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Vala's tiny heart pounded, her vision blurred by tears, yet she ran with all her strength to keep the promise she had made to her father. She stopped when she reached the great rock, brushed her bangs from her eyes, looked once to the waterfall streaming down beside her and once more to the lake below, where the water gathered before rushing out to the sea. Fear seized her. She looked back. Soldiers and villagers were locked in a fight to the death. One of them spotted her and started running toward her. Vala sobbed. For an instant it felt as though she met her father's eyes. Musaf's cry echoed through the square.

Vala, jump!

Vala turned her back on her village, stretched on her thin legs, and leapt.

Father!

Screaming, she plunged into the water.

Just as Musaf had taught her, she swam beneath the surface, never lifting her head until she reached the cave hidden behind the waterfall. She came up gasping, sat upon the slick wet stones. She pulled off her dress, wrung it out and spread it over the rocks. She followed the instructions in her head without emotion, just as her father had drilled into her repeatedly. She drew her knees to her chest and wrapped her thin arms around them. Droplets from the falls splashed across her face and mingled with her tears. The roar of water filled the air as it struck the stones. Vala let herself break down, sobbing, wailing, crying out again and again... She brought her thumb to her mouth, and as she sucked it the crying eased. Sleep overtook her.

When she woke, the first thing she felt was that she was not cold. In fact, there was a strange warmth against her chest. As sleep drowsiness lifted, she realized beneath her hand was the heartbeat of a furry animal. She sat up at once and so did the wolf pup she had been clutching in her sleep. Now on her hands and knees, she stared at him, and he at her, both frightened of each other. At last, the pup licked the girl's nose. Vala stepped back. She giggled: it tickled me! Then she sneezed. At that, the pup sprang on her, licking her nose, cheeks, and salty face, while his tail wagged furiously.

Vala pushed the pup off her to the side. He was small, yet heavy. The stone was cold against her back, and she shivered. She felt her dress. It was no longer wet. As she dressed, she noticed the last of the light slipping away; night was falling. The memory of what had happened returned, and still, she could not believe it. In only a few days a life full of dreams, love, and peace had turned into a nightmare.

A week before, a worn-out horse had come to the village, bearing on its back a man half-dead. The Rider was unconscious, the reins loose, the horse plodding wearily toward the village square. When it reached the center, the horse's eyes closed, its head sank, and it slept. It was midday, hot, and the square was

empty. It was the children who noticed it first, then the people from the nearest houses. They gathered around. The Rider's long black hair, slick with oil, covered his face. One of the village elders, Adem, stepped forward, lifted stranger's hair, touched his face, and felt for his breath.

Call Mother Ela, he said, the horse is spent, and so is the boy.

Soon Mother Ela came from her house in the forest, leaning on her staff. Every few steps she stopped, pressed her hand to her back, caught her breath, and walked on. The lines of her face seemed less like signs of age than features she had been born with. The colors of her flowered shalwar had faded, the white scarf at her neck had yellowed, but her hair was bright red as clover — she had dyed it freshly with henna.

As she drew near the crowd parted for her. She grasped the horse's reins and paused for breath. Then she brushed back the Rider's hair and held her hand to his nose. He was still alive. She pulled down his eyelids. His eyes were bloodshot. Bring me a stool, she called. Someone brought one. She climbed it, placed her hands on his neck, then his back, his ribs, and finally his arms and legs. Holding the saddle, she stepped down.

Vala and Musaf stood beside her. Vala clung to her father's arm, watching. Mother Ela bent down, stroked the girl's hair. My beautiful girl, my poor orphaned child, she said. She drew Vala close, breathed in her hair. Vala felt her bones, smelled the mix of soap, henna and age.

Ela straightened and turned to Musaf.

Can you carry him to my house?

Of course, Mother, Musaf answered, and in a single motion he hoisted the Rider onto his back.

Keeping step with her, he bore the burden as though it weighed nothing, following her into the forest. At the end of the path, they climbed the rocks to reach the house set in the hillside. The walls were so well hidden among the trees that one would not know a hut stood there until standing nearly upon it. There were two rooms, one where Mother Ela slept and the other for everything else. She told Musaf to lay the Rider upon the couch. Through the window, sunlight filtered through the leaves, falling across his face like raindrops.

Together they removed the Rider's shirt. Ela checked his fever, dipped a cloth in vinegar, and carefully rubbed down his tanned, dirt-streaked body. She wiped his face. She moistened a sponge and touched it to his lips. His face twitched; his mouth reached for the water. She wet it repeatedly until his thirst was soothed. When the fever eased a little, she began washing him with soapy water. Muddy streams of sweat, blood, and filth poured off him. As the grime cleared, bruises became apparent. Some were the marks of long days in the saddle, but those on his arms and chest were different. He had fought, Ela thought.

She laid a light quilt over him and was about to leave when the young man began to stir. His eyes were barely opened, his voice a groan, but the beat of his heart, the beads of sweat rolling from his brow

showed he was coming round. He tried to speak but no sound came save for a rasp, as though his voice had been torn out. Ela laid her hand on his brow, looked into his eyes. It's all right, Rider, she said, do not fear, I am here.

A smile flickered across his face, then vanished. He gathered his strength to speak again, and Ela leaned close.

Mother, he whispered, they are coming.

He noticed the candle burning above his head. The fresh light of morning had begun to chase away the dampness of night. When he turned his head, he saw Mother Ela sleeping on the mat beside him.

For a moment it felt as though cobwebs were strung inside his mouth. Hunger, sickness, and exhaustion had sapped his body's strength. He swallowed. It was like a needle pricked the roof of his mouth, and his tongue tasted bitter. Fear of death seized him.

Then his nose told him he was alive. Spices, soap, the sweat of a hardworking old woman — all the scents mingled, and his head spun. At last, through all the confusion, the rich smell of mushroom soup reached him, and his hunger rose. At that same instant his stomach growled.

Mother Ela lifted her head.

Good morning, young man.

Good morning.

The faint sound of his own voice startled him.

Do not be afraid. You've taken a hard blow to the back. You'll be a little quiet for a few days.

The Rider nodded. He pushed himself up on one elbow.

Mother, they are coming. And they are many. They have weapons. You must hide.

You told me yesterday. I went to the village and told the people. Years ago, when you first came, the Radoni were shocked and frightened of you. This time no one cared. No one ever comes to this village. Perhaps one or two curious souls from nearby and nothing more. And no one here ever leaves our village.

The Rider faltered. Guilt washed over him; he grew ashamed and looked away. He felt as if his whole body had shrunk.

Yes, Mother. Until I came, it was as you said. I was a fool. I roamed all of Simin, drew every corner of the island into my notebook. I came here to sketch this place as well.

He stopped. It was as if he could no longer hold his head on his neck. The dizziness came again, and he lost his balance.

And they took the notebook. Now they are coming here. Not only here but they are going to every village on the island, one by one.

Who are they? Why are they coming?

They need workers for the mines. Slaves, really. They seize people from the villages and drive them into the mines.

Mother Ela looked at him, uncomprehending.

First, a soldier comes to the village. He says: the King of Simin needs villagers. Those who agree go quietly. Those who refuse are taken by force. The ones who keep resisting are killed.

Still, she looked at him, still not understanding.

And they bring a kam with them. The kam tells the villagers that it is Saule's will. That one day our trials will end, and we will return to our former prosperity.

Part of her believed him, felt the danger was real. Yet part of her could not help but think he had lost his wits. The idea that strangers might come from afar to snatch them from this godforsaken village — for any reason at all — was absurd.

And did they do this to you?

No. I almost wish they had. In the last village I told them what was happening. There was a kam there too. He told the villagers I was a demon, that I had come to bring them misfortune. So, they beat me. I tried to defend myself but failed. I suppose they threw me across Kavaf's back and drove him off. Kavaf must have brought me here.

He did well. You are lucky. You have a fine horse.