

# The Watermelon Boys

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# Part I



# 1

THE PRESENT IS AN ARROGANT time in which to live, always has been. Humans of the present look back at their people, land, and history, and whisper to themselves with glee, *We are not them*. But we were always them. We are our history; we are the crimes of our ancestors. And we wait, mouths agape, to hear tales of hope, as though good could triumph in such a world.

But every century, every desperate land, every present, has its own moment of optimism, an instant in which its people are so sure, just like their fathers before them, that something better is possible. They tell themselves that their souls are better now, more compassionate, more powerful. *This time it will be different.*

So, even when he was lost, face down in the sludge, still unconscious, the man on the banks of the River Tigris would come to believe it too. Proof that even when a person has no name, no memory, and no idea how he ended up on the shores of Baghdad, hope can prevail. Yes, humans have a long history of mistaking desperation for courage.

And when he felt a prod in his back, his body aching, his mind flooded with unanswered questions—none of it took away his unshakable belief that, eventually, all would be well.

“Told you he wasn’t dead, Mariam. Told you,” someone shrieked, as the man heard small feet thumping into the distance. He sat up, blinking river dirt out of his eyes.

“Wait,” he said, with a grunt that shocked even himself.

The sun disappeared behind two figures standing over him. He rubbed his eyes and squinted up at them. The sky was obscured by two pairs of large beetle eyes, made wider by thick black outlines that shaped them into lemons, and by four braids, half twisted into folds of gray cloth. The smaller girl broke the silence with a squeal that wobbled her oversized cheeks.

“Are you all right?” asked Mariam, politely. “I . . . we thought maybe you needed help. Should I fetch my baba?”

“No. Where am I?” he tried to whisper, but it came out as a growl.

“Nahar Street is that way,” she said, pointing.

“Baghdad?” he asked. She nodded, and he thought she spoke again—though he couldn’t be sure. He stood up, swaying, his head throbbing. He rubbed at the dirt dried to his chest and slapped at his sleeves. For a second he remembered, and was sure he saw his companion and his horse on the bank across the Tigris.

“Bring my horse around, would you, Karim?” he called across the river. “And, no, we can’t take turns riding him. I don’t care what your story says—he’ll not end up in the river if I can help it.” The man threw back his head and laughed. “See how well I know you, Karim.”

The girls exchanged a glance.

“Let’s go, Salsabeel. He’s crazy,” said Mariam, walking away.

“Look!” said Salsabeel, pulling on her friend’s sleeve, using the full force of her plump form to drag them both back to the man. He was standing, still swaying slightly, and examining the river. “Are you a soldier, Ammu?” she asked gently, indicating his belt’s insignia. He looked down and his hands darted around his muddied uniform. “Then how did you come to be here, in the mud?”

His breathing quickened and he clasped his hands together to stop them shaking.

He turned with a slight wobble and shook his head with a gasp.

And then he ran.



## 2

### Winter 1915 Baghdad

HE RAN. HE WASN'T SURE if his legs were heavy from the clay of the Tigris or from the ache of the cuts it surely concealed, but he ran anyway. His hair was matted with sand and dirt, and the thumping in his head made him feel like a man was running behind him, playing the tabla drum on the back of his skull.

He flicked his eyes as he ran, inspecting the alleys on either side for any trace of the familiar. He found himself in a narrow street lined with shanasheel oriel windows, their wooden panels knotted into webs of hexadecagonal stars and tessellated honeycombs. He ran past ten, eleven shanasheel, each betraying its hidden residents with the gravelly clank of a clay water flask, the tittering of gossip, or wafts of earthy tea. Something about the tea tugged in the man's stomach; it was a memory he could not quite place, but it was a comforting sensation, he thought. Why, then, did it fill his chest with such an ache? He put a hand against the street's stone wall and shut his eyes for a moment.

He caught only flashes of the scenes in front of him: reams of smoke trailing up from an open-air stone oven, the green woven belt of a passing man, but most of all it was the eyes—everywhere he looked, flashes of eyes—curious, amused, and disapproving. A huddle of women, with visors peeping out under their veils, stared at him as they hurried by, before averting their eyes from him—with some terror, he thought. Maybe

this was it. Would he roam these streets forever, aching with this unshakable sense of absence? It was surprisingly painful to feel loss and not recall where to place it. He even considered for a moment if this was his journey to the afterlife. He tugged at his belt and pulled it up a little higher on his waist. Whatever had happened to him, whatever the reason he was coated in days-old dirt and reeked like a butcher's cast-offs, he was still here. And it brought him relief when he told himself he had defeated the odds, unknown as those odds were. He would remember, he had to, or what was the point of it all? And he swore then that if he had to run every inch of Baghdad, he would remember.

He wound around unfamiliar alleys and passed crooked homes. Like the flashes of a moving picture, he watched a magenta and cobalt minaret disappear over his shoulder and found himself inside the tubular hall of Baghdad's weavers' bazaar, where the horizon disappeared behind an infinite stream of stone arches. Bold rugs were suspended from iron hooks, and each merchant marked his territory with the display of his most intricate creation on the wall above his workshop, as he sweated below. Scores of weavers worked in counterbeats, deftly tossing shuttles of wool through dancing pins, and tapping their pedals in a rhythmic jig. He felt himself in a colony of praying mantises, as the workers bobbed their bent heads and spread their arms in an embrace of their looms.

Light beamed in from looming windows casting a haze on the thread cobwebs that zigzagged around the weavers, and making the floor of discarded fibers in the window's glare light up with a dusty glow. A sea of Baghdadis careened down the bazaar: men in dishdasha robes and suit jackets clenching their wares under their arms, women with bejeweled braids, and others, cloaked in warrior black from head to toe, their suspended huntress faces gleaming as they eyed the market stalls. He wound through the carpet of shredded wool, kicking up a multicolored wake. As he passed each stone arch, another

appeared on the horizon. And, God, the stench. Had Baghdad always smelled so bad? He filled his lungs with the reek of sweat and piss and sourness that had fermented in the heat and sand for weeks. He pinched his eyes shut and let his legs and ears navigate. Shoppers called out angrily as he jostled them but he kept his eyes sealed, stopping only when he felt the sun warm his forehead.

“May I shave your face, sir?” a street merchant called to him as he exited the bazaar. “That beard is a veritable beehive. Let me see to it.”

“Take your photo?” another yelled from across the road. A crowd of shoppers tussled past.

The man slumped to the floor and leaned against the tear-drop archway of Baghdad city’s North Gate.

“Some syrupy hot zalabya, sir? The best this side of Baghdad,” said a man from beyond the gateway. “I can see you’re in need of a—”

But the man would never know what it seemed he needed. He covered his ears and filled his lungs. “Enough!” he said. He put his head to his knees and rocked, humming his favorite Sherif Muhiddin melody. He heard laughter and mocking murmurs, which only grew louder as he tried to drown them with his humming.

“It’s all right,” he told himself. “I will remember and it will be all right.” He heard a woman yell, but he kept rocking, thinking of the sluggish, sorrowful oud, sharing the musician’s epic as his own tragedy.

“A madman!” a woman shouted. If he had opened his eyes, he would have wondered why tears had erupted onto her cheeks, but all he heard were the unrelenting accusations that he was a madman, pelting him from the gateway. He shut his eyes and hummed his melody, loudly enough to block out all else.

“Mad!” she yelled. Then, after a few moments, she took him by the shoulders and began humming the tune with him.

He opened his eyes and dropped his arms, the dried mud on his face now moist again. The woman crouched beside him, and he knew he had been mistaken: a person with a face as kind as hers could never have called him mad.

“Ahmad!” she gasped, her eyes shining. “I found you, Ahmad.”

### 3

AHMAD COULDN'T RECALL MUCH OF what followed. Years later he would remember that evening through flashes of water that glinted moonlight into his face, through the trees filled with orange blossom, and by the steady pace of hoofs.

For all their gaps, these memories would become his most vivid. It was in the flicker of a woman touching his brow, her face as she explained what was happening to him, as she stood in the doorway while a man stared into his eyes. He would wake for a few minutes, and recall with irritation that he could not remember something before he returned to sleep. Some days he felt he had been awake for hours, alone and in the dark, digging into his brain. His boys, his baby, his wife: he was sure these were truths. Their voices swirled in his mind and sometimes he felt like they could have been in the room, sitting so close to him that he felt his lungs deflate under the weight of his heart. And then, just occasionally, he felt the flicker of a small hand in his.

Ahmad didn't know how long he spent in this bed, remembering and not remembering, waking in bursts before disappearing, as though dragged by gravity back into unconsciousness to reunite with the images of bodies, slumped, unmoving, around archeological ruins. In the moments when he felt in control of his history, he would switch his ring from his left hand to his right. It helped him to remember.

His eyes shot open and his right hand felt odd. The ring.  
*The list.*

He shut his eyes and strained.

1. *My wife*
2. *My sons and my baby girl*
3. *The war*
4. *I don't know what happened*
5. *But I am not dead*

He ran through the list on his fingers, then counted his prayers on them until he fell asleep.

It was early one morning that Ahmad awoke to a hoopoe's call. It sounded as if it were hooting right beside his eardrum, singing him awake from his pillow. It was that sudden rush of sound he felt after he surfaced out of the river. A haze of light was streaming horizontally onto his bed, and the air was thick, damp, and earthy. He noticed the room for the first time, the wall he was sure he'd never looked at before, though it seemed so familiar.

With a gasp he spotted a forehead poking over the end of the bed, hidden behind his left foot.

"Baba?" asked a hesitant voice.

For a long moment there was silence as Ahmad gazed at his feet, then his face contorted with a neglected smile, and he croaked, "Yusuf."

Yusuf ran to the bedside and flung his arms around his father. "They said you wouldn't remember."

Ahmad lay silently for a few minutes, staring at his son. A pool formed in the outer crease of his eye and spilled down the side of his face, disappearing into his hairline to join the hoopoe. "How could I forget you, Yusuf?" he replied softly, with a cracked smile. "Is it possible to forget a person who jumps on top of a poor sick man in bandages?"

Yusuf laughed, and poked the yellowing bruises on Ahmad's face, now clear of grime.

Ahmad shut his eyes, lifted a hand to his crown, felt a misshapen triangle fill the cup of his palm, and recalled, with a flare, gunfire, the rock, the river, Ctesiphon. Oh, God, what had become of him? He opened his eyes, saw Yusuf staring at him expectantly, and choked down the memory of the battle on the river.

“Ah, yabni . . . my son, I wish it were possible to forget such cruel people, but alas . . .”

“Then I should make sure you remember me even more strongly,” replied Yusuf, hugging his father with deliberate force.

“I have missed you truly, my son,” said Ahmad, shutting his eyes. “Even when I could not remember you, I missed you.”

The two were silent for a moment, when Yusuf asked, “Do you remember what happened to you?”

“Perhaps it’s better that I don’t,” replied Ahmad, quietly. It was not quite an untruth, but he still felt a pang of guilt. How do you confess fear to a child when you have sworn the world is safe? How do you explain the particular color that sand turns when doused with blood? How do you explain that the memory of a color can repulse you because you have never seen it anywhere else?

Ahmad could recall only snapshots from the battle of Ctesiphon; the iconic arch he had visited as a child, that adorned all the foreign postcards, was now a graveyard to his Ottoman comrades and English enemies. He recalled the shining face of a young Arab at his feet and his stomach lurched. He recalled their haphazard retreat from the front line, toward the Tigris, and his shock as he looked at himself in the waters—unrecognizable, ragged, his face covered with a sticky, gritty red. And he recalled jumping into the amber river, dispersing into it deep pink swirls, from the blood of God-knows-who, his arms gripping something to keep him afloat. And then nothing.

Yusuf watched his father, then said with a smile, “But what you imagine might be worse than what actually happened, you know. What if you were just bumped on the head by a goat?” Ahmad smiled.

“Now,” said Yusuf, “can we say hello to Mama? She kept telling me off for sneaking into your room, but now you can tell her I cured you.”

“So you disobey your mother as well as your father?”

“I treat everyone equally.” Yusuf sniggered.

Ahmad hauled his aching limbs out of bed, wincing at the slightest motion. He wondered how long it had been since he had last stood. Yusuf grabbed his father’s hand and asked, “Haven’t I grown since you saw me last? Everyone says I’m finally starting to look twelve.”

Ahmad chuckled. “How should I remember?”

Ahmad felt his son’s grown hand—and he had noticed, sadly, how big he had become—leading him through a courtyard, down a corridor that felt both familiar and unsettling, and out into a garden of dazzling light and sweet scents. He rubbed his arms and felt under his palms the limbs of a stranger, lean and bony, where they should have been heavy from a lifetime of laboring. His body moved like it was borrowed from another.

*But I am home*, he reminded himself. Any body would do.

Ahmad rounded a corner of the house and froze when he saw her. He gasped. The hazy image of a woman mopping his brow—how could he have allowed himself to forget that face? “Dabriya,” he whispered, trying to mask the quiver in his throat.

She had called in every favor to track down Ahmad after he had disappeared at Ctesiphon. There was no trace of him among the survivors and little information about those who had fallen. And when hope of ever hearing any news—even permission to grieve—had disappeared, Dabriya had found

her husband caked in dirt, blood, and flies under the archway of the Old City, just a few hours' ride from his home.

Ahmad gazed at Dabriya's face and staggered into her embrace.

"Habibti," he said, his arms on the back of her veil. "I'm sorry, my love," he croaked. "I'm sorry I couldn't see you. I'm sorry it took me so long."

"Well, timekeeping isn't this family's strength," she replied, not attempting to mask her smile. She blinked, pressing her palm to Ahmad's back and stroking his ribs, whispering her thanks to God.

For days, Dabriya boiled pot after pot of ground tea on the outside fire, ready at a moment's notice for the endless stream of well-wishers who came to welcome Ahmad back to the neighborhood. She was grateful to have an outlet to distract her from the confusion of his return. She wanted to scream the words that would free all that was trapped between her ribs. But she doubted such words existed. What sound could capture her relief that he had returned? That her family was whole again, after having believed herself widowed and her children fatherless?

And, for a time, Dabriya and her children forgot about the shadows that had darkened their home in Ahmad's absence. The sullen indifference that for months had lived on their eldest son Emad's face loosened. Emad thought the constant frown of his black brows made him unreadable, but it only served to make him look pubescent, tired, and lost, and these were truths of their own, too. With the return of her father, little Luma could not stop giggling—when he hiccuped, when he dropped his fruit, especially when he sneezed—with the relief that all her fuzzy memories of Ahmad were not dreams. He was real.

Questions once so inimical to restful sleep were forgotten in the shadow of the orange harvest and dusk prayers on the river shore. Ahmad's uniform had been tossed, unwashed, to

the back of a cupboard, and, as no officials came for him, there it remained.

After a while, Ahmad stopped trying to remember the journey that had landed him in Baghdad's reeds. He stopped switching his ring from one hand to the other and checking his list of truths. He stopped counting the number of sunsets he shared with his family, and the number of watermelons they cracked open at sunset. But he knew something was missing from his memories, something that, even all these weeks later, would wake him in the night, screaming a name he could never quite recall, with a face that disappeared as he crossed back into consciousness.

But the knowledge that he had the capacity to forget his wife, his home, himself—that never left. And every morning, after he had touched his forehead to the floor with gratitude, he took the small photograph that used to stand at Dabriya's bedside, and tucked it into the folds of his belt. Just in case.

“WELCOME, WELCOME,” SAID DAWOOD, SMILING so broadly that his eyes disappeared. His tarboosh was positioned precisely in the center of his crown, his leather sandals smelled newly sewn, and a slim green and red patterned belt held his striped robes in place. Ahmad felt an itch on his head and was suddenly conscious of his fraying ghutra. He had forgotten how grand his neighbor’s house was: wooden shanasheel were dotted around the exterior, and alabaster arches striped with blue led to an inner shaded courtyard, overlooked by a long oak balcony. Dawood led him to a low seating area in a corner of the courtyard. A small fountain, surrounded by colorful geometric tiles, bubbled in the middle.

A maid scurried out with a woven tray holding two glasses of tea and a fan of freshly sliced watermelon triangles. It was only after they had eaten several pieces that Dawood spoke.

“Although I am truly glad of your company again, brother, there is more than one reason I requested it today.”

“Which is the chief reason I accepted your invitation, as you know,” Ahmad replied, and the two chuckled.

“Has the army contacted you?” Dawood asked. Ahmad shook his head. “You must be very careful. They may send people to search for you, and the first place they’ll look is here.”

Ahmad shook his head again. “Maybe once the war is over. But if they haven’t come yet, I think I’m safe for now.”

He gave a wry smile. "And who will they send for one soldier, who is probably lying dead in Ctesiphon?"

"So you won't be returning to the army?" asked Dawood, raising his eyebrows.

"It's not like that," Ahmad said quietly.

"Well, that's how they will see it."

"No need to look so happy," said Ahmad.

"Not happy," said Dawood, "but they didn't deserve you. Our army isn't what it used to be."

"Say it enough and it will come true, brother," said Ahmad sharply.

"Then why haven't you returned?" said Dawood, a bit too quickly. Ahmad sighed heavily and Dawood looked away. "I'm sorry, it's your decision."

Ahmad examined his friend for a moment. Once he said it there was no taking it back.

"I thought of you, Dawood, when I believed my time had come." Dawood's eyes softened. "I can't tell you how terrible it was, seeing my brothers ripped apart, but I truly thought that it was a price worth paying. I thought that when it came to it I could give my life for our freedom, for Baghdad, for my family to live safely." Ahmad shut his eyes, trying to ignore the knot in his throat. "But imagine kneeling in a stream of blood and brains, like it's the third fucking river of the land, being yelled at by a Turk to fight, to vindicate my brother, whose guts are spattered across my right thigh. That's when I thought of you, Dawood. That's when it hit me that I was defending our land against colonizers so that the last invaders can keep ruling us." Ahmad looked at his friend and turned his palms to the sky. "This is our city and we are fighting for no stake in it."

Dawood leaned toward Ahmad and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, brother," he said. "I truly wish I was wrong."

Ahmad shook his head. "I can't deny it." He sighed. "It is no longer the army of our fathers."

They sat in silence for a moment, Ahmad, eyes shut, gripping the back of his knee with one hand and Dawood staring down at the tray of watermelon.

And when Ahmad finally swallowed the knot, and released his leg, and opened his eyes, Dawood smiled at him, just enough.

“You heard about the Sharif of Mecca?” asked Dawood.

Ahmad nodded. “The *English* Arab rebellion,” he said, raising his eyebrow.

“You can pull that face,” said Dawood, “but the English are the only ones promising us our own country. A Baghdad ruled by Baghdadis, can you imagine?”

“Every day,” said Ahmad, slowly. “I miss the days when I had no notion of a free city.”

“Maybe it’s too late for us,” said Dawood. “Maybe we will just become another Constantinople—maybe your army will come in and slaughter all our Armenian brothers and that will be the end of our glorious city.”

Ahmad blinked incredulously. “Firstly, it isn’t my army any more, and secondly, don’t be ridiculous. This is Baghdad—the entire city is Armenian or Jewish or Chaldean. It could never happen here.”

“They always say it’s impossible before it happens,” said Dawood. “Who would have thought the Turkish Unionists would order the killing of all their own Armenian soldiers?”

“We might be ruled by Turks, but you’re forgetting that we aren’t actually Turkish, and neither are our soldiers. Why would any of us care about Unionist aims for the Ottoman Empire? Who would execute his own neighbor? There would be nobody left in our city if they ordered us to kill all the men who believe in something different to them.” Ahmad stared at his friend.

“I know, brother,” said Dawood, “I know, but think of the cost. What if we are wrong? We cannot risk losing those we love.” He tilted his head and frowned. “What if they come to Baghdad, like they went to Van, to Constantinople? What if

they come and capture or kill every Armenian on this side of the Euphrates? It will be too late.”

Ahmad winced. All this time he had been talking of abstract dangers in distant lands. How could he have missed what Dawood was trying to tell him? He’d been too busy defending his city’s name to think about what would actually happen if the Turkish Unionists had their way in Baghdad.

“You understand what I am saying, brother?” asked Dawood.

Ahmad nodded. “I must warn Mikhael.”

When Ahmad visited Mikhael on his modest lands a few buildings upstream, he thought the old man might sob or need to lie down, but he did neither. When Ahmad told him he was worried for his safety, that he had heard how the Armenians in Anatolia were being besieged, killed, and exiled, Mikhael did not yell out or curse the perpetrators.

“You’ll come and stay with us,” said Ahmad, “until we know what the danger is, until it passes.”

Mikhael looked at Ahmad. “I know you mean well, yabni, but none of this is news to me. I’ve been worried for my life for years, and I’m sure I’ll be worried for many more, or until they come for me.” Mikhael put a hand on a post of his goat enclosure, turning to look at his goats. His white hair feathered forward beneath his cap. “But I will happily accept your invitation if it will bring either of us a little comfort.”

Mikhael didn’t understand how it had come to this. Surely someone should have come to the Armenians’ defense—should have protested, at least? One minute the Turkish Unionists were shouting slogans of justice and equality, and the next, Armenian lives, homes, even children, were the obstacle to Ottoman glory. And the Turks believed it. He hadn’t thought he would live long enough to see the masses fall for the lies of men in power again. And he realized, then, how predictable people were.

Mikhael moved into a small ground-floor room that opened onto the stony courtyard of Ahmad's house. He probably didn't protest as much as decorum dictated he should, but he had never had much time for decorum. As the weeks passed, Mikhael tended his goats each morning before Ahmad's family rose, returning with the day's milk. He spent his afternoons sleeping and his evenings weeding Ahmad's garden or playing guessing games with Yusuf, Emad, and Luma. Outwardly, he was uncomplaining, and sprightly for his years, but sometimes, when he was at his home, there were moments when his legs gave way at his helplessness for the families that were hunted, had perished crossing deserts, or who were slaughtered, their bodies left to float down the Euphrates, not always in one piece.

Dawood's position in the Baghdadi law courts had provided him with useful, well-informed contacts within the city and in wider Ottoman lands, who were willing to pass on news for the right price. Though Dawood could never be sure that reports of Unionist attacks to the north, or British progress to the south were true, it was an alternative source of news to the local reports. Ahmad and Mikhael followed keenly both Dawood's updates and local accounts, which were filled with Ottoman heroism and news of the construction of the illustrious Baghdad Railway. Apparently it was fully operational between Constantinople and Kut, which, to Ahmad, seemed improbable and of little relevance. In the British press, too many Armenian lives were lost for them to be presented as more than a unit of mathematics, though Mikhael questioned the enthusiasm with which the grisly reports were written. Nevertheless Ahmad deciphered the British papers with Dawood's help—his friend could read at least four languages with ease—with hunger and skepticism, and with the knowledge that everything they heard or read was likely already out of date.

Though the war continued to grow bloodier across the land that the foreign papers called Mesopotamia, Ahmad and his family found a suspended solace in their reunion, and in

their distance from Baghdad City. They knew they were at war—or at least that their rulers were—but when they were sitting beside the river cracking seeds, or jumping for the peaches on the highest branches, they could almost convince themselves that their isolation would last forever. Dabriya consoled herself with the knowledge that finding happiness amid brutality is not defeat: it is a victory that has always inspired peace with more focus than any weapon. Whoever could find a corner of joy in the midst of a war, she thought, surely had a duty to enjoy it for as long as they could.

Ahmad would cross the Tigris many times that spring, spending hours in Dawood's cool courtyard maneuvering pawns and knights, as they grazed on watermelon triangles, discussing politics in abstract. One evening of chess and chatter stretched well into the night and Ahmad rowed his small boat home by moonlight. He found Dabriya sitting on the riverbank, leaning against a tree. He hopped out with a smile and clasped her hand. She sighed heavily.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Just relief,” she said, shaking her head.

Ahmad bit his lip. “I didn't realize how late it was. I'm sorry.”

“You're here now,” replied Dabriya.

“I was just across the river. What could possibly happen?” He smiled.

“If you knew how it felt to have your fears come true . . .” She trailed off. Ahmad lowered his head and held Dabriya's hand with both of his. She looked down, avoiding Ahmad's eyes as she spoke. “So many things should have been taken from us. I should be jumping for joy, shouldn't I?” Ahmad stroked her palm with his. “I'm so happy that you're back, Ahmad, but I'm always, always afraid that you'll be lost again.”

“It's all right to be afraid, but just know that I'm not going anywhere. This is our home, and we will be safe and together until this war ends.”

"You must want to join the English fight against the Turks," whispered Dabriya.

Ahmad looked at his wife's face. How he had longed for her eyes, their maddening saffron glow every time she watched him leave, and their palm green when she lay beside him at night. He could never deny her wishes. He didn't have it in him and they both knew it.

"But I want to be here more," replied Ahmad. He ran his hand along the hair that poked out at the peak of her veil. He had forgotten even her hair, how thick it was under his fingertips and darker than the sky on the longest night. His stomach soared. Was this what happiness felt like? It had been so long since he had felt anything beyond the eruption of adrenalin, and exhaustion as it ebbed away.

"I will tell the rivers and the earth, and all the undeserving people on it, that I do not belong to them. I belong to you," he said. "The Ottomans and the English can go kill each other in the desert and leave us savages in peace."

Dabriya turned to him. "When we heard you were missing, the world just continued, not even pausing for your absence," she said. "And I thought everything we ever did would just fade away like it never happened."

He leaned back against the tree, clasped her hand again, and whispered, "But it didn't."

Dabriya smiled beside him, leaning against the palm trunk, as two bats danced above the trees. "Ahmad," she said softly. "Who is Karim?"

The name sent a jolt through Ahmad's veins. *Karim*. He felt bile rise in his throat as he remembered the pale-checked boy, barely older than Emad, lying at his feet, his left knee and right hip bent at impossible angles.

*"Do it, Yuzbasi Ahmad," begged Karim, grasping at his unformed thigh, his cheeks wet. "Please do it."*

*"I can't," said Ahmad, the muzzle of his gun pointed at the boy. Karim's wispy, barely-there beard was coated with dust. "I can't."*

*"Do it, quickly," said Karim, as his body sank into the sand. "Don't let me die like this. Please, Abu Emad."*

*He knew he should shoot, should do as his protégé asked, but Ahmad also knew that he could not. He had ended many lives, but this was one he could not take responsibility for, no matter how close death already was. Karim would probably die slowly, painfully. And if, by a miracle, he lived, he would never again know what it was to walk.*

*Ahmad swung his gun onto his back and dropped to his knees. He scooped Karim into his arms and retreated from the British. Karim screamed curses at him.*

*A thud to the back of his head sent Ahmad to the ground, and Karim flying, his body limp. There were no screams this time.*

*Ahmad came round to a labored rocking motion under his stomach. He was face down, slung over a camel's back. The sight of its bulging feet pressing into the sand hypnotized him briefly. He grunted.*

*"Can you walk?" asked a Turk from below.*

*Ahmad recognized him as a captain from the badge on his shoulder. "I think so," he said. He slid off the camel to the ground, his knees buckling. A crowd of troops swarmed around him, enveloping him as he struggled to his feet. He couldn't recognize a single face, and it was only then that he remembered Karim. His only true friend from the crowds of men around him.*

*"Where's Karim? The boy who was with me, his legs were . . ." He trailed off.*

*"We couldn't save him."*

*A chill ran down the back of Ahmad's neck. "He's dead?" he asked, though it came out as a squeak.*

*"No idea," replied the captain. "We couldn't carry you both and you were in better shape."*

*Ahmad felt sick. What if the English had taken Karim? Oh, God, the things they would do to him. He pictured Karim's legs, askew and limp. The poor boy begging for release from a slow and painful death. "I should have done it," he said. "I should have done as he asked."*

"Ahmad." Dabriya was shaking his shoulder. Ahmad sat up with a jolt. He couldn't remember how he had come to be on the ground. It was so easy to forget, he thought, and then he laughed—a phlegmy sound he tried to cloak with a cough. If only it were easy to forget. His cheeks felt cold and he hoped he had not been crying. She must not see him cry. She must not know what he had done. She must not know what he had not.

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