

## CHAPTER 1

## Angels of Za'atari

Strings of white lights, strewn from trailer top to trailer top, glimmer against the violet night sky. A classic Syrian tune, with its piercing accordion, strikes into the dry desert air. The sand shifts to the quickening beat of the darbuka.

It can mean only one thing: it's wedding season in Za'atari.

A cheering crowd gathers in a semicircle around the bride and groom, seated together in clear plastic chairs at the heart of the excitement. The bride wears a sparkling gold dress and a matching headscarf that shine in the darkness. Powder blue liner surrounds her beaming eyes, cast upward into the drama of the night. Camera flashes and compliments abound for the twenty-something young woman; her dress is gorgeous, makeup is flawless, hair is stunning, she is told. But the mastermind behind the look is nowhere to be found.

She is back, back in Saudi Market. Past the new falafel shop and toward the pink trailer with the emerald green dress hanging by the window. The accordions are only

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a faint echo now. Back beyond the trailer's wooden sign with its name painted on it – صالون الأنوار, "Salon of Lights" – and inside the purple door. Through the narrow zig-zag lane between the rainbow of puffy-bottomed dresses dangling from the ceiling. Back still, through the half-parted burgundy velvet curtain and into the beauty salon is where we finally find her . . . seated with her back resting against the glittery pink wall, she drinks her "shay" – her tea – peacefully.

She is Yasmina. Dressed in all black, with a black-and-gray striped hijab wrapped elegantly around her head, sitting like a queen in her castle. Silent power and confidence.

For most of her four decades on earth, Yasmina's life mission has been to prepare brides for their weddings. "Ever since I was a young girl in Syria, I loved dressing up my dolls and doing their hair. When I was fourteen, I told my parents I would one day open a salon. And I did." But she knows her place on wedding day; she likes to give her clients space.

Rather than attend the festivities, she spends this evening with her family in the salon. Her son Ashraf – thin with big energetic eyes and tightly wound curls, wearing a red-and-white Arsenal jersey – jumps onto one of the two perched brown leather seats in front of the long mirror, as if to make an announcement. He talks about his first day at soccer camp and how he scored his first goal. All to build up to his final line, one he does not hesitate to deliver: "Wallahee ana ahsan min Lionel Messi." "As God is my witness, I am better than Lionel Messi." Yasmina's husband Abdel, who is sitting next to her, nearly chokes on his tea in laughter.

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Yasmina smiles – a sort of wise, bemused, even-tempered smile, as if to remind you not to get too high or too low in life. A smile of gratitude that recalls how she fled southern Syria while pregnant with Ashraf, how he was born prematurely at only seven months, and how she traveled to Za'atari with him in her arms. A smile of experience that tells her customers to trust her for their big days. “Believe me, sometimes a smile is enough.”

She stands to get ready to head home, and glances at the clock on the wall. Back in District 5, the wedding is probably ending and her client should soon be heading home from the celebration. A celebration in a refugee camp. A celebration many outside the camp might find surprising, given the sufferings of war that led to the camp's very existence.

Yasmina laughs dismissively at the notion: “Syrians always find an excuse to celebrate.” Then her face turns more serious, as if reflecting on her life's journey in just that moment:

“Fee wact lil huzn, wa fee wact lil farah.”

“There is a time for sadness, and there is a time for happiness.”



Malak's studio is drenched in color.

An oval palette with dried paints of bright green, dull yellow, and burnt orange lays on the chair. Half-squeezed tubes of paints called *French ultramarine blue* and *flamingo pink* and *alizarin crimson* are piled by the foot. Works of art

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are scattered on the floor underneath the easel with her blank white canvas: a pencil drawing of a United Nations (UN) aid worker in his light blue vest, a black-and-white charcoal drawing of a man with a half-shaven beard, a painting of a woman with a thorny red rose pressed against her closed eyelid.

This studio in Za’atari District 11 doubles as a shared bedroom with Hoda, one of Malak’s eleven older sisters. Hoda frequently comes home to an obstacle course of paint brushes, drawings, and assorted frames – which had been an ongoing source of sibling argument, until she simply got used to the treacherous path to bed. Malak is the youngest daughter, so “I’m in a good spot – all the attention is on me,” she says with a guilty laugh illuminating her round face. Besides, Hoda is too proud of her little sister’s art to stay upset.

The studio’s business model starts with Malak painting what is in her heart. Many times that leads to a flurry of orders from customers around the world through her Instagram and Facebook pages – a process coordinated by the studio’s manager: Malak’s neighbor, best friend, and biggest fan, Roaa. Often it leads to a sale at an auction or exhibition, some of which are hosted in Za’atari and others in Amman, the capital city of Jordan.

But usually, as in the case of Malak’s current project, revenue is a distant afterthought. This project will be presented in just an hour at a community forum for girls about the harms of child marriage, a practice that leaves girls open to abuse, threatens their mental and physical health, and interrupts their education. Wearing a turquoise headscarf

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and navy dress, Malak sits on the ground and uses a midnight blue colored pencil to put the finishing touches on the last of twenty comic-style drawings. This one is a young girl in a teal wedding dress looking sadly, longingly up at a magnificent full moon by the ocean. "People often don't like you to advise them directly, but you can get to them through art." At least she hopes so, because the girls of Za'atari have talents waiting to be discovered. "When you find the gift God gave you, you can do amazing things."

"Time to go sister!" Hoda enters the doorway with a knock. Five feet of constant energy, Malak hurriedly puts her pencil down, gathers her drawings, and stumbles to the door. "Trust me, I'll clean up later." Malak's piercing eyes smile knowingly at Hoda. An eager smile. Eager to awaken the spirit within Za'atari, one drop of color at a time. Certainly too eager to clean her trailer.

If you would have told a younger Malak that this is what her life would look like at age twenty-three, that bright light in her eyes might have flickered. Her studio now is very different from the lush garden where she would paint back at home in Damascus. Za'atari is not where she wanted to be, not by a long shot. "I kissed the ground of my house in Syria before I left. I cried so much into the wind outside the house that my sisters thought it was raining. I would have rather died than go to Za'atari."

"But I always had the paper and crayons that I brought with me from Syria." With those in hand, her dreams would evolve and take hold. Now at once a businesswoman, an artist, a community leader, a university student, a medical professional in training, and, yes, a

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refugee, Malak – which means “angel” in Arabic – is not just living in Za’atari. She is enlivening it.



Sitting alone in the center of her trailer, on a chocolate-colored cushion resting atop the chocolate-colored carpet, Asma looks down at a children’s book. Her soft brown eyes dart across page after page in sheer concentration. It was a quick rehearsal for the performance to come. A rare moment of silence in Trailer 6.4, District 8, Za’atari.

Suddenly, without a word from Asma, the trailer around her is transformed. Children’s laughter and stomping against the dirt outside grows louder and louder until the trailer walls shake slightly. The wooden door creaks open. Five young boys take off their shoes and dive into the open space in front of Asma, as is their weekly ritual. Her living room had become a magical escape for them.

“Ahlan wa sahlan, ya Sammy.” “Welcome, Sammy.” Asma greets each of them, her face having instantaneously switched from focus to a smile. If Yasmina’s smile is wise, and Malak’s is eager, Asma’s is soft and infectiously joyful. More and more children pour in, and last through the door are two of Asma’s favorite students: her eldest daughters, Tamara and Maya. Tamara is shorter, older, and gentler, while Maya is taller, younger, and more playfully mischievous. Returning from taekwondo practice, they are wearing matching white uniforms with yellow belts. They quickly say their hellos and head to the back room, reemerging in matching ruby dresses

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with big ruby bows in their hair. They take turns giving Asma a hug before sitting cross-legged with their friends.

It's time to begin. "Yalla, ya shabaab." "Come on, children." With three words, as if Asma possesses a supernatural gravitational pull, the children gather to sit in a more organized circle surrounding her. She grabs ahold of her baby boy, Mohammed, and puts him firmly in her lap as she reaches over him to turn to the first page. The magic begins.

"This story is about a conversation between a boy named Samir and his mom. It is called *A Plane That Brings Love*."

Asma's voice rises and falls as she reads the story, with the passion of a once-in-a-lifetime audition. The children concentrate, spellbound by her performance, immersed in a world far removed from the Za'atari heat. At each page, Asma smoothly rotates the book toward the kids so they can enjoy the illustrations accompanying the dialogue:

*"Mom, I want to drive an army airplane when I grow up,"*  
*Samir says.*

يقول سمير: "يا أمي، أريد قيادة طائرة عسكرية عندما أكبر."

Tamara suddenly stands and scurries to the kitchen. She returns with a water jug and glasses for the group. Always a gracious host. Asma continues:

*"But I will be a pilot of love, not war. I will draw red hearts and spread them everywhere from my plane. I will spread happiness, love, hope, and peace. So the little boys and girls can play in peace. So the birds flying around can sing in peace."*

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”لكنني سأكون طيارًا للحب، وليس للحرب. سأوجه القلوب الحمراء وأنشرها في كل مكان من طائرتي. سأنتشر السعادة والحب والأمل والسلام. لذلك يمكن للفتيان والفتيات الصغار اللعب في سلام. لذلك يمكن للطيور المحلقة الغناء في سلام.“

Upon reaching the final page, she holds up the book to show a cartoon illustration of a boy with brown aviator goggles parachuting down onto the Syrian hills, as his mom waits for him with open arms. His parachute is in the form of a red heart with the word “love” – حب – labeled on it in three places.

*“Yes! I will be pilot of love, not war. So my country will be more beautiful. A country of hope, happiness, love, and peace.”<sup>1</sup>*

”نعم فعلا! سأكون طيار الحب، وليس الحرب. لذلك سيكون بلدي أكثر جمالا. بلد الأمل والسعادة والحب والسلام.“

For a second or two, the words hang in the air. Asma closes the book: “Al Nihaya.” “The End.”

In an instant, the spell is lifted. The kids graciously thank Asma and begin to gather their things and leave, playfully pushing one another on their way out. In the moments after their departure, as their laughter fades in the distance, Asma is alone again for just a few seconds.

She thinks back to when she was a girl two decades ago in the town of Dara’a, and what her education meant to her. How she would sleep in her school uniform because she was so excited for the next day. How she dreamt one day she would become a teacher, but worried she lacked the confidence. “I loved school. But in class when the teacher would ask a question and I knew the answer, I would have to wait until at least one person raised her hand first.” Now she is



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boldly reinventing herself as a social entrepreneur and poet, leading a storytelling initiative that is expanding throughout Za'atari. "I want every girl to complete her education. Everyone should fulfill her dream."

In that brief moment of quiet, Asma looks up and whispers a prayer of thanks for the chance to "tashaja," to "encourage" . . . to gently uplift children toward the dreams they might otherwise have forgotten.



Welcome to Za'atari. مرحبا بكم في الزعتري

Here, in the desert heat, a community was born in the swell of crisis. Situated in Jordan just seven and a half miles south of the Syrian border, the camp – a two-square-mile rectangle divided into twelve districts – is nestled in the very heart of the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> A twenty-first-century refuge where ancient empires once reigned.

A consequence of the Syrian civil war, Za'atari began in summer 2012 as a barren place devoid of activity and, more fundamentally, lacking in hope. It is a place originally meant to exist only temporarily, but one that has nonetheless persisted till today as the Syrian war cruelly trudges forward into its second decade. Over the years – though extraordinary challenges persist in the camp – Za'atari residents would transform the settlement into a hotbed of entrepreneurship. Thousands of startups and social initiatives now line the streets in trailers, which are the ubiquitous corrugated aluminum mobile housing units also referred to as "caravans." This

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entrepreneurial movement is the story told in this book. Yasmina, Malak, and Asma are parts of that movement, innovating to infuse celebration, art, and education into their improbable desert home. And they, too, are parts of a much broader story of refugee entrepreneurs activating camps and cities around the world, from Middle Eastern towns to the American Rust Belt and everywhere in between.

These three women's work has helped uplift the Za'atari community, but that outcome was far from inevitable. The start of their stories was the start of every refugee's story: pain. Like any striving entrepreneur knows, pain is not just pain – it is an opportunity. But before they could tap into the powerful sparks within them, their periods of utter darkness were all too real. Refugees endure some of the harshest periods of darkness a human being can experience in this life.

Darkness is where this story begins.