

## Prologue

The sun hung like a burning disc above the *Rub' al Khali*.<sup>1</sup> Under a blistering sky, the poet Abdul Alhazred<sup>2</sup> felt the sand beneath his feet glow like molten copper.

Two men followed in his wake. Their lips were cracked, their eyes hollow with hunger and thirst. In recent days, they had seen only one oasis; an illusion, a cruel mirage.

Travelers did not call this desert the *Empty Quarter* without reason. This part of the Great Arabian Desert devoured caravans as though they had never existed.

"The Nameless City must be here somewhere," the poet insisted. "Cthulhu<sup>3</sup> showed it to me in a dream."

He pressed on, even as his companions fell farther behind.

Just as exhaustion threatened to claim him completely, his toe struck something solid beneath the sand. He dropped to his knees and began to dig.

"A jar!" he cried. He shook it; liquid sloshed inside. "At last. Water!"

His companions summoned the last of their strength and staggered toward him, staring at the exquisitely ornamented flask. Alhazred feared they would go mad if their hope proved false yet again.

Carefully, he scraped away the wax sealing the cork. The jar opened with a sigh.

At first, nothing happened.

Then the belly of the jar began to tremble, and a deafening whirlwind burst forth from its neck.

"Free! I am free!" roared the djinn, released from its narrow prison. Wherever the spirit touched the ground, palm trees sprang forth. Promptly, the men stood amid a lush and fertile oasis.

"Who has freed me?" the spirit demanded once its fury had subsided.

From the corner of his eye, Alhazred saw his companions throw themselves to the ground, burying their faces in the sand. Trembling, he answered, "I did. I am the famed poet Abdul Alhazred."

"That deserves a reward," thundered the djinn. "Choose wisely. I can make every woman love you. I can grant you ten thousand pieces of gold. Or... I can grant you total knowledge of the world, the universe, and everything beyond."

Curiosity overcame the fear of Alhazred's companions. They stared at the poet, breathless.

He did not hesitate. Women, he knew, could be won with his words. Gold could be earned by writing. But knowledge, that was what he had always thirsted for.

"I wish to possess total knowledge," Alhazred said firmly.

The djinn laughed, a sound like a thousand golden bells. "So be it," he said, and with a long, jubilant cry, he dissolved into the desert wind.

Something changed in the poet's eyes.

He saw shapes that could not exist. Names no mouth should ever utter. And suddenly, everything fell into place. His gaze revealed that nothing remained hidden. He grasped the staggering truth of all things; Earth, the cosmos, and life itself.

“What do you see?” one companion asked impatiently.

Alhazred did not answer.

“How does it feel, to possess total wisdom?” asked the other.

Still no reply.

The men backed away as despair grew in the poet’s eyes. They could only imagine the horrors unfolding within his mind.

At last—after what felt like an eternity—he spoke, “I should have chosen the gold.”