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The day the soldiers came, we cheered. We weren't supposed to, of course; if Potta had seen us, he would have been furious; but we couldn't help it. Jenna and I were on our way back from the reed beds, our arms full of plants for use at home, when we saw the dust rising up in the distance. The road was empty apart from a woman walking towards us with a basket balanced on her head. The dusty, scrubby track wound off into the distant mountains, with only the occasional tree to break up the landscape. Usually there was nothing to be seen at all, but today there was a low cloud growing bigger and bigger by the minute.

'Horses?' I was puzzled.

'Wagons?' suggested my sister.

The woman with the basket turned to look behind her. 'Soldiers,' she whispered. 'The liberators!'

I felt an excitement rush through me at her words, though I didn't know what to expect. Jenna and I watched the dust clouds approach, and before long we could hear the noise of the vehicles too. The woman stood with us and tugged at her headscarf to cover her face.

Then the cars and trucks were upon us, one after another, kicking up tiny stones and more clouds of dust as they passed, making us cough. Soldiers riding on the roofs, smartly attired in beige and brown, with foreign badges on their caps, smiled and waved at us. Of course, to begin with I tried not to look at them, but there were so many smiles and waves and cheerful shouts that after a while I couldn't help but smile back. And then I waved, and the soldier I waved to looked so delighted that suddenly I couldn't stop waving, and then I was cheering, and the woman next to me was cheering, and Jenna was cheering too – and then the woman unwound her headscarf and brandished it in the air! I gasped at this public breaking of rules, but when no one came running to arrest her, I looked around furtively and unwound my own scarf too.

'Amina!' cried my sister. 'What are you doing?'

‘Being liberated!’ I cried, my green scarf mixing in the air with the black of the woman’s. ‘Come on, Jenna!’

But my sister was more cautious than me and kept a tight hold on her own navy scarf.

‘It’s like a story, Jenna,’ I said, exhilarated. Excitement bubbled through me. ‘Once upon a time there was a kingdom ruled by a tyrant. But then a flight of angels arrived to rescue the people!’

‘Hardly angels,’ said Jenna, though she was smiling. ‘Where are their wings?’

The engines roared like avenging dragons. I could almost imagine them breathing fire. The smiling soldiers blurred in the haze and the dust and the intoxicating scent of freedom.

‘Remember this day,’ said the woman as she gazed at the seemingly endless procession of vehicles. I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or to herself, but she repeated it. ‘Remember this day – the day liberation began.’

‘I will,’ I said impulsively, and she turned to me and smiled.

‘Everything will change now,’ she said. ‘You’ll see.’

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Eventually the procession came to an end, and we put our scarves back on and went on our way. I glanced behind at the woman, whose name we didn't know, and there was a lightness in her step that I was sure hadn't been there before. I felt the same way. After five years of living under the Kwana, we were about to be rescued! No more stupid headscarves, no more stupid rules about going out without escorts, no more flogging in the streets. The life I could remember only as a kind of dream – life before the Kwana – would return!

'How long do you think it will be before we can go back to school?' I asked Jenna eagerly.

My sister, her headscarf tightly in place, made the sort of tutting noise my mother was so good at. 'Mini, why do you always ask things like that? How can I know the answer? How can anyone?'

'What are you talking about?' I asked. 'The soldiers are here, aren't they? Everyone's been saying for months that things can't go on the way they are. Look at the riots in the big cities! The rest of the world has finally realized what Ranami has been doing to our people. Our glorious leader and his glorious Kwana army – huh!'

‘Ssh!’ Jenna looked crossly at me. We were nearing the edge of our village. ‘Can’t you hold your tongue? You’ll get us into trouble!’

I was frustrated. ‘Aren’t you even a *little* bit excited, Jenna? I mean, don’t you *want* things to change?’

‘Of course I do! But I don’t think it’s a good idea to talk about it.’ Jenna unwrapped one arm to gesture at our village. ‘Are things different here yet? No. So it’s still not safe.’

My gaze swept over the approaching rows of homes. Talas wasn’t all that big compared with Gharsad, the nearest city, but it felt big to me. I’d never lived anywhere else; never set foot outside the area. It was as familiar to me as my own hands. The buildings were made out of stone, brick, wood, metal – anything people could find or buy at market. Some were grand affairs, with several rooms, gardens and verandas. Others simply consisted of one main room where everyone slept, ate and washed together. I could remember when this particular street had been half the length it was now – over the years, new people had come, bought a piece of stony ground, and built their home on it, stretching the street

further and further. We'd been promised running water and electricity when the Kwana came to power, but it never appeared. Maybe, I mused, the arrival of the foreign troops would mean that we finally got those things.

The thought made me smile. Running water, in our own house! Being able to turn on a tap and fill up a cup, just like that! It would be heavenly.

It was a mistake to smile in the middle of the street, as I should have remembered. 'You!' called a harsh voice to our left, and Jenna and I stopped sharply. My gaze flicked across instinctively, and my heart sank. Four men were sitting outside a café, staring at us. All of them were dressed in the dark green jackets of the Kwana local military, and all had rifles propped up against their chairs. A large poster of Ranami, his expression stern and forbidding, adorned the wall of the café, its colours faded from the sun. The man who had called to us was tall, with a thick moustache and a badge that indicated he was one of the commanding officers. He stood up now, frowning.

All this I took in faster than I can describe, and I cast my eyes to the ground, biting my lip. My arms

tightened on the collection of reeds and I felt cold from fear in the hot sunshine.

I heard the man walk over, his boots crunching the fine pebbles. ‘Young women,’ he said, his voice low, ‘are not permitted to make a spectacle of themselves in the street.’ He spat at my feet, and I saw a tiny globule attach itself to my little toe. It made my guts lurch. He walked round behind Jenna, and I heard her gasp, but I didn’t dare raise my eyes. Then he was back behind me. ‘Young women should behave properly,’ he hissed.

I felt a deep twinge of anger. I had only been smiling! How could that be seen as improper behaviour? But I didn’t dare speak; I knew enough of the Kwana not to risk making things worse. Besides, these men didn’t need an excuse to pick on people: sometimes they did it just for the fun. It was useless to wish I’d done something differently.

I felt the man’s hand on my head, which made me shiver, but he was only pulling at the edge of my headscarf. ‘Not even dressed properly,’ he said with a sneer.

I reached up to my scarf, realizing that I hadn’t tied it tightly enough when I’d put it back on. Thank

goodness the Kwana hadn't seen us waving to the foreign soldiers! I gulped at the thought of how we might have been punished.

The soldier smacked my hand away. 'You should not need reminding,' he told me. 'You are old enough to know better. What would your glorious leader say?'

One of the men still sitting at the café table called over, 'You could make sure she won't forget, Hamsi.'

I heard Hamsi laugh softly, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe, if I was lucky, I'd only get a slap across the face, or a kick in the back. The Kwana were supposed to follow strict rules on what punishments were suitable for which crimes, but some of them liked to make up their own punishments . . . I hoped that Hamsi was one of the ones who followed the guidelines. Maybe if I showed that I was sorry . . . I dropped to the dirt, feeling the sharp stones dig into my knees. Hamsi laughed again. 'It's too late to beg.'

There was a tug at my throat, and then a sudden rush of air about my ears as Hamsi pulled away my headscarf. I swayed slightly, off balance, and dropped my reeds. My shoulder-length black hair hung in straggly tendrils about my face. I felt suddenly very exposed. Yes, I'd taken off my scarf to wave at the

soldiers, but that had been my choice. Here, with a man removing it for me, in front of other men, I felt humiliated, and my cheeks burned.

The three men at the table laughed, and one of them muttered something to the other two. 'Maybe we should give her something to hide under that headscarf,' Hamsi said, his voice raised so that his colleagues could hear. 'Something that will remind her to keep it on.'

I felt dizzy with panic. What did he mean?

Then I heard a long scraping noise as Hamsi removed the knife from the sheath on his belt, and I started to tremble. I felt my hair being gripped tightly in a clump on top of my head, and I gasped as my chin jerked upwards, exposing my neck. The knife flashed dangerously close. Was he going to cut my throat? I screwed my eyes shut again and started to pray – to the gods, to my parents, to anyone who might help me.

A radio crackled harshly and a voice came out of it. I couldn't make out the words, but one of the men called sharply to Hamsi, and my hair was suddenly released. Hamsi, losing interest in me, strode back to his companions, and then, without a word or a

glance, they were all gone, walking purposefully down the street towards the central square, their guns carried tightly in their hands and Hamsi's knife back in his belt.

I bent forward, shaking with relief, glad that I was already on my knees – otherwise I would have fallen. 'Amina!' My sister was speaking urgently. 'Amina, are you all right? You must get up, quickly, in case they come back.'

I struggled to my feet, trying to gather up the dropped reeds in my wobbly arms. They were covered in dust and would need a thorough soaking before they were clean enough to weave. My sister's face was pale as she picked up my headscarf from the ground and helped me tie it on. 'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I was only smiling . . . I'm really sorry, Jenna.'

'I know,' she said. Then she sighed. 'Trouble again, though. Come on, let's get out of here.'

We started off again, trying to ignore the stares from passers-by. Talas was a busy place, even on the outskirts, and several people had witnessed my humiliation. It was too much to expect anyone to come to my rescue, though. Everyone knew the

penalties for getting involved with something that wasn't your business.

We kept our heads down all the way home. There was no chance of my getting caught smiling again – the euphoric feeling from earlier had completely evaporated. Foreign soldiers here to liberate us? So what?

Only Mamie and Vivie were at home when we arrived, which was to be expected. Potta was at work and my older brother Ruman was at school – the school that had been forbidden to girls ever since the Kwana came to power.

Jenna swiftly explained to Mamie what had happened in the street. News travelled fast in Talas, and my mother would find out from some gossipy neighbour if we didn't tell her. Mamie brought me a drink of water and relieved me of my bundle of reeds, instructing Vivie to take them out onto the back porch. My nine-year-old sister did as she was told, though I could see she was bursting to ask for more details.

I sat for a moment, drinking my water and feeling the trembling subside. 'What happened?' asked Mamie quietly. 'Why did they pick on you?'

‘I was smiling,’ I said with a shrug. ‘I looked too happy.’

She gave a sigh. She knew as well as I did how the Kwana didn’t really need a reason to show off their superiority. ‘You must pay more attention to your surroundings, Amina. Why were you so distracted?’

My gaze went automatically to my older sister. Jenna looked hesitant, and I knew she was wondering if we should tell Mamie about the soldiers. But she’d find out anyway. ‘We saw the liberators arrive,’ I said in a low voice. ‘The foreign soldiers. In their trucks and cars and everything – oh, Mamie, it was such an amazing sight!’

‘Hush!’ said Mamie, alarmed. ‘How— Where were you?’

‘On our way back from the reed bed,’ I said. ‘They were just coming along the road, just – *there*. Out of the dust, truck after jeep after car after—’

‘It would have been better if you hadn’t been on the road at that time,’ said Mamie. ‘Still, I suppose as long as you kept your heads down and didn’t look at them—’ She caught the involuntary glance I exchanged with Jenna again, and her jaw dropped. ‘What did you do? Tell me, quickly!’

‘We – we waved at them,’ I admitted reluctantly. ‘That’s all, I promise.’ It wasn’t all, and Jenna knew it. We’d cheered, and I’d taken off my headscarf, which was about the worst thing I could have done in front of strangers, but I couldn’t bear to get into any more trouble.

‘You waved at them?’ said Mamie, appalled. I heard Vivie give a little gasp, and suddenly I felt cross. It was all so unfair! Why should welcoming the soldiers who had come to free us be such a bad thing?

‘You’d have done the same if you’d been there,’ I said rebelliously. ‘It was amazing – the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. And it made us feel . . . happy. Hopeful!’

‘Amina!’ cried Mamie.

‘Well, it did,’ I went on. ‘Everyone’s always saying how much we need help to come from outside. Everyone hates the Kwana. Now the help is here – why shouldn’t I be happy? Why shouldn’t I wave to them and let them know I’m pleased they’re here?’

‘That’s enough!’ snapped Mamie sharply, and her eyes were fearful. ‘You stop right there, Amina

Ambrose, before you get us all into trouble.’ A thought occurred to her. ‘Did anyone else see you doing this?’

I stared at the floor, mutinous. ‘There was another woman on the road. She stood with us – she cheered too.’

‘A woman? What woman?’

I shrugged. ‘She had a black headscarf, but I didn’t know her.’

‘Married,’ said Mamie, her eyebrows drawing together. ‘I don’t know whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. She could be married to a Kwana – she could report back to him . . .’

‘She said that we should remember this was the day liberation began,’ Jenna said unexpectedly. I felt grateful to her for backing me up. ‘She seemed really happy to see the soldiers.’

Mamie sighed. ‘Well, there’s nothing we can do about it now. We’ll have to hope that she is what she appeared to be. You know the Kwana have spies everywhere.’

There was silence. There was more I wanted to say, but I knew it wasn’t a good moment. Not for the first time I was in trouble for speaking out too much.

Why couldn't I just hold my tongue and be a good girl, like my older sister? Jenna kept her head down and her mouth shut, and she was rarely in trouble. Sometimes I envied her. My mouth seemed to open of its own accord, and words and thoughts came out without my control. I should have been born a boy – then it wouldn't have mattered. The thought made me bitter.

Potta and Ruman came back at about the same time. My father looked tired. 'There was trouble on the road,' he said. 'I had to come a different way.'

'What kind of trouble?' asked Mamie.

Potta looked at us. Ruman was unpacking his school bag; Jenna, Vivie and I were sitting quietly in the corner, weaving tiny flower decorations out of pieces of reed. I tried not to look curious. 'Protests,' said Potta. 'More students out, clashing with the Kwana.'

'Students from your university?'

Potta shrugged. 'Who knows? I think so. I didn't stay to see. I had fewer in my class again today, though.'

Potta taught history at Gharsad university, and I

knew his job had become more difficult recently. The Kwana, not content with ruling people's day-to-day lives, wanted to rule their minds too, and their education. Potta was no longer allowed to teach parts of the country's history that the Kwana deemed 'unacceptable'. Instead, he was forced to stick to a new curriculum that they had created. We all knew he hated doing it, although he would never dare say so. But I saw the way he frowned when he looked at his books now, and heard the annoyed mutters whenever Mamie asked him about work.

'Where are they all going?' Mamie wanted to know.

'Joining the underground movement, I suppose,' said Potta. 'It's so dangerous – they're young, idealistic. They think that they'll be able to work with the foreign troops . . . You know they passed by here today?'

'Yes,' said Mamie. Her eyes flicked across to me and Jenna. 'Amina and Jenna saw the jeeps on their way back from the reed beds.'

Potta stared at us. 'You saw them?'

I nodded.

'How many were there?'

I was surprised. I thought he'd be cross with us for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. 'Loads,' I said. 'Hundreds.'

'One hundred? Three hundred? Be precise, Amina.' Potta sounded urgent.

'I – I don't know,' I admitted. 'I didn't count – I'm sorry.'

'I thought there were about one hundred and twenty,' said Jenna in her soft voice. 'But I lost count after I got to seventy-six.'

'A hundred and twenty!' my brother suddenly exclaimed. Ruman was fifteen and as tall as Potta now, though he was thin and wiry where Potta was more thick-set. His dark eyes were shining under his mop of black hair, which never stayed lying flat no matter how often he combed it. 'I wish I'd seen it! It must have been incredible.'

I felt a rush of warmth for my brother. He knew how I'd felt.

'They're on their way to Bremir,' said Potta thoughtfully. 'I wonder . . .' Then he seemed to remember we were all listening, and his face changed. 'You must remember,' he told us, 'that things are still the same.'

‘How can you say that?’ asked Ruman. ‘Everything will change now.’

‘Perhaps,’ Potta replied. ‘But not yet. For the moment, everything is the same. If liberation *does* come . . .’ He hesitated.

‘*When* it comes,’ said my brother.

‘*If* . . .’ repeated Potta, ‘then we will change accordingly. But the Kwana are still in charge in Talas, and until that changes, we go about our lives as usual. Ranami is still our leader, don’t forget.’

‘Not for long,’ muttered Ruman, and Potta turned on him, suddenly furious.

‘Don’t you know how dangerous it is to go around saying things like that? Have you forgotten what brought the troops here in the first place? The Kwana are *strong*, I keep telling you – look what happened in Bremir and in the west of the country. All those people shot because they dared to protest! I will *not* have my son risking his life and the lives of his family because he can’t keep his mouth shut!’

Ruman’s face flamed red with embarrassment, and I felt for him. He and I had the same problem: we couldn’t help asking ‘What if?’ and ‘Why?’ and whereas it was more acceptable for a boy to ask

questions, it wasn't safe for *anyone* to question our leader. He pressed his lips together tightly, picked up a text book and went out to sit on the back porch.

Jenna, Vivie and I exchanged glances and went back to our work.

Mamie made Potta a cup of herb tea and murmured soothing things. They talked quietly for a while, too quietly for me to be able to hear the words, but just before the sky darkened outside, I heard Potta say something that chilled me from the inside out:

'There are bad things to come, my Mia. There may be salvation at the end, but things will get worse before they get better . . .'