to be burned for personal ascension. They reject the covenant, the balance, the very idea of permission. They seek to take. They drain places of power, artifacts of significance, and,” he looked pointedly at the Seal in Amir’s hand, “heirs. They are why the Diwan must remain hidden.”

“And the jinn? Rukh said ‘tribes.’ You said ‘court.’”

“The Jinn are a race of sentient beings created from smokeless fire,” Zafir explained. “They are as varied as humanity: noble and wicked, wise and foolish, strong and weak. Sulaiman, gifted with understanding of all languages, did not enslave them as some stories crudely tell. He forged a covenant. In return for his just rule and mediation, many tribes swore allegiance, finding purpose and order in service to a higher wisdom. This Diwan was their capital as much as his. But without a king...” He gestured to the crumbling gallery outside. “Allegiances fray. Tribes like the Ifrit of the Volcanic Deep grow restless and prideful. The Marid of the Hidden Seas retreat to their abysses. The sly Ghoul of the Wastes see opportunity in chaos. I preside over a parliament of ghosts and reluctant ambassadors.”

Amir’s head swam. It was too much. He was an archaeologist, a man who pieced together history from broken shards. He wasn’t a king, a diplomat to elemental beings. “I can’t do this,” he said, the words bursting out of him. “I’m not a ruler. I solve academic puzzles. My biggest responsibility was grading undergraduate essays.”

Zafir studied him, his tired eyes missing nothing. “The Seal says otherwise. And it has a way of forcing one to rise to its expectations. Your first test is already here.”

“What test?”

Before Zafir could answer, the air in the chamber rippled. Two figures materialized in the doorway, not bothering with the entrance. One was a tall, imposing being. His skin had the texture and color of cooled basalt, and cracks of molten orange light glowed beneath it. He wore ornate armor of blackened metal, and heat haze shimmered around him. His face was handsome in a fierce, sharp-angled way, and his eyes burned like coals. The other was smaller, hunched, with skin like wrinkled parchment and eyes that were entirely milky white. He leaned on a gnarled staff of petrified wood and wore ragged robes that seemed to blend into the shadows.

The tall one spoke first, his voice a low rumble like stones grinding in a deep furnace. “Vizier Zafir. The court whispers that the Wind has brought a spark to the cold Throne. We have come to

see this... spark for ourselves.” His burning gaze swept over Amir, dismissive. “This is the heir? He smells of dust and mortal fear.”

The smaller one’s voice was a dry rustle. “Appearances are a veil, Ignis. Even a spark may start a conflagration. Or be easily snuffed.”

Amir felt a flare of indignation cut through his fear. He stood up, facing them. “I am Amir. And you are?”

The tall jinn, Ignis, let out a short, sharp laugh that sparked embers in the air. “I am Ignis, Emissary of the Ifrit of the Smoldering Citadel. This wraith is Kael, Speaker for the Ghulat of the Silent Forest.”

Zafir remained seated, his posture weary but his eyes alert. “You bypass the Hall of Petitions. This is a breach of protocol.”

“Protocol is for when the Throne has power,” Ignis rumbled. “We come with a grievance. A border dispute. My people mine the Ember-Roots in the Ash-Canyons. The Ghulat,” he spat the word, “claim the canyons are part of their blighted forest, that the mining disturbs their sacred silence. They have ambushed our miners. We have burned their watch-trees. It will be war if not settled.”

Kael’s milky eyes seemed to stare through Amir. “The vibrations of their digging are a sacrilege. The silence of the forest is not mere absence of sound. It is a living prayer. Their industry is a screeching nail on the soul of the world. They must cease.”

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