

## One

FALL 1952

So, then. You want a story and I will tell you one. But just the one. Don't either of you ask me for more. It's late, and we have a long day of travel ahead of us, Pari, you and I. You will need your sleep tonight. And you too, Abdullah. I am counting on you, boy, while your sister and I are away. So is your mother. Now. One story, then. Listen, both of you, listen well. And don't interrupt.

Once upon a time, in the days when *divs* and *jinnns* and giants roamed the land, there lived a farmer named Baba Ayub. He lived with his family in a little village by the name of Maidan Sabz. Because he had a large family to feed, Baba Ayub saw his days consumed by hard work. Every day, he labored from dawn to sundown, plowing his field and turning the soil and tending to his meager pistachio trees. At any given moment you could spot him in his field, bent at the waist, back as curved as the scythe he swung all day. His hands were always callused, and they often bled, and every night sleep stole him away no sooner than his cheek met the pillow.

I will say that, in this regard, he was hardly alone. Life in

Maidan Sabz was hard for all its inhabitants. There were other, more fortunate villages to the north, in the valleys, with fruit trees and flowers and pleasant air, and streams that ran with cold, clear water. But Maidan Sabz was a desolate place, and it didn't resemble in the slightest the image that its name, Field of Green, would have you picture. It sat in a flat, dusty plain ringed by a chain of craggy mountains. The wind was hot, and blew dust in the eyes. Finding water was a daily struggle because the village wells, even the deep ones, often ran low. Yes, there was a river, but the villagers had to endure a half-day walk to reach it, and even then its waters flowed muddy all year round. Now, after ten years of drought, the river too ran shallow. Let's just say that people in Maidan Sabz worked twice as hard to eke out half the living.

Still, Baba Ayub counted himself among the fortunate because he had a family that he cherished above all things. He loved his wife and never raised his voice to her, much less his hand. He valued her counsel and found genuine pleasure in her companionship. As for children, he was blessed with as many as a hand has fingers, three sons and two daughters, each of whom he loved dearly. His daughters were dutiful and kind and of good character and repute. To his sons he had taught already the value of honesty, courage, friendship, and hard work without complaint. They obeyed him, as good sons must, and helped their father with his crops.

Though he loved all of his children, Baba Ayub privately had a unique fondness for one among them, his youngest, Qais, who was three years old. Qais was a little boy with dark blue eyes. He charmed anyone who met him with his devilish laughter. He was also one of those boys so bursting with energy that he drained others of theirs. When he learned to walk, he took such delight in it that he did it all day while he was awake, and then, troublingly, even at night in his sleep. He would sleepwalk out of the family's

mud house and wander off into the moonlit darkness. Naturally, his parents worried. What if he fell into a well, or got lost, or, worst of all, was attacked by one of the creatures lurking the plains at night? They took stabs at many remedies, none of which worked. In the end, the solution Baba Ayub found was a simple one, as the best solutions often are: He removed a tiny bell from around the neck of one of his goats and hung it instead around Qais's neck. This way, the bell would wake someone if Qais were to rise in the middle of the night. The sleepwalking stopped after a time, but Qais grew attached to the bell and refused to part with it. And so, even though it didn't serve its original use, the bell remained fastened to the string around the boy's neck. When Baba Ayub came home after a long day's work, Qais would run from the house face-first into his father's belly, the bell jingling with each of his tiny steps. Baba Ayub would lift him up and take him into the house, and Qais would watch with great attention as his father washed up, and then he would sit beside Baba Ayub at suppertime. After they had eaten, Baba Ayub would sip his tea, watching his family, picturing a day when all of his children married and gave him children of their own, when he would be proud patriarch to an even greater brood.

Alas, Abdullah and Pari, Baba Ayub's days of happiness came to an end.

It happened one day that a *div* came to Maidan Sabz. As it approached the village from the direction of the mountains, the earth shook with each of its footfalls. The villagers dropped their shovels and hoes and axes and scattered. They locked themselves in their homes and huddled with one another. When the deafening sounds of the *div*'s footsteps stopped, the skies over Maidan Sabz darkened with its shadow. It was said that curved horns sprouted from its head and that coarse black hair covered its shoulders and

powerful tail. They said its eyes shone red. No one knew for sure, you understand, at least no one living: The *div* ate on the spot those who dared steal so much as a single glance. Knowing this, the villagers wisely kept their eyes glued to the ground.

Everyone at the village knew why the *div* had come. They had heard the tales of its visits to other villages and they could only marvel at how Maidan Sabz had managed to escape its attention for so long. Perhaps, they reasoned, the poor, stringent lives they led in Maidan Sabz had worked in their favor, as their children weren't as well fed and didn't have as much meat on their bones. Even so, their luck had run out at last.

Maidan Sabz trembled and held its breath. Families prayed that the *div* would bypass their home for they knew that if the *div* tapped on their roof, they would have to give it one child. The *div* would then toss the child into a sack, sling the sack over its shoulder, and go back the way it had come. No one would ever see the poor child again. And if a household refused, the *div* would take all of its children.

So where did the *div* take the children to? To its fort, which sat atop a steep mountain. The *div*'s fort was very far from Maidan Sabz. Valleys, several deserts, and two mountain chains had to be cleared before you could reach it. And what sane person would, only to meet death? They said the fort was full of dungeons where cleavers hung from walls. Meat hooks dangled from ceilings. They said there were giant skewers and fire pits. They said that if it caught a trespasser, the *div* was known to overcome its aversion to adult meat.

I guess you know which rooftop received the *div*'s dreaded tap. Upon hearing it, Baba Ayub let an agonized cry escape from his lips, and his wife fainted cold. The children wept with terror, and also sorrow, because they knew that the loss of one among them

was now assured. The family had until the next dawn to make its offering.

What can I say to you of the anguish that Baba Ayub and his wife suffered that night? No parent should have to make a choice such as this. Out of the children's earshot, Baba Ayub and his wife debated what they should do. They talked and wept and talked and wept. All night, they went back and forth, and, as dawn neared, they had yet to reach a decision—which was perhaps what the *div* wanted, as their indecision would allow it to take five children instead of one. In the end, Baba Ayub collected from just outside the house five rocks of identical size and shape. On the face of each he scribbled the name of one child, and when he was done he tossed the rocks into a burlap sack. When he offered the bag to his wife, she recoiled as though it held a venomous snake.

"I can't do it," she said to her husband, shaking her head. "I cannot be the one to choose. I couldn't bear it."

"Neither could I," Baba Ayub began to say, but he saw through the window that the sun was only moments away from peeking over the eastern hills. Time was running short. He gazed miserably at his five children. A finger had to be cut, to save the hand. He shut his eyes and withdrew a rock from the sack.

I suppose you also know which rock Baba Ayub happened to pick. When he saw the name on it, he turned his face heavenward and let out a scream. With a broken heart, he lifted his youngest son into his arms, and Qais, who had blind trust in his father, happily wrapped his arms around Baba Ayub's neck. It wasn't until Baba Ayub deposited him outside the house and shut the door that the boy realized what was amiss, and there stood Baba Ayub, eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking from both, back against the door, as his beloved Qais pounded his small fists on it, crying for Baba to let him back in, and Baba Ayub stood there, muttering, "Forgive

me, forgive me,” as the ground shook with the *div*'s footsteps, and his son screeched, and the earth trembled again and again as the *div* took its leave from Maidan Sabz, until at last it was gone, and the earth was still, and all was silence but for Baba Ayub, still weeping and asking Qais for forgiveness.

Abdullah. Your sister has fallen asleep. Cover her feet with the blanket. There. Good. Maybe I should stop now. No? You want me to go on? Are you sure, boy? All right.

Where was I? Ah yes. There followed a forty-day mourning period. Every day, neighbors cooked meals for the family and kept vigil with them. People brought over what offerings they could—tea, candy, bread, almonds—and they brought as well their condolences and sympathies. Baba Ayub could hardly bring himself to say so much as a word of thanks. He sat in a corner, weeping, streams of tears pouring from both eyes as though he meant to end the village's streak of droughts with them. You wouldn't wish his torment and suffering on the vilest of men.

Several years passed. The droughts continued, and Maidan Sabz fell into even worse poverty. Several babies died of thirst in their cribs. The wells ran even lower and the river dried, unlike Baba Ayub's anguish, a river that swelled and swelled with each passing day. He was of no use to his family any longer. He didn't work, didn't pray, hardly ate. His wife and children pleaded with him, but it was no good. His remaining sons had to take over his work, for every day Baba Ayub did nothing but sit at the edge of his field, a lone, wretched figure gazing toward the mountains. He stopped speaking to the villagers, for he believed they muttered things behind his back. They said he was a coward for willingly giving away his son. That he was an unfit father. A real father would have fought the *div*. He would have died defending his family.

He mentioned this to his wife one night.

“They say no such things,” his wife replied. “No one thinks you are a coward.”

“I can hear them,” he said.

“It is your own voice you are hearing, husband,” she said. She, however, did not tell him that the villagers *did* whisper behind his back. And what they whispered was that he’d perhaps gone mad.

And then one day, he gave them proof. He rose at dawn. Without waking his wife and children, he stowed a few scraps of bread into a burlap sack, put on his shoes, tied his scythe around his waist, and set off.

He walked for many, many days. He walked until the sun was a faint red glow in the distance. Nights, he slept in caves as the wind whistled outside. Or else he slept beside rivers and beneath trees and among the cover of boulders. He ate his bread, and then he ate what he could find—wild berries, mushrooms, fish that he caught with his bare hands from streams—and some days he didn’t eat at all. But still he walked. When passersby asked where he was going, he told them, and some laughed, some hurried past for fear he was a madman, and some prayed for him, as they too had lost a child to the *div*. Baba Ayub kept his head down and walked. When his shoes fell apart, he fastened them to his feet with strings, and when the strings tore he pushed forward on bare feet. In this way, he traveled across deserts and valleys and mountains.

At last he reached the mountain atop which sat the *div*’s fort. So eager he was to fulfill his quest that he didn’t rest and immediately began his climb, his clothes shredded, his feet bloodied, his hair caked with dust, but his resolve unshaken. The jagged rocks ripped his soles. Hawks pecked at his cheeks when he climbed past their nest. Violent gusts of wind nearly tore him from the side of the mountain. And still he climbed, from one rock to the next, until at last he stood before the massive gates of the *div*’s fort.

Who dares? the *div*'s voice boomed when Baba Ayub threw a stone at the gates.

Baba Ayub stated his name. "I come from the village of Maidan Sabz," he said.

Do you have a wish to die? Surely you must, disturbing me in my home! What is your business?

"I have come here to kill you."

There came a pause from the other side of the gates. And then the gates creaked open, and there stood the *div*, looming over Baba Ayub in all of its nightmarish glory.

Have you? it said in a voice thick as thunder.

"Indeed," Baba Ayub said. "One way or another, one of us dies today."

It appeared for a moment that the *div* would swipe Baba Ayub off the ground and finish him with a single bite of its dagger-sharp teeth. But something made the creature hesitate. It narrowed its eyes. Perhaps it was the craziness of the old man's words. Perhaps it was the man's appearance, the shredded garb, the bloodied face, the dust that coated him head to toe, the open sores on his skin. Or perhaps it was that, in the old man's eyes, the *div* found not even a tinge of fear.

Where did you say you came from?

"Maidan Sabz," said Baba Ayub.

It must be far away, by the look of you, this Maidan Sabz.

"I did not come here to palaver. I came here to—"

The *div* raised one clawed hand. Yes. Yes. You've come to kill me. I know. But surely I can be granted a few last words before I am slain.

"Very well," said Baba Ayub. "But only a few."

I thank you. The *div* grinned. May I ask what evil I have committed against you so as to warrant death?

“You took from me my youngest son,” Baba Ayub replied. “He was in the world the dearest thing to me.”

The *div* grunted and tapped its chin. I have taken many children from many fathers, it said.

Baba Ayub angrily drew his scythe. “Then I shall exact revenge on their behalf as well.”

I must say your courage rouses in me a surge of admiration.

“You know nothing of courage,” said Baba Ayub. “For courage, there must be something at stake. I come here with nothing to lose.”

You have your life to lose, said the *div*.

“You already took that from me.”

The *div* grunted again and studied Baba Ayub thoughtfully. After a time, it said, Very well, then. I will grant you your duel. But first I ask that you follow me.

“Be quick,” Baba Ayub said, “I am out of patience.” But the *div* was already walking toward a giant hallway, and Baba Ayub had no choice but to follow it. He trailed the *div* through a labyrinth of hallways, the ceiling of each nearly scraped the clouds, each supported by enormous columns. They passed many stairwells, and chambers big enough to contain all of Maidan Sabz. They walked this way until at last the *div* led Baba Ayub into an enormous room, at the far end of which was a curtain.

Come closer, the *div* motioned.

Baba Ayub stood next to the *div*.

The *div* pulled the curtains open. Behind it was a glass window. Through the window, Baba Ayub looked down on an enormous garden. Lines of cypress trees bordered the garden, the ground at their base filled with flowers of all colors. There were pools made of blue tiles, and marble terraces, and lush green lawns. Baba Ayub saw beautifully sculpted hedges and water fountains gurgling in

the shade of pomegranate trees. In three lifetimes he could not have imagined a place so beautiful.

But what truly brought Baba Ayub to his knees was the sight of children running and playing happily in the garden. They chased one another through the walkways and around trees. They played games of hide-and-seek behind the hedges. Baba Ayub's eyes searched among the children and at last found what he was looking for. There he was! His son Qais, alive, and more than well. He had grown in height, and his hair was longer than Baba Ayub remembered. He wore a beautiful white shirt over handsome trousers. He laughed happily as he ran after a pair of comrades.

"Qais," Baba Ayub whispered, his breath fogging the glass. And then he screamed his son's name.

He cannot hear you, the *div* said. Nor see you.

Baba Ayub jumped up and down, waving his arms and pounding on the glass, until the *div* pulled the curtains shut once more.

"I don't understand," Baba Ayub said. "I thought . . ."

This is your reward, the *div* said.

"Explain yourself," Baba Ayub exclaimed.

I forced upon you a test.

"A test."

A test of your love. It was a harsh challenge, I recognize, and its heavy toll upon you does not escape me. But you passed. This is your reward. And his.

"What if I hadn't chosen," cried Baba Ayub. "What if I had refused you your test?"

Then all your children would have perished, the *div* said, for they would have been cursed anyway, fathered as they were by a weak man. A coward who would see them all die rather than burden his own conscience. You say you have no courage, but I see it in

you. What you did, the burden you agreed to shoulder, took courage. For that, I honor you.

Baba Ayub weakly drew his scythe, but it slipped from his hand and struck the marble floor with a loud clang. His knees buckled, and he had to sit.

Your son does not remember you, the *div* continued. This is his life now, and you saw for yourself his happiness. He is provided here with the finest food and clothes, with friendship and affection. He receives tutoring in the arts and languages and in the sciences, and in the ways of wisdom and charity. He wants for nothing. Someday, when he is a man, he may choose to leave, and he shall be free to do so. I suspect he will touch many lives with his kindness and bring happiness to those trapped in sorrow.

“I want to see him,” Baba Ayub said. “I want to take him home.”

Do you?

Baba Ayub looked up at the *div*.

The creature moved to a cabinet that sat near the curtains and removed from one of its drawers an hourglass. Do you know what that is, Abdullah, an hourglass? You do. Good. Well, the *div* took the hourglass, flipped it over, and placed it at Baba Ayub’s feet.

I will allow you to take him home with you, the *div* said. If you choose to, he can never return here. If you choose not to, *you* can never return here. When all the sand has poured, I will ask for your decision.

And with that, the *div* exited the chamber, leaving Baba Ayub with yet another painful choice to make.

I will take him home, Baba Ayub thought immediately. This was what he desired the most, with every fiber of his being. Hadn’t he pictured this in a thousand dreams? To hold little Qais again, to kiss his cheek and feel the softness of his small hands in his

own? And yet . . . If he took him home, what sort of life awaited Qais in Maidan Sabz? The hard life of a peasant at best, like his own, and little more. That is, if Qais didn't die from the droughts like so many of the village's children had. Could you forgive yourself, then, Baba Ayub asked himself, knowing that you plucked him, for your own selfish reasons, from a life of luxury and opportunity? On the other hand, if he left Qais behind, how could he bear it, knowing that his boy was alive, to know his whereabouts and yet be forbidden to see him? How could he bear it? Baba Ayub wept. He grew so despondent that he lifted the hourglass and hurled it at the wall, where it crashed into a thousand pieces and its fine sand spilled all over the floor.

The *div* reentered the room and found Baba Ayub standing over the broken glass, his shoulders slumped.

"You are a cruel beast," Baba Ayub said.

When you have lived as long as I have, the *div* replied, you find that cruelty and benevolence are but shades of the same color. Have you made your choice?

Baba Ayub dried his tears, picked up his scythe, and tied it around his waist. He slowly walked toward the door, his head hung low.

You are a good father, the *div* said, as Baba Ayub passed him by.

"Would that you roast in the fires of Hell for what you have done to me," Baba Ayub said wearily.

He exited the room and was heading down the hallway when the *div* called after him.

Take this, the *div* said. The creature handed Baba Ayub a small glass flask containing a dark liquid. Drink this upon your journey home. Farewell.

Baba Ayub took the flask and left without saying another word.

Many days later, his wife was sitting at the edge of the family's

field, looking out for him much as Baba Ayub had sat there hoping to see Qais. With each passing day, her hopes for his return diminished. Already people in the village were speaking of Baba Ayub in the past tense. One day she was sitting on the dirt yet again, a prayer playing upon her lips, when she saw a thin figure approaching Maidan Sabz from the direction of the mountains. At first she took him for a lost dervish, a thin man with threadbare rags for clothing, hollow eyes and sunken temples, and it wasn't until he came closer yet that she recognized her husband. Her heart leapt with joy and she cried out with relief.

After he had washed, and after he had been given water to drink and food to eat, Baba Ayub lay in his house as villagers circled around him and asked him question after question.

Where did you go, Baba Ayub?

What did you see?

What happened to you?

Baba Ayub couldn't answer them, because he didn't recall what had happened to him. He remembered nothing of his voyage, of climbing the *div's* mountain, of speaking to the *div*, of the great palace, or the big room with the curtains. It was as though he had woken from an already forgotten dream. He didn't remember the secret garden, the children, and, most of all, he didn't remember seeing his son Qais playing among the trees with his friends. In fact, when someone mentioned Qais's name, Baba Ayub blinked with puzzlement. Who? he said. He didn't recall that he had ever had a son named Qais.

Do you understand, Abdullah, how this was an act of mercy? The potion that erased these memories? It was Baba Ayub's reward for passing the *div's* second test.

That spring, the skies at last broke open over Maidan Sabz. What came down was not the soft drizzle of years past but a great,

great rainfall. Fat rain fell from the sky, and the village rose thirstily to meet it. All day, water drummed upon the roofs of Maidan Sabz and drowned all other sound from the world. Heavy, swollen raindrops rolled from the tips of leaves. The wells filled and the river rose. The hills to the east turned green. Wildflowers bloomed, and for the first time in many years children played on grass and cows grazed. Everyone rejoiced.

When the rains stopped, the village had some work to do. Several mud walls had melted, and a few of the roofs sagged, and entire sections of farmland had turned into swamps. But after the misery of the devastating drought, the people of Maidan Sabz weren't about to complain. Walls were reerected, roofs repaired, and irrigation canals drained. That fall, Baba Ayub produced the most plentiful crop of pistachios of his life, and, indeed, the year after that, and the one following, his crops increased in both size and quality. In the great cities where he sold his goods, Baba Ayub sat proudly behind pyramids of his pistachios and beamed like the happiest man who walked the earth. No drought ever came to Maidan Sabz again.

There is little more to say, Abdullah. You may ask, though, did a young handsome man riding a horse ever pass through the village on his way to great adventures? Did he perhaps stop for a drink of water, of which the village had plenty now, and did he sit to break bread with the villagers, perhaps with Baba Ayub himself? I can't tell you, boy. What I *can* say is that Baba Ayub grew to be a very old man indeed. I can tell you that he saw his children married, as he had always wished, and I can say that his children bore him many children of their own, every one of whom brought Baba Ayub great happiness.

And I can also tell you that some nights, for no particular reason, Baba Ayub couldn't sleep. Though he was a very old man now,

he still had the use of his legs so long as he held a cane. And so on those sleepless nights he slipped from bed without waking his wife, fetched his cane, and left the house. He walked in the dark, his cane tapping before him, the night breeze stroking his face. There was a flat rock at the edge of his field and he lowered himself upon it. He often sat there for an hour or more, gazing up at the stars, the clouds floating past the moon. He thought about his long life and gave thanks for all the bounty and joy that he had been given. To want more, to wish for yet more, he knew, would be petty. He sighed happily, and listened to the wind sweeping down from the mountains, to the chirping of night birds.

But every once in a while, he thought he heard another noise among these. It was always the same, the high-pitched jingle of a bell. He didn't understand why he should hear such a noise, alone in the dark, all the sheep and goats sleeping. Sometimes he told himself he had heard no such thing, and sometimes he was so convinced to the contrary that he called out into the darkness, "Is someone out there? Who is there? Show yourself." But no reply ever came. Baba Ayub didn't understand. Just as he didn't understand why a wave of something, something like the tail end of a sad dream, always swept through him whenever he heard the jingling, surprising him each time like an unexpected gust of wind. But then it passed, as all things do. It passed.

So there it is, boy. That's the end of it. I have nothing more to say. And now it really is late and I am tired, and your sister and I have to wake at dawn. So blow out your candle. Lay your head down and close your eyes. Sleep well, boy. We'll say our good-byes in the morning.