

THE DAEVABAD TRILOGY, BOOK THREE

S. A. CHAKRABORTY



Dedication

For my parents, who worked so hard to make sure their children could dream, and who were always there, no matter how long and far my wanderings

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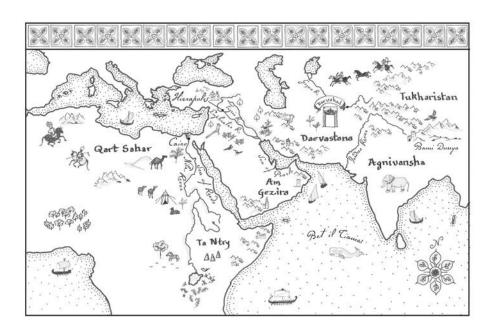
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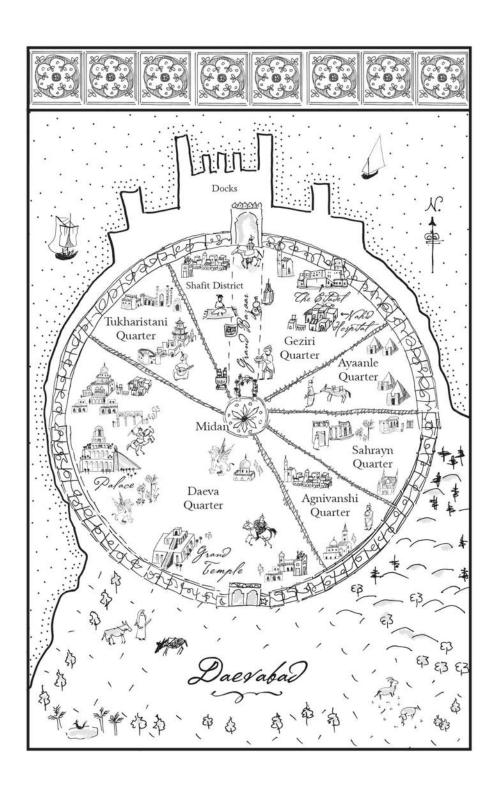
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Maps





Prologue

Manizheh

Behind the battlements of the palace that had always been hers, Banu Manizheh e-Nahid gazed at her family's city.

Bathed in starlight, Daevabad was beautiful—the jagged lines of towers and minarets, domes and pyramids—astonishing from this height, like a jumble of jeweled toys. Beyond the sliver of white beach, the dappled lake shimmered with movement against the black embrace of mountains.

She spread her hands on the stone parapet. This was not a view Manizheh had been permitted while a prisoner of the Qahtanis. Even as a child, her defiance had made them uneasy; the palace magic's public embrace of the young Nahid prodigy and her obvious talent curbing her life before she was old enough to realize the guards that surrounded her day and night weren't for her protection. The only other time she'd been up here had been as Ghassan's guest—a trip he'd arranged shortly after he became king.

Manizheh could still remember how he'd taken her hand as they'd gazed at the city their families had killed each other for, speaking dreamy words about uniting their peoples and putting the past behind them. About how he'd loved her since they were children, and about how sad and helpless he'd felt all those times his father had beaten and terrorized her and her brother. Surely she must have understood that Ghassan had had no choice but to stay silent.

In her mind's eye, Manizheh could still see his face that night, the moon shining upon his hopeful expression. They'd been younger; he'd been handsome. Charming. Whatamatch, people would have said. Who wouldn't want to be the beloved queen of a powerful djinn king? And indeed, she'd laced her fingers between his and smiled—for she still wore such an expression in those days—her eyes locked on the mark of Suleiman's seal, new upon his face.

And then she'd closed off his throat.

It hadn't lasted. Ghassan had been quicker with the seal than she'd anticipated, and as her powers fell away, so did the pressure on his throat. He'd been enraged, his face red with betrayal and lack of air, and Manizheh remembered thinking that he would hit her. That he'd do worse. That it wouldn't matter if she screamed—for he was king now and no one would cross him.

But Ghassan hadn't done that. He hadn't needed to. Manizheh had gone for his heart and so Ghassan did the same with ruthless effectiveness: having Rustam beaten within a hair of his life as she was forced to watch, breaking her brother's bones, letting them heal and then doing it again, torturing him until Rustam was a howling mess and Manizheh had fallen to her knees, begging Ghassan for mercy.

When he finally granted it, he'd been even angrier at her tears than he'd been at her initial refusal. *Iwantedthingstobedifferentbetweenus*, he'd said accusingly. *Youshouldn'thavehumiliatedme*.

She took in a sharp breath at the memory. *He'sdead*, she reminded herself. Manizheh had stared at Ghassan's bloody corpse, committing the sight to memory, trying to assure herself that her tormentor was truly gone. But she wouldn't have him burned, not yet. She intended to examine his body further, hoping for clues as to how he'd possessed Suleiman's seal. Manizheh hadn't missed that his heart had been removed—carved from his chest with surgical precision and making it clear who'd done the removing. Part of her was grateful. Despite what she'd told Nahri, Manizheh knew almost nothing about how the seal ring was passed to another.

And now, because of Nahri, Manizheh knew the first step after finding them would be to cut out the heart of Nahri's djinn prince.

Manizheh returned her gaze to the city. It was startlingly quiet, adding an eerie facade to the entire experience. Daevabad might have been a kingdom at peace in the dead of night, safe and still under the helm of its rightful guardians.

A lie a distant wail betrayed. The cries were otherwise fading, the violence of the night giving way to sheer shock and terror. Frightened people—hunted people—didn't scream. They hid, hunkering down with their loved ones in whatever shelter they could find, praying the darkness might pass them by. Everyone in Daevabad knew what happened when cities fell. They were

raised on stories of vengeance and their enemy's rapacity; depending on their roots, they were told hair-raising tales of Zaydi al Qahtani's violent conquest of Daevabad, Darayavahoush e-Afshin's scourging of Qui-zi, or the innumerable sacks of human cities. No, there wouldn't be screaming. Daevabad's people would be hiding, weeping silently as they clutched their children close, the sudden loss of their magic only one more tragedy this night.

They are going to think another Suleimanhas come. It was the conclusion any sensible person would arrive at. Had Suleiman's great judgment not started with the stripping of their ancestors' magic? They probably expected to see their lives shattered and their families torn apart as they were forced to toil for another human master, powerless to fight back.

Powerless. Manizheh pressed her palms harder against the cold stone, aching to feel the palace's magic. To conjure dancing flames or the shimmer of smoke. It seemed impossible that her abilities were gone, and she could only imagine the injuries piling up in the infirmary, injuries she now couldn't heal. For a woman who'd endured the ripping away of everything she loved—the shy country noble she might have married, the dark-eyed infant whose weight in her arms she'd yearned to feel again, the brother she'd betrayed, her very dignity as she bowed before the Qahtanis year after year—the loss of her abilities was the worst. Her magic was her life, her soul—the power beneath the strength that had enabled her to survive everything else.

Perhapsanaptpricetopay,then,forusinghealingmagictokill, a voice whispered in her head. Manizheh pushed it away. Such doubt wouldn't help her or her people right now. Instead she'd lean on anger, the fury that coursed in her when she watched years of planning be upended by a quick-fingered shafit girl.

Nahri. The defiance in her dark eyes. The slight, almost rueful shrug as she shoved their family's most cherished treasure onto the finger of an unworthy sand fly.

Iwouldhavegivenyoueverything,child.Everythingyoucouldhave possiblywanted.EverythingIneverhad.

"Enjoying your victory?"

Aeshma's mocking voice set her teeth on edge, but Manizheh didn't so much as twitch. She'd been dealing with the ifrit long enough to know how to handle him—how to handle everyone, really. You simply offered no target—no weaknesses, no doubt. No allies or loved ones. She kept her gaze forward as he joined her at the wall.

"A long time I've waited to look upon Anahid's city." There was cruel triumph in his voice. "But it's not quite the paradise of the songs. Where are the shedu rumored to patrol the skies and the gardens of jeweled trees and

rivers of wine? The fawning marid servants conjuring rainbows of waterfalls and a library teeming with the secrets of creation?"

Manizheh's stomach twisted. *Goneforcenturies*. She'd immersed herself in the great stories of her ancestors, and they painted an utterly unfamiliar Daevabad from what she saw now. "We will bring them back."

A glance revealed cold pleasure rippling across Aeshma's fiery visage. "She loved this place," he continued. "A sanctuary for the people she dragged back together, her carefully tended paradise that allowed no sinners."

"You sound jealous."

"Jealous? Three thousand years I dwelled in the land of the two rivers with Anahid, watching the floods recede and the humans rise. We warred with the marid and traveled the desert winds together. All of that forgotten because of some human's ultimatum."

"You chose different paths in dealing with Suleiman."

"She *chose* to betray her people and closest friends."

Shesavedherpeople. Iintendtodothesame. "And here I thought we were finally setting that aside and making peace."

Aeshma scoffed. "How do you propose to do that, Banu Nahida? Do you think I don't know what's happened to your abilities? I doubt right now you could even summon a spark, let alone hope to fulfill your bargain with me." He raised a palm, a tendril of fire swirling between his fingers. "A shame your people haven't had three millennia to learn other ways of magic."

It took everything Manizheh had not to stare at the flame, hunger eating through her soul. "Then how fortunate I have you to teach me."

The ifrit laughed. "Why should I? I have been helping you for years already, and I've yet to gain a thing."

"You've gained a glimpse of Anahid's city."

Aeshma grinned. "There is that, I suppose." His smile widened, his razor-sharp teeth gleaming. "I could gain even more right now. I could throw you from this wall and kill her most promising descendant."

Manizheh didn't flinch; she was too accustomed to men threatening her. "You would never escape Darayavahoush. He would track down every ifrit left, torture and slaughter them before your eyes, and then spend a century killing you in the most painful way he could imagine. You would die at the hands of the magic you desire most."

That seemed to land, a scowl replacing Aeshma's mocking grin. It always did; Manizheh knew the ifrit's weaknesses as well as he knew her secrets.

"Your Afshin does not deserve such abilities," he snapped. "The first daeva freed from Suleiman's curse in thousands of years, and he's an ill-tempered, overly armed fool. You might as well have given such abilities to a rabid dog." That wasn't an analogy Manizheh liked—there was already a bit too much defiance simmering below the absolute loyalty she typically enjoyed with Dara.

But she pressed on. "If you desire Dara's abilities, you should stop issuing worthless threats and help me get Suleiman's seal back. I cannot free you from the curse without it."

"How very convenient."

"Excuse me?"

He dropped his gaze to stare at her. "I said it is *convenient*," he repeated. "For decades now, I have been at your side, awaiting *your* help, and you keep coming up with excuses. It is all very distressing, Banu Nahida. It's making me wonder if you're even capable of freeing us from Suleiman's curse."

Manizheh kept her face carefully blank. "You were the one who came to me," she reminded him. "I've always made clear that I would need the ring. And I would think you've seen enough to know what I'm capable of."

"Indeed I have. Enough that I'm not particularly eager to see you master my kind of magic as well. Especially for the mere promise of some future freedom. If you want me to teach you blood magic, I'm going to need something more tangible in return."

Moretangible. Manizheh's stomach knotted. She had already lost so much. The little she had left was precious. "What do you want?"

The ifrit's cold smile curled again as his gaze drifted over Daevabad, the eagerness in it sending a hundred warnings through her mind. "I think of that morning every day, you know. That raw power scorching the air, screaming in my thoughts. I hadn't felt something like that since Anahid pulled this island from the lake." He ran his fingers along the parapet in a caress. "There's nothing quite like Nahid magic, is there? Nahid hands raised this city and have brought back untold masses from the brink of death. A mere drop of their blood is enough to kill an ifrit. A Nahid life . . . well, imagine all the things *that* could do." Aeshma twisted the knife deeper. "The things it already has done."

Now Manizheh did flinch. How quickly it all came back. The smell of burned flesh and the sticky blood coating her skin. The twinkling city seemed to disappear, replaced by a scorched plain and smoky sky—the dull color reflected in her brother's vacant, unseeing eyes. Rustam had died with an expression of faint shock on his face, and seeing that had broken what was left of Manizheh's heart, reminding her of the little boy he'd once been. The Nahid siblings who'd lost their innocence too soon, who'd stuck together through everything only to be ripped apart at the end.

"Speak plainly."

"I want your daughter." Aeshma was brusque now, any coyness gone. "And since she's proven herself a traitor, you need her gone."

A traitor. How simple it was for the ifrit to declare such a thing. He hadn't seen a trembling young woman in a torn, bloodied dress. He hadn't stared into frightened, achingly familiar eyes.

Shebetrayedyou. Indeed, Nahri had done worse, tricking her with a sleight of hand more appropriate for a low-born shafit thief than a Nahid healer. But Manizheh could have forgiven that, would have forgiven that, had Nahri taken the ring for herself. Creator knew she could not judge another woman's ambitions.

But Nahri hadn't. No, she'd given it to—of all people—a Qahtani. To the son of the king who'd tormented her, the king who'd stolen any chance Manizheh had at a happy life and driven the final wedge between her and her brother.

Manizheh couldn't forgive that.

Aeshma spoke again, perhaps seeing the doubt in her long silence. "You need to make some choices, Manizheh," he warned, his voice dangerous and low. "Your Scourge is obsessed with that girl. If she was clever enough to deceive you, how do you imagine that lovesick fool would fare if she made a play for his heart? But the things I could teach you, that Vizaresh could teach you . . ." Aeshma leaned closer. "You would never again have to worry about Darayavahoush's loyalty. About *anyone's* loyalty.

"But only for a price."

A glimmer caught Manizheh's eye—a fiery shard of sun emerging from behind the eastern mountains, its brilliance taking her aback. Sunrise wasn't usually that bright in Daevabad, the protective magic veiling the city off from the true sky. But it wasn't just the sun's brightness that felt wrong.

It was the silence accompanying that brightness. There was no drumming from the Grand Temple or djinn adhan, and the quiet failure to welcome the sun's arrival sent more dread into her heart than all the blood that had dripped from her unhealed finger. Nothing stopped the drums and the call to prayer; they were part of the very fabric of time in Daevabad.

Until Manizheh's conquest ripped that fabric to shreds. Daevabad was her home, her duty, and she'd torn out its heart. Which meant it was her responsibility to mend it.

No matter the cost.

She closed her eyes. Manizheh had not prayed since she'd watched two djinn scouts bleed out in the icy mud of northern Daevastana, dead at the hands of the poison she'd designed. She'd defended her plan to Dara; she'd gone forward with bringing an even worse wave of death to Daevabad. But she had not prayed through any of that. It felt like a link she had broken.

And she knew the Creator would not help her now. She saw no alternative, only the path she'd forged and had to keep walking—even if there was nothing left of her by the time she finished.

She made sure her voice was steady; Manizheh would not show the ifrit the wound he'd struck. "I can offer you her name. Her true one.

"The name her father gave her."

Part I

1 **Nahri**

When Nahri was a very little girl, in the last orphans' home that would take her, she met a storyteller.

It had been Eid, a hot, chaotic day, but one of the few pleasant ones for children like her when Cairo's better off were most inclined to look after the orphans whose welfare their faith preached. After she had feasted on sweets and stuffed butter cookies in new clothes—a pretty dress embroidered with blue lilies—the storyteller had appeared in the haze of sugar crashes and afternoon heat, and it wasn't long before the children gathered around him had passed out, lulled into dreams of faraway lands and dashing adventures by his smooth voice.

Nahri had not been lulled, however; she had been mesmerized, for tales of magical kingdoms and lost royal heirs were the exact fragile hopes a young girl with no name and no family might nurse in the hiddenmost corner of her heart. But the way the storyteller phrased it was confusing. *Kan wa ma kan*, he kept repeating when describing fantastical cities, mysterious djinn, and clever heroines. *It was and it wasn't*. The tales seemed to exist between this world and another, between truth and lies, and it had driven Nahri mad with longing. She needed to know that they were real. To know that there might be a better place for her, a world in which the quiet things she did with her hands were normal.

And so, she had pressed him. *But was it real?* she demanded. *Did all that really happen?*

The storyteller had shrugged. Nahri could remember the rise of his shoulders, the twinkling of his eyes, no doubt amused by the young girl's pluck. *Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't*.