

On Wednesday morning the village wakes to a morning of rare beauty. The men bring oxen in from the emerald-green pasture and harness them to wagons, which they begin loading with the barley harvest. The women bustle about the farmhouses, sweeping, dusting, hand-washing, kneading dough.

The recent night raids and thefts of village livestock and produce by Kurdish nomads are more brazen than normal, but nothing else is particularly unusual.

"You will only encourage them," *Hoviv* warns the young men calling for revenge. He disappears the next day, along with his son Armen, Anahid's erstwhile suitor.

Papa is tense and distant. Mama fusses even more over trivial things. They are not speaking. Mama will not say why. I return from walking Covinar to the village schoolhouse and find Mama in tears. Mama wipes her eyes, sniffs and shrugs off my questions.

"We carry on as usual," she says. "Did you wash your hair yet?"

"Not yet, Mama."

"Why did you not do that already? You must be more responsible, girl. I need you to help me later with the *lavash*. Go, do it now."

"Yes, Mama." *Go. Do it now. Tidy this. Finish that. Maybe Anahid really did run away.*

"David?" Mama calls my eldest brother. Dwarfing us, heavily-bearded, with the all-season tread of a farmer, David approaches and stops several paces away, his face flushed. "Please go with Anoush to the river pool."

"You do not need to watch out for me," I say.

David flushes. "Papa needs me to help with the oxen."

"Go to your Papa, then." Mama speaks more sharply than normal. David sighs in relief and retreats. Mama is suddenly close to tears.

"Mama, I am only going to my place by the river."

"Yes, but you cannot be too careful. You do not know who is out there."

"Do not worry, Mama. Please, do not treat me like a child."

"*Voch, girl.*" Mama throws her hands in the air. "What do you know?"

I scoop up my hand-made soap and wooden comb, clean linen tunic of red and gold and hand-woven towel and skip outside. "I will be back before you know it."

"Come straight home," Mama calls after me. "Do not dawdle. We have things to do."

Not long afterwards, I cast off my smock and slide into the small rock pool that fills up with the overflow of rushing mountain spring water. The shock of the cold water eases and I sink into it. I am relieved. My monthly time, a little late, is past. The breeze whispers in the long grass edging the pool. I close my eyes and feel the sun warm my eyelids, as I take pleasure in the sensuous backwater coolness and amuse myself by identifying the calls of ducks, lapwings, kingfisher, laughing thrush, and the piercing cry of a soaring hawk.

I do not notice the hoof beats of the rider and his mount. A shadow passes over my eyelid. The birds are silent.

"Who is there?"

A dark face appears above. "Are these yours?" The man's hook-nosed, sun-brown face and guttural tones mark his Kurdish origin. He holds up my smock and towel. I sink into the water up to eye level and say nothing.

He holds out a hand as if to draw me to him. "Come here, girl."

I paddle away and fold my arms against my breasts. My heart pounds.

*Is this how it goes? Am I to be Ibrahim's whore that night? Will everything I know and value become like an autumn leaf that falls from the branch, withers and dies?*

I withdraw from his extended hand. I feel the bed of stone against my back and the tufts of grass that cling to the soil in the narrow strip above the river's steep bank. Behind him I hear the grunt and snuffle of his grazing mount.

"Come here. I mean you no harm."

"Who are you?"

He grins, gap-toothed. "I am called Rubar. I am a river. Maybe that is why Ibrahim bey sends me to find you here."

"Why does the bey send for me?"

"Questions, questions." Rubar's face hardens. "You are a woman. Do you not know to obey? The bey sends for you. Come now."

"I obey my father. When I marry, I will obey my husband."

"That is good. You will have a husband sooner than you think."

"How do you know which man my father chooses for me?"

Rubar laughs, an ugly yapping. "Your father is told whom he chooses. Now, come."

"My mother expects me." I lift my chin and glare at him.

"Do as I tell you," Rubar demands. His hand plays over the long knife that hangs from his belt. "Do not make me come after you."

My hands find the tufts of grass above me and I swing myself out of the water. Now I hang above the torrent. My hands begin to cramp with the strain in seconds. There is a splash and the sound of cursing. "The bey will not be pleased if you are marked." The splashing gets closer. I cannot hold on any longer.

Rubar's face appears above me. Everything happens in a rush. He takes a big handful of my hair and grabs my left wrist. His knife is between his teeth. As he drags me upwards, I twist my body and somehow roll on top of him. I swing my free right hand down hard on his nose and bite the hand holding my hair. He flinches and I am able to roll off him and kick his ribs. He grunts, but reaches for me and I kick again, my heel hitting him square on the nose. Rubar over-balances and falls backwards over the narrow ledge. The river water's rushing masks his tumble down the slope.

There is a sharp crack.

I dare to look. Below, Rubar sprawls at an unnatural angle on a large jagged rock, a wound in his head pumping blood. The relentless river pulls at his twitching body and carries it away downstream.

The breeze whispers through the grass. The reeds sway one way, then the other. The hawk's whistle pierces the sky. A cloud obscures the sun. I pick up my towel, pull on my smock, the slap the rump of Rubar's horse to send it on its way, and hurry back to the Armenian Quarter, combing my hair out as I walk. But no matter how fast I walk and how hard I yank at my hair, I cannot stop trembling or replaying in my mind how I made Rubar fall to his death, even though his untimely end is an accident. My teeth are chattering and I beg God out loud to forgive me my sin, but I do not feel him there, with me, consoling me.

No one knows what I have done. I will say nothing, but light candles for Rubar, despite him being a *Mussulman*, and pray each day for redemption. And I live up to this promise to myself as soon as I arrive home.

A little later, Mama finds me clean, dressed, stretching dough for *lavash*. She looks at me in the same way as old Arshalous, down her nose.

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Later that day a stranger on horseback comes galloping towards the village and pulls up on the edge of the town square in a cloud of dust. "The army lays siege on a town below a mountain to the south-west," he bellows to a group of men, who sit in the shade, the day's work complete.

"What mountain?" my brother David asks.

"It is the mountain named for Moses, Musa Ler."

"Is it far from here?"

"Four days, riding hard. Near Iskenderun. They will defend themselves to the end, rather than surrender."

"Will the army come here?" David asks. "Will they come for us?"

"Defend yourselves!" the stranger warns. "They will come." He urges his mount forward and pounds back onto the road to spread the word.

In gardens and groves that normally buzz contentedly amid aromas of hot black coffee, cinnamon and flowers, knots of elders whisper urgently. Hooded eyes dart towards the children at play in the late afternoon sunshine. Marash farmers are not soldiers. Our only firearms are ancient single shot weapons for hunting.

The air in Marash crackles with uncertainty.

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In the evening, relatives come to the hearth. They have a visiting friend with them named Bedros, a mature man with no wife. He carries a rifle and a soldier's pack. His lean body appears wound up tightly, ready to spring into action at any moment. He has hard grey eyes like granite that soften a little as he casts a glance in my direction.

In the firelight, I see my three brothers sitting with grim faces, ardent for action. My uncle stands and repeats the warning about troop movement in the west, and

Bedros nods: *this is true*. The men shift in their seats and glance at him with the deference of farmers to a soldier.

Covinar buries herself in Mama's skirt. Her puppies squeeze in tighter, whining in sympathy. Her little voice floats above the murmurs. "Where is Anahid?"

*Perhaps in the bazaar at Zeitoun, with the new golden bracelets?*

*Riding behind Ibrahim bey on a white stallion, head covered in cloth?*

*You would know those blue eyes anywhere. Stunning, like ...*

Eyes steal to me.

"Where is she?" Covinar addresses Mama, but it carries throughout the lodge.

"Ssss, *hogis*," Mama strokes Covinar's hair. "Ssss."

Mama sits wide-eyed but not seeing. Two tears roll down her cheeks. She wipes them away with a swift, practised motion. But I see her do it.

I am only beginning to see Mama's pain. For an instant, in her eyes, I see God's pain, too. It is surely the pain God must feel when his children turn their backs on his commandments and let wickedness rule their ways. Mama's love and care is there, every day, right up until this last day of our old lives in our old world.

*Do this, tidy that. Wash yourself. Do your best. Listen to your Papa. Watch your sister. Do not let her out of your sight. Families stick together.*

Mama loves us, I remind myself. She teaches us love. Like *Hayr Garegin*.

Like Jesus.

I see it, in that instant: to take her child away is to take a piece of her heart. In a blink of the eye, I feel her pain and know that Anahid is gone from our lives.

And I realise that I am a woman now. I must behave as one. I find myself holding Mama as a child. "We must stay together," I murmur in her ear.

She weeps without sound. Now Covinar clings to the maroon folds of her floor-length skirt. The hearth fire hisses. A dog howls in the distance.

Covinar's puppies squeeze in closer still. Her little voice floats in the silence, as she strokes and pats both pets. "Where is *Hoviv*?"

Papa speaks gently. "He is gone, to see the bey."

I turn to Papa. "He is never gone this long before."

Papa finds it hard to meet my eyes. "The bey is touring his lands."

"But *Hoviv* always comes here before," Covinar says.

"He is very busy now," Papa says, his face working to mask feeling.

The eyes of the elders glitter.

Mama's pain stabs at me and it makes me angry. I direct it at Papa. "Why?"

"You ask too many questions, *axchiks*," Papa says. His eyes say much more.

I feel the warm salt of Mama's silent tears, wetting the white sleeves of my best blouse. This is my home. Love is always here. Now there is fear.

In the firelight, the faces flush deeper in shame. Covinar's little voice pipes up: "Why is everyone frightened?"

No one has an answer. "It will be worse," Bedros says, and a few branches pop and splutter in the fire as if to add emphasis to his words. "For twenty years I have fought against the persecution of my people, between Urfa and Adana, against Turks who stole our daughters, livestock and crops. We resist, but the oppression continues."

"When did you become a soldier?" my brother David asks.

"When I was fifteen." Bedros answers. David shifts awkwardly under the stranger's intense gaze.

"So young," Mama's friend Gohar says, from across the open fire.

“I was an orphaned boy,” Bedros says, “in an empty village near Urfa. I had no choice. My inheritance was stolen from the ground where it was buried. I had nothing. I found the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, who fed and trained me. I swore loyalty to the Dashnaks. I had nothing to lose. I swore to fight the *Hamidye*, who murdered my family and everyone in my village.”

“Were you at Adana?” my uncle asks.

“No. We were to the east, when they slaughtered our people at Adana six years ago. There was no resistance. Back then, some people felt that Talaat and Enver might not think, like the Sultan, that killing Armenians will fix all the Empire’s problems.” At that there was much murmuring. “Can there be peace?” *Hayr* Aram asks.

“Peace is unlikely,” Bedros says. “After Adana, Dashnak hearts were hardened against the enemy. As their hearts are hard against us. In 1914, my comrades and I followed our Commander Vartan into the Imperial Russian Army. We became Ararat Regiment, Armenians fighting for our homes, an end to being second-class citizens. We destroyed the Third Ottoman Army at the Battle of Sarikamish. We sent Enver and his men packing. But we have not seen the last of them. I fear for the peace of villages like this one. I see no way to defend yourselves from attack.”

Old folks’ tales would wash over me when I was a child. Past families decimated by the *Hamidye* are just names whispered across long-dead hearths. “When will the attack come?” David asks.

“It is impossible to say,” Bedros said. “I have had a short furlough since my comrades and I helped defend Van against the enemy. The Ottoman Third Army withdrew but now it regroups. Men say now that Enver and Talaat will be harsher still on Armenians, since we fought against them on Ottoman soil.”

The name of Sultan Abdul Hamid inspires dread in the elders, but the children of Marash do not know the essence of being outsiders. We are to learn in the most painful way.

The ancient, cracked tones of *Paron* Hovhannes break the silence, as his rheumy eyes seem to look out beyond the flames over great distances. "We are the *infidel*."

"Strangers," Papa says. "Hundreds of years later, we are still strangers."

"We are worse than that," Bedros says. "We are like unwanted guests."

Hovhannes dips his head in acknowledgement and begins to retell the story about a great bull he once owned that was to go to pasture with the cows for many seasons. "He was the biggest beast I ever raised, the pride of the village, worth more than money. The old bey, Mustafa, came to me in that first season."

I speak out loud. "Mustafa?" Mama glances up at me, shocked at my impudence. There are murmurs in the direction of the girl who speaks when the men are speaking. "Who was married to Ayse?"

"The same." The old man clears his throat. "He accused me of not paying my taxes. He commanded me to fetch the bull from the meadow."

The snap and fizz of burning wood bounce from walls as he gathers his thoughts. The older folk know the tale, but it has not been repeated for many years and the youngsters are listening now. All about the large single-room dwelling, older people shift in their seats. A child murmurs. The firelight dances over the wooden *khachkar* hanging near the entrance. Candles either side illuminate the wooden Jesus on the cross. Women wrap children in blankets.

Gohar lifts the large pot of boiling water for tea from its place on the edge of the large hearth. Our neighbour, the widow Knarr, emerges into the firelight with dried

mint, thyme and chamomile from her garden. Together, Knarr and Gohar blend the herbs and prepare to fill numerous hand-made, fired clay cups.

Hovhannes accepts the first cup, sips from it, clears his ancient throat, and his words tumble creakily into the rapt silence about the fire.

The *bey* ordered him to slaughter the beast. His men, about fifteen of them, were hungry. Hovhannes suggested they slaughter a calf. Mustafa struck Hovhannes full in the face, and as he lay in the dirt, kicked him hard several times about the body. and commands him again to slaughter the bull. The calf was an insult. His have nothing to show for their hunting. The bull might feed a hundred, the men were hungry. The *bey* ordered Hovhannes to have the feast ready by sundown the next day.