

# *Runaways*

By Alisha Zaidi

We were running out of time. The train would be leaving soon. The train taking us to our safety, to our future, to our new home. I looked around one last time; this was where all my memories laid, and everything I cherished. Baba would sing *Qawali* songs in the living room, while Mama would make dinner. The aroma would spread throughout the house. *Dadi* and *Dada* would sip warm chai and tell me stories from their childhood while rocking me to sleep under the warm Luknowi sky. This was where my sister got married and where my brother took his first steps. Soon, it will just be a distant memory.

“C’mon Pari, move, grab Raheem and let’s go.”

Mama was right, the Raj was coming and if we didn’t leave soon, they’d burn us to the ground, along with the entire village. I grabbed my bag in one arm, and my baby brother in the other. I took one last look and closed the door for the final time. With Baba leading us, we made our way through the jungle path that would lead us into the main city. Raj soldiers had never stepped foot into the jungle since they had invaded. It’s been everyone’s main way in and out without being caught. I carefully tiptoed behind my mother, all of us being as quiet as we could. After a while, I could feel Raheem getting restless. I looked down at him. He scrunched up his nose and started to open his mouth. It’s the face he makes right before he cries. With one arm, I quickly try to rock him back to sleep. “*Taqaat* Raheem, we need you to be strong. I know you’re scared- we all are- but I need your strength. Keep resting.”

The jungle was filled with many dangers between its trees. All that could be woken up if I couldn’t keep my brother asleep. Tiptoeing across the floor helped us avoid *Zeher*, a venomous plant that grew anywhere and was very sensitive to sound. If you get too close, it releases a poisonous vapour into the air that would knock you out cold. Not to mention that this particular trail was in tiger territory. Although the Raj don’t come into the forest, they cleared out much of the animal life when they first arrived for meat and fur. Not much was left, so the tigers relied on unlucky souls that wandered into their midst. Even though poisonous plants and hungry tigers were something to be weary of, they were the least of our problems.

We were almost to the city, almost to the train, but suddenly, I heard ruffling between the trees. As if someone was moving in plain sight. Baba froze to listen, my mother froze behind him. I suddenly sensed a dark, shadowy presence creeping up on me.

“Well, look what we’ve found.” said a cold voice behind me. I suddenly felt the sharp touch of a steel blade on my back. “Hello, *Shezadi*.” he whispered. A tall dark figure stepped in front of my father, as several others surrounded us. Their faces were masked with scarves, and their swords pointed at us.

Looters. This is what we were afraid of. Criminals, banished by Raj soldiers who now lurked in the shadows of the jungle. They robbed and killed anyone who trespassed. I could see Baba’s eyes widen in horror, Mama tightly gripping the back of his arm. My feet sunk into the muddy dirt of the jungle earth. I couldn’t move. There was no way they’d let us go; we were stuck here.

“Please, my family...my children...let them go. Let me get them on that train.”

“Ah... *Muhajirs*. The Raj are looking for you, anyone caught running is to be turned in.” The man stared at Baba. He started circling us, not lifting his steely grey eyes off us for a second. I felt my heart trying to break out of my chest, and the sweat dripping down my forehead.

“Jafar, grab the child.” The man behind me violently pulled my arm toward him, and put his blade to my throat.

“NO! Please! My children my ch-” The grey-eyed man lifted the back of his hand and swung it across my mother’s face. She laid unconscious on the ground, Baba’s eyes widened with horror being held back by one of the other men and calling out to her. Raheem couldn’t keep his cries quiet for any longer. Jafar dug his sword deeper into my throat.

“Shut him up,” he hissed, “Before I do it for you.”

I tried my best to rock Raheem back to sleep. The grey-eyed man bent over my mother, ripping off her gold chain and bangles.

“Toll fee, for trespassing without permission.” he stepped towards me. “That’s hers paid, now what about yours?”

He stared at the gold *juhmkas* hanging from my ears. They were my Nani’s last gift to me before she died. I raised my hand to my ears.

“Come now *Shezadi*. Make this easy on yourself and your Baba.”

I looked up at my father, still being held back by two of the other men.

“Just rip them off her Kabir. We’ve got to get a move on, if the Raj see us they’ll kill us all right here.”

I looked up at him in confusion. What does he mean, if the Raj see us?

“You’re lying. The Raj don’t set foot here, they haven’t for years.”

“Stupid child,” Jafar responds angrily. “That was before they caught wind of runaways trying to escape to the Pure Lands. What did you think? They were just going to let you leave? The jungle is crawling with them, and if you want to leave here alive, take those off your ears and hand them over.”

And all of a sudden, I heard gunshots from every corner.

“RUN!”

I could feel Jafar releasing me and saw my father break free and lifting my mother over his shoulders.

“Run Pari! I’m right behind you! Get to the train! GO!”

I moved my feet as fast as I could. I heard guns and yelling all around me, heard Raheem wail, but I had to get to the train. From every corner of the jungle, soldiers swarmed in. I could see Kabir’s men trying to fight them off. But it was no use, there were too many of them. *Get to the train* was all that was running through my mind. There was a small swamp I’d have to cross before getting to the square. I put one foot in and was immediately swallowed by the murky deep. My legs barely touched the ground and were tangled in seaweed. Last time I tried to swim I was four and nearly drowned. I had tossed my favourite doll into the deep part of the lake next behind our house and tried to save her. Baba had to dive in and get me. This time it wasn’t a doll I was trying to save, it was my brother. I held Raheem above my head and began to tread as fast as I could. My legs kept getting caught in mud. I looked out for any Raj, but they were nowhere. We were still in a tiger’s turf, maybe one scared them off. I finally made it to the otherside, my clothes muddy and my legs wobbly

but I was almost there. I turned left and climbed down a rock path that finally led me directly into the main city. But it's not at all what I expected. It used to be lively and colourful and happy. Now, it was a warzone. The whole station was painted red. I saw soldiers fighting villagers, but I saw villagers fighting villagers. Men, women and children all being arrested or killed. The Raj have turned my people against each other. To the point where we've started to take each other's lives. We were peaceful once, I wish we could go back to that time. Back to when we weren't running for our lives. Back to when we didn't have to leave.

I couldn't think of that right now, my focus was making it on that train. I covered Raheem's head, and dashed through the crowd. I dodged bodies, bullets, swords and blood. But I finally made it to the train. The platform was crowded beyond belief. People were climbing all over one another trying to get on. I could see people being trampled, families being separated, and blood being shed. Steam and smoke from the engine clogged my lungs. I was small enough to get by without people noticing too much. I gripped my brother, grabbed onto the handle, and weaved myself through the crowd of people. When I made it to a door heaved myself onto the train. I sat down to finally catch my breath.

“Baba! Baba! We did it! We're here we - Baba?”

In all the madness of getting out of the jungle and finding my way to the train, I never once looked back to check on my parents. In a panic I looked out into the mound of people still trying to get on, calling out for them. “Mama! Baba!” hoping they would answer. I knew what the truth was. That there was a likelihood I would never see them again. I sat back down, tears streaming down my face. Raheem was crying again, he'd been crying since we got out of the jungle. This was the first time I'd been able to pay attention to him. I wiped my face, and began to rock him back to sleep once more. I took his hand, and all his fingers wrapped tightly onto only one of mine. He started cooing softly.

“It's alright *jaan*. I'm here, I'm your *taaqat* and you are mine. We only have each other now.”

Only each other. There was no turning back. We were *Muhajirs*, runaways, and we were running toward our new life. Leaving our family and our past in India. Running towards our future in the Pure Lands.