

# Lost



ASR Publications

# Lost

Miraj Academy- Book 1

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For those who find themselves astray,  
know that when one is true of heart, there  
is always a way back.

*“And He found you lost and  
guided [you],”*

– 93:7

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# 1

## Struggle

*“There is no struggle more worthy than struggling against the self.”*

– Imam Ali, *Ghurur Al-Hikam Wa Durar Al-Kalim*

Falling from fifty feet is a terrible way to die. Perhaps there were worse, but as I was currently clutching a window pane far above the ground, nothing else was really coming to mind. My fingers were trembling, the effort turning them an alarming shade of white. I held on tightly even as another gust of wind blew past. The weather was proving to be quite a nuisance, but I knew I could hold on.

A numbing sensation was spreading throughout my arm. I ignored the pain and focused on the thick branch in front of me. *Three, two-*, I jumped. The branch shook violently from the impact, but in a show of great loyalty, did not snap.

“Careful Sana!” Manahil and Jawad hissed simultaneously from their position directly below me. I wished they hadn’t. Involuntarily, my gaze shifted down to the two siblings and then to the ground. My stomach clenched at the sight. I was misinformed. This height was definitely more than fifty feet.

While climbing heights was not new for me, doing so in the middle of such heavy winds was a first time. Even this thick branch was swaying slightly, warning me that it was not immune to the strength of the wind.

As I stabilised myself, I took a quick scan of the grounds searching for only one thing, the tell tale green of law enforcement. All it took was one harmless glance from a wandering guard and I was done for. Granted, the winds were heavy and this area had poor lighting, but nevertheless, I was hesitant. We could not afford to get caught. Stealing from the mayor's personal warehouse was not an offense taken lightly.

"Ready?" I called. Without waiting for an answer, I threw the lightest of the three bags that were slung on my shoulder. I wish I could have kept all three, but the weight was hindering my progress.

"Got it," Jawad responded. Manahil seeming to be saying something but her voice was drowned in another blast of wind. Judging from her gesturing hands, she was probably telling me to throw another bag down. I pretended that I hadn't seen her. Did she really expect me to throw down the entire loot while I am in this vulnerable position? It was almost insulting that she considered me so foolish.

I straightened up and began crossing. With each step, I silently thanked the branch for dutifully supporting my weight. I gasped suddenly as my ankle nearly twisted in one of the knots of the branch. I checked my ankle by lightly putting weight on it, and thankfully it seemed fine. A broken ankle would make for a most unwelcome inconvenience. Looking ahead, I could see that just half the branch remained. The wind blew furiously, jostling the tree just as I covered the distance.

I gripped the trunk firmly digging my nails into the flaking bark. As soon as the blast calmed, I took the chance and began climbing down. This part was the least challenging. I didn't really need to try at this point. As always, my hands and feet easily found the natural holds in the bends of the branches. Descending as fast as possible, I practically jumped the last few feet. Just as I reached the ground, another unbearable gust of wind blasted, almost as if it was restraining itself until my descent.

"You climb as fast as the Sarbaaz!" Manahil exclaimed in admiration. She didn't see me smile to myself. I was probably faster.

I handed one of the bags to Manahil, and took a last look around to ensure that we hadn't dropped any of the precious loot. If either sibling noticed, I kept the heaviest bag with me, they didn't say anything.

The winds seemed to calm for a few moments, as if catching its breath. I turned to leave the premises, when I heard a sound. An incredibly unwelcome sound. Voices. They were growing louder.

"I swear I saw something here!" a voice exclaimed barely audible amongst nature's own bellows.

The three of us exchanged a glance, frozen in our somewhat concealed position beneath the trees. I could make out the silhouette of two guards wildly waving around a flashlight, its light slicing through our dark cover making it way dangerously close. I hesitated. Should we wait them out or make a break for it? Turns out we didn't need to choose.

"There, I see them!" a flashlight abruptly swung in our direction. This time there was no hesitation.

We tore down the hill, our footsteps crashing through the foliage, heading towards the security fence. Despite our head start, we could hear the heavy pounding of our pursuers on our heels and gaining by the second.

"Stop you pathetic scum!" he cried, his voice drowned in the gunshot snaps of the branches that came underfoot.

We raced towards the fence with as much speed as we could muster. Manahil, with her petite form, easily slipped through the hole in the fence we had discovered a few weeks ago. Unfortunately, as I slid through, a stray barb caught my palm, lacerating the exposed skin of my hand. I couldn't suppress the grunt of pain that clawed up my throat, but I clenched my hand despite the warm sensation trickling down my palm from between my fingers. I didn't have to turn around to know that Jawad had followed suit, the slight clang announcing his exit just as the guards appeared. Judging by the strange yelp he made on the way, he didn't escape unscathed either.

Without looking back, we ran towards the town. As the clamour of their yells faded, I risked a quick glance behind me and saw them still estranged behind the fence. Turns out being

over six feet tall and enjoying surplus portions carried its own disadvantages. They could not fit through the hole in the fence. That bought us the time we needed.

The wind was picking up again, tugging at my clothes and constantly sliding the bag off my shoulder. But this time, I was grateful. Hopefully the guards would decide to take shelter and dismiss the 'pathetic scum'.

As we approached the edge of the shrubbery, Manahil stepped back, letting Jawad take the lead, rushing our little party to the safety of the shadows of the towering buildings. As much as I hate to admit it, my sense of direction was not the best, and Manahil did not have much to boast of either. But this particular portion of town I was familiar with as frequent escapades had forced me to commit to memory every possible place to hide and every place to run. As Jawad turned down one alley, to the next, I followed along with the map in my head. I knew them as well as a child knows the layout of their nursery. Outside the nursery however, well, that was another story.

An uncomfortable burn was erupting in my chest, but I forced it down. The soft pants of my companions clearly revealed that they were faring no better. We had to find a shelter fast.

As if reading my mind, Jawad stopped abruptly before a battered house. We rushed inside shutting the doors behind us, eager to gain shelter from both the merciless winds and our pursuers alike.

We sat on the dusty floor in silence, save for the occasional random creak one expects from abandoned homes. One by one, the torturous minutes ticked by. We endured them, straining our ears, dreading the sound of footsteps, gunshots, anything that suggested our position was revealed. For a crime of this nature, the perpetrator was never punished alone, there were always others, loved ones, who paid the price as well.

We waited, but the only sound I could hear was the diminished howl of the wind which strangely seemed almost pained.

"Think we lost them?" Manahil asked, her firm voice more shaky than usual. I nodded, though a part of me kept expecting the door to burst open any moment. Manahil let out a sigh of

relief. I did not share her emotions. I would feel relieved once I returned home, preferably at the earliest. The longer we were exposed, the greater was the likelihood of getting caught.

With any immediate danger ostensibly at bay, I turned towards the inside of the house to acquaint myself with my surroundings and immediately regretted it. I stifled a breath. The stench was suffocating, though not unfamiliar. Smoke and rot was an odour I was well acquainted with, as I'm sure were many others in the area. Dwellings resembling this one were a common find around here given the number of families forced to abandon them. Such were the gifts of war. Though we had often used such structures before for various purposes, the experience was equally unpleasant each time.

The floor creaked under our steps, threatening to give way any moment. But I had visited enough of such houses to know it was bluffing. At least I hoped so. Tackling architectural disasters would be difficult to fit in the schedule.

I knelt down and cleared away the dust and grime from a segment of the floor with my sleeve making just enough space to empty the contents of my bag. I divided it into four piles. There was a slight intake of breath. So quiet, that if I hadn't been expecting it, I might have missed it. I looked up to see Manahil and Jawad exchange a glance as they stared at the four piles. Jawad's hand hovered over the pocket where I knew he kept a small knife in case of emergencies. What was he thinking? Did he intend to...

I kept my voice calm.

"Manahil. Jawad. Me. Kumail," I said pointing to each pile in turn.

I looked straight at them daring them to contradict me, but my eyes never left Jawad's hand that continued to fiddle with his pocket. Manahil's jaw was tight as if debating with herself. Was she carrying a blade? A gun perhaps? But guns were hard to get hold of. She must have some weapon but from here, it was impossible to tell what.

My muscles tensed. Taking down both of them at once...it wouldn't work. Jawad was handy with a knife, and Manahil was at

an advantageous position. I possessed a weapon as well, but it was a rusty thing and not of much use against a prepared opponent. I cursed myself for somehow ending up near the corner. That was an error I shouldn't have made, and would certainly never repeat. Regardless, they must be aware that I would never go down alone. I'd make sure of it.

They had never voiced their concerns before, but I knew they always disapproved of the fourth pile. It didn't matter. If they thought I would leave out my little brother's share, they were sorely mistaken. Sure we carried out the plans, but he made them. Without him, we'd starve.

The siblings must have reached the same conclusion. Jawad gave a strained nod, and let his hand fall. But his shoulders were still tense and there was a flare in his eyes. Of course, he just desired a larger share. Every extra portion meant more food for his family. Understandable. But he wasn't going to get it from me.

The two knelt down, and started adding the contents of their bags to the four piles I had created. In the dim light that leaked in the room from some outside lamppost, I watched them both carefully. My focus never left the food as I constantly checked for any signs of uneven division or deception. I had worked for every bit of these supplies and I definitely intended to take my share. There were cans of vegetables and hardened pieces of bread amongst other delights.

I frowned and scoffed inwardly. There was a time when I wouldn't consider feeding such sustenance to my pets. Or even my servant's pets. Now, I needed it to survive.

Still, in these times, many would consider this a feast. I had often toyed with the idea of breaking into one of the mayor's more auspicious storage locations which housed meat or medicine, but they were always too securely guarded. These humble warehouses with the less preferred inventory were easier targets.

While nursing my injured hand, I kept an eye on each sibling and noticed Manahil was doing the same to me.

"So..." she began in a light, though slightly forced tone. "How are things at your place?"

I suppressed my surprise at the rapid change in her demeanour. But what had I expected? This was Manahil just doing what Manahil did best - gathering intel. Even if it required casually ignoring the fact that she and her brother had threatened me moments ago. Very well, I'd play along.

"Fine," I responded, maintaining a neutral expression. I had no interest in discussing my personal affairs with anyone.

A flash of anger crossed her face, which she almost immediately subdued with a tight smile. Clearly, she was frustrated with my response, or likely the lack thereof. She cleared her throat. "We'll rendezvous later for the next location."

"Two days from now," I replied. Kumail needed time to plan the next location. The altercations of tonight hadn't done much to help. It would have been preferable to lay low for a while but we could not afford such a luxury. The necessity for basic supplies outweighed any possible danger. But we would have to select the next target with extreme caution. If there was a 'we' at all. Planning with Manahil and Jawad was becoming increasingly risky with each venture. I never knew when that knife might find its way to my throat.

Just as I was about to ask him about the status of the food, Jawad held out a bag, "Done. It's all there."

As if I would take his word for it. I checked meticulously through all the contents and then checked again, ignoring the exasperated sigh from Jawad and Manahil rolling her eyes. They might be in a rush, but this was non-negotiable. I had to be sure everything was there.

When I was finally satisfied, I gave a curt nod to the siblings, turned towards the door and slipped into the night.

The wind had calmed significantly, which made me all the more desperate to reach the safety of home. Only when I was out of the range of random security checks, would I feel at peace.

Though this was not the first time, parading in the night always left me uneasy. There was something unsettling about the absolute silence and unwavering calm that draped over the world after the sunset. It always felt like something was hiding just beyond my range of vision. I was eager to be at home as soon

as possible. I made my way through the streets, careful to stay out of the mundane glow of the occasional lamppost.

I turned street after street, the sense of uneasiness still strongly coursing through. As I entered one alley, from the corner of my eye, I saw something dash past.

I immediately slid a small blade out from my boot and swerved around prepared to defend myself. But when I turned, there was nothing in sight save for a black crow staring at me with large beady eyes.

‘Shoo!’ I hissed. The crow stared at me but strangely did not budge.

‘Scram, what do you want!’ I waved it away aggressively, but it hopped a few steps forward and began pecking at a small old piece of bread some fool had misplaced.

‘So be it,’ I spat at the crow and huffed away. I tried to ignore the fact that I had just spent a good many precious seconds conversing with a bird. This was an interaction I would likely keep to myself.

After a few minutes, where I was lucky enough to not encounter any humans or animals alike, I finally spotted the familiar green and black flag of our country flying high above my house. My mouth soured at the sight. My parents insisted that as loyal citizens, we should proudly display the symbol of our nation. I would much rather just rip it to shreds. That flag was no more than a magician’s trick used to deceive patriotic fools to join a war they could never hope to survive.

An ache in my arm snapped my attention back to the task at hand. This small bag was getting heavier by the minute. With a quick glance at my surroundings, I sneaked around to the back window and slipped through, closing it softly behind me.

As I stepped inside, my foot slipped on the windowsill. I tried in vain to reach out for some form of support before tumbling to the ground. ‘

“Ah!” I cried before quickly covering my mouth to stifle the sound while simultaneously massaging my hurt knee. Great. My knee wasn’t hurt too bad, but my ego was another story. Hopefully, I hadn’t woken anyone. It would take a fairly elaborate

story to justify my graceful position sprawled on the floor with a muddy imprint of my shoe on the windowsill.

I waited a few seconds. Satisfied that I hadn't interrupted anyone's beauty sleep, I tiptoed to my bed and pushed my bag of supplies under it, throwing an old scarf on top to conceal them from immediate view. Rather than storing the entire batch of additional food in the kitchen where my parents were sure to notice, I usually kept them in my room and simply replaced any house supplies that were going low. My parents were never the type to be too concerned with details. Or maybe they did know and just chose to look the other way. Honestly, I wasn't sure. But if they weren't aware, I did not intend to be the one to inform them.

I got down on my knees to adjust my little harvest amongst the other stashes from previously successful trips. As I pulled each item out of the bag, I felt my heart sink further. A couple of loaves of hardened bread, some tins of peas and beans, an assortment of spices and two bags of potatoes. I almost laughed. This was all I had to show after a week of planning and a risk that might have costed me my life. This collection had seemed much more glamorous in the dim light of the warehouse under the effects of adrenaline.

'Aaaah!' I hissed, kicking the side of my bed. No matter how hard I tried, we were doomed to this haggard, lowly life chasing after scraps and leftovers. Would we ever enjoy the comforts that I'd spent my childhood ravishing in? It's hard to believe there was ever a time when I didn't spend sleepless nights gathering basic necessities.

The air in my room felt suffocating and I could feel the walls closing in around me. Hints of tears blurred my vision, and a rhythmic pounding in my head made even forming simple thoughts a burden.

I evacuated the confinements of my room and rushed down the hall. I needed something, anything to drag me out of this abyss.

*It's late, so everyone's probably...* the thought trailed off as I heard a low voice coming from my little sister's bedroom.

I walked closer.

“It is said they can move mountains merely with the power of their mind. That the very earth trembles upon their command. The great beasts of the land, air and seas bow before them,”

Kumail’s deep voice echoed softly in the hall. I scoffed, *This story...again?* Sure, it was Alizay’s favourite, which was largely Kumail’s fault, but I had nurtured the hope that with time, she would eventually grow out of the legends of the Sarbaaz. Obviously, I was mistaken. Even if by her age of nine, the magic really should have worn off in my opinion.

I pushed the door open slightly and peered inside. Kumail was in his wheelchair next to Alizay’s bed, his dark hair combed with expert precision and care, as usual. Alizay was almost entirely concealed under her blanket save for two excited eyes that peeked just above the edge, completely enamoured by the tale.

“They are the protectors of the land. It is unknown who is chosen to join their forces, but it is said that they select those unlike any other. Those strong of mind, body and spirit,” Kumail continued.

I must admit, the Sarbaaz had managed to achieve one thing with absolute perfection. They had concocted, without a doubt, one of the best propaganda schemes I’d ever seen. What a masterful way to charm naive villagers to lay down their lives for such an army? At best, the Sarbaaz were mere figments of the imagination, and at worst, more likely in my opinion, they were favoured members of a selfish army. Either way, I had ceased believing in their majesty a long time ago. If such strength served our nation, wouldn’t we have won the war years ago? Instead, we continued to hover between unstable peace treaties and full-fledged hostilities.

I stepped inside. The two were so lost in the story, even the slight creak of the door didn’t alert them to my presence.

“And there you have it. The legendary Sarbaaz,”

As I’d expected and unfortunately witnessed multiple times in the past, the light in Kumail’s eyes dimmed, his smile fading just as he finished the tale, overshadowed by something darker. I could not understand why he continued to torture himself like this.

Alizay’s thin arm reached from under her blanket and tugged

his sleeve.

“That’s it Alizay. Time for bed. Shab Bakhair.”

There was an effort to say it kindly and not many would detect the slight edge in his voice, but I could. It was the same bitterness he faced every time he narrated this story. Like Alizay, Kumail once idolized the Sarbaaz with an unwavering passion. In fact, he dreamed of joining them. Not me though. I don’t find solace in fairytales.

In spite of his boisterous claims that he no longer believed, I could still see the spark he had every time he retold the legends he dutifully memorized as a child. It was always closely followed by the same look of spite, or perhaps disappointment, as he returned to reality. Even if he wanted to, even if they wanted him to, his disability destroyed any remote chance he had of joining.

“Salams,” I said.

Both snapped their heads towards me, evidently caught off guard.

“Wasalam. You took your time,” Kumail responded in a flat tone. Clearly, I hadn’t chosen the best moment to interrupt.

“We were nearly caught.”

“What!” he exclaimed sharply. “How?”

I raised a brow.

“I’m fine though, so don’t worry. And thanks for asking.”

Kumail waved away my taunt.

“How and where?”

I rolled my eyes. Kumail hated the idea that one of his masterful plans might have a flaw. Even though I disliked the short sightedness it caused, how could I blame him? Every mistake - any mistake - could land us in jail or worse. The mayor wasn’t particularly famous for his mercy.

“Wandering guards just as we were leaving the warehouse. It was mostly bad luck.”

Kumail scoffed. I had to agree. We didn’t believe in bad luck, just poor planning.

He rolled his wheelchair back a few steps, his brows furrowed in a deep frown. I turned to Alizay leaving him to his thoughts.

“And how is my favourite sibling?”

Alizay gave me a small smile but didn't respond. She just continued to stare at me, her round face now completely out from under the blanket.

I sighed. It looked like this was all I was going to get today. Well, at least Kumail managed to initiate some brief interaction with her yesterday, so overall, we were still making progress.

I stroked her hair wishing she would tell me about her day, or an interesting story she read, something, anything. But no. She continued her silence.

Every time I ever had the opportunity to hear Alizay's voice it was a blessing. Three years ago, after the same bomb attack that put Kumail in a wheelchair, Alizay stopped speaking. Not a word. It took months of coaxing and begging before she showed the smallest signs of recovery.

Even now, she still hadn't healed. Sometimes, she would go weeks completely mute. Kumail was the only one who managed to engage her in brief conversation from time to time. I was graced with sporadic interactions, usually comprising in total of a single sentence or a few words. Perhaps the common trauma they faced that day, bonded them somehow.

"Api?" a croaky voice sounded. I froze and a moment later, got down on one knee focusing all my attention on her, as I always did whenever she spoke. "Hafsa?" she asked, in barely a whisper.

*Not this again!* I groaned inwardly.

Kumail threw me a warning look, but I ignored him.

On the rare occasion she spoke to me, it was always about this. I desperately clung to the smallest fragments of hope that she would forget my little promise, but she never did.

"Not yet, but I'll stop of at her house tomorrow. I promise." I replied sealing my statement with those binding words.

If Alizay wasn't so fragile, I would have said no. We didn't have the resources to share with others, no matter how destitute they might claim to be. Sure, between my father's footwear business, my mother's job at the restaurant, and my...help, we managed better than others. But that was not our concern.

However, in the longest conversation I'd had with her in months, Alizay practically begged me to help her friend. So here I was.

Trudging down the dirty road to Hafsa's house at least once a week, dropping off a bag of supplies we sorely needed.

Alizay didn't seem very pleased with my response. She turned to Kumail, who once again threw me a despised look I'm sure he reserved particularly for me.

"What?" I hissed. It was easy for him to play the good brother. He wasn't the once who kept risking lifetime imprisonment over a trivial friendship.

My little sister turned back to me. She didn't say anything, but kept staring at me with pleading eyes. I resisted, but it was futile.

"Fine!" I huffed, cursing the big sister inside of me that clearly had no semblance of back bone. Alizay didn't react immediately, but the sides of her mouth curved into a slight smile. That made it all worth it. I loved to see her smile.

My own frustration temporarily tamed, I returned to my room and quickly put together a small package of a few essentials we might be able to manage without. At least, without too much discomfort.

Once more, a faded voice echoed through the hall,

"Really Alizay, that's enough stories for tonight."

*Serves him right!* I smirked. His passion might have faded, but not before lighting its fire in her. If experience meant anything, Alizay's obsession would not be going anywhere anytime soon.

Ignoring my hand that still stung from earlier, and the ache in my arm, for the second time that day, I entered the shadows of the night.

I adjusted my hijab and pulled my thin coat tighter to block out the chills that were making me shiver uncontrollably. It was doing a pathetic job at providing any protection from the weather whatsoever. The breeze had lost intensity but the night was still cold.

Hafsa's apartment building was close, just around the corner, so thankfully, I could make my way there keeping mostly to more vacant streets. Though, I found myself checking over my shoulder every few seconds. The skirmish from earlier that night still had me on edge.

**Time. It has seen all beginnings, and it knows all ends. It bears witness to every part of our lives, testifying to the choices we make. Decisions. Moments that define who we are and who we are meant to be.**

**It is said they can move mountains with nothing but the power of their minds. That the earth itself shudders when they speak, stone and soil bending to their will. That the great beasts of land, sky, and sea bow before them in silent submission.**

**They are the unseen protectors of the nation. When darkness rises and kingdoms fall, it is their strength that holds the world together.**

**No one knows how they are chosen. No ceremony. No summons. Only whispers that they seek those unlike any other. Those forged in hardship, sharpened by loss, and unbreakable in mind, body, and spirit.**

**Sana never believed in fairy tales.**

**But there is a difference between stories and legends.**



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