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## Persia

March 1901

*I pinch my nose shut* and gulp down two raw rooster gonads.

“Do not make that face, *khanom* Simone,” Pearl, the midwife, commands. “Do what I say, or your womb will continue to cough up blood each month.”

The woman pounds a brown concoction in a cast-iron mortar, her expression so serious she must imagine herself creating life. She rambles about mixing the pulp of a rare fish found in the Caspian Sea, five pulverized pearls harvested in fertile oysters, two grams of gold, and another secret elixir.

I dig my hands in the pockets of my riding breeches as the one-eyed witch raises a thimble of rosewater to my nose to hold back my vomit.

Why would I, the daughter of Françoise and granddaughter of Mme Gabrielle, idols of seduction, banish myself to a stone house on top of the Persian mountains? Why would I ingest gonads? Why would I follow the advice of a mad midwife?

The catalyst was Yaghout, my mother-in-law.



Tired from months of travel from France to Persia, upon arriving at the port of Anzali on the Caspian Sea, Cyrus and I joined a caravan that made its way over tortuous passes toward Tehran. My first glimpse of Persia on approaching Anzali from Baku was the red-tiled roofs of a small town. And, in the distance, a mountain range hidden by clouds. From here, we crossed a vast desert on *kajavehs*, two-passenger vehicles resembling chicken coops balanced on donkeys. Our faces caked with dust and fatigue, we arrived at Mahaleh, the Jewish quarter. Sabbath candles flickered on windowsills. We negotiated a web of narrow alleys and crumbling walls to Sar-e-chal—the pit’s edge.

A sobering odor assaulted me.

A large heap of decomposing refuse sat in a pit at the center of the quarter. Traders, shopkeepers, and residents, a populace covered in a cloak of sadness, toss their daily garbage into this gorge. Men wear strange hats—the conical or lambskin of the middle and upper class, the woolly muff of the Cossack, half bowl felt of the working class. The cleric’s turban is reminiscent of my mother’s fluffy swan pillow. Strange little shops with fronts open to the street line the bazaar. Shopkeepers sit where they can reach everything without rising. Public cooks broil mutton en brochette over hot beds of charcoal. A water carrier, his sheepskin jug on his shoulders, handed me a tin cup. Cyrus waved him away, pulling my foulard over my red curls. I must drink nothing but hot tea, he said, until I become accustomed to Persian germs. Concealed under chadors, weary eyes peeping through horse-hair blinders, women shuffle around like black tents. Even Mme Gabrielle’s ghosts would have rejected this gloomy place, where Jews have to comply with the custom of wearing a chador.

To think I fought to leave Château Gabrielle for this.

The camel carrying our belongings had difficulty squeezing

through the narrow cul-de-sac. We hired a mule to finish the task of transporting our valises.

“Houses at the end of alleys offer a degree of protection from periodic raids by Muslims,” Cyrus explained, causing me further alarm. I clung to his arm and asked the significance of the patch worn on certain jackets. “Jews must display identifying signs so Muslims won’t come in contact with us and defile themselves.”

“You don’t,” I said.

“I refuse to comply,” he replied.

“But *you*, a Jew, are the shah’s private jeweler?”

“Being the only Persian gemologist with a degree from France, I am needed in court. And I have invaluable connections to the European diamond markets.”

Before I had occasion to show more concern, he took me by the hand and led me to my future mother-in-law, Yaghout. Informed of our arrival by the quarter news bearer, she greeted us at the door. She wore the type of pants, vest, and ballet skirt the present shah’s father had admired at the Paris ballet and that the women of his harem later made fashionable. If only Cyrus’s mother knew that my grandmother had pleased the present shah on his last visit to Paris.

“*Madar*, meet my fiancée,” Cyrus said, kissing her forehead.

“*Pesaram*, my son!” she cried out, ignoring my outstretched hand.

I cringed under her scalding stare that traveled the length of my body to rest on my red hair. Bursting into fits of violent sneezing, she feigned an allergic reaction, which I did not realize then was to me. She held a Bible above Cyrus’s head as we stepped into her home. In her other hand, she swayed a fire turner, a coal-filled, crackling wire basket. I had an urge to unstopper the tiny pores of my skin and unleash my perfume to mask the pungent odor of the smoking wild rue seeds she used to ward off the evil eye.

Cyrus pulled me into his arms. "Welcome to Persia, *jounam*."

Yaghout turned on her heels and stormed out into the garden. I glanced back to see her toss the fire turner into a small pool. The dying embers hissed in the water.

I suddenly missed Paris. I missed Françoise and Mme Gabrielle. I even missed my grandmother's repertoire of spirits wandering Château Gabrielle and the surrounding Valley of Civet Cats.

During the two weeks I lived with Yaghout, I tried to ingratiate myself to her. I flaunted the Farsi I had learned from Alphonse, our Persian butler back home. I brewed tea and chopped herbs for rice. I prepared *ghormeh sabzi*, an herbal lamb stew of red beans and dried lemons. But despite her endless insistence, I refused to wear the chador.

The volley of sneezes my presence triggered, the gurgling of her *ghalian* hookah, the shuddering rose petals in the foaming water, and the smoke shooting out of her nostrils were rude and frightening. How long was I expected to live with this woman? When she began to pop pills under her tongue to thwart a looming heart attack, I was ready to flee. Nothing Cyrus had said, and certainly none of my fantasies, had prepared me for the dark-eyed, mustachioed Yaghout.

"Is she a virgin?" she hissed to Cyrus one morning. "Do not give me that look, *pesaram*, but reconsider your decision to wed her. Because if she fails to produce a bloody sheet with Rabbi Shlomo the Penitent's signature on four corners, you will be dead to me."

"Consider me dead right here and now!" Cyrus snapped back.

I had been late for breakfast, still patting my forest of curls into place, when he grabbed my arm and swept me out the door, across the dusty garden with its ancient walnut and mulberry trees, emaciated chickens and loud roosters, and past the outhouse, an open-mouthed grave.



“Stop daydreaming, *khanom* Simone,” Pearl, the midwife, scolds, startling me back to the mountains, the lingering taste of gonads bitter in my mouth. “If you do not become pregnant, your husband will flee to *yengeh donyah*.”

Beard, the owner of the teahouse around the corner, considers *yengeh donyah* the edge of the world—somewhere very far from Persia. Somewhere like the Valley of Civet Cats, I suppose.

Out of her chemise, Pearl retrieves a stretch of flesh that resembles puckered leather, rather than the breast she directs under her armpit into the mouth of the child bundled up in the chador around her shoulders. “You see *man hameh kareh hastam*.”

*Oui, oui*, I suppose, she might be proficient in all manners of child rearing. But I would rather return to Tehran and face Yaghout than allow this woman to nurse my baby when I have one.

Her good eye stares at me, the other milky dull and forlorn like a dead goat’s. She lost the eye to the trachoma epidemic in Rasht, a town in the north of Persia, she explains, adding that her one good eye is sharper than my two. She pinches some of the concoction out of the mortar and rolls a smidgen into a lewd colored blob between her callused fingers.

I shake my head, assuring her that I will not consume chicken droppings, which is what the mixture looks like.

“Well, then,” she threatens, tying her bundle, “if you do not care to become pregnant, so be it. I came here to make you a proper wife. What else would a devout Muslim do, *khanom*, than come to the aid of a foreigner in the mountains?”

Pearl had first appeared at my doorsteps a week before. She had a message from Yaghout: *Although Cyrus married a French goy, he is still a Persian Jew. And like every one of us he deserves a son to recite the kaddish over his grave.*

That day, facing Pearl at the door, right there and then, a

palpable fear bled into my veins. What if I never conceive? What if I fail to become pregnant with Cyrus's child?

I opened the door wide, stepped back, and invited the midwife into the stone *maisonette* that was becoming home.

Wedged between two cliffs with an awesome view of the Damavand Volcano, a source of Persian mythology, the house stands thousands of meters above the capital city of Tehran. The surrounding mountains gush with streams, waterfalls, and wells that join the Karaj and Jajrud rivers to irrigate the thirsty city below. At daybreak, when clouds lounge low on our slate roof, hikers knock on our door. They seek a cup of hot tea, a glass of pomegranate juice, or a date-and-onion omelet before continuing their climb to the summit, before the summer sun bakes the boulders into stony ovens, or winter winds whip the carpet of snow into crystalline shards. The ever-changing shades of stone and earth, rain and snow, give the impression of four seasons encapsulated in one day. The silence, punctuated by the occasional clattering of hooves, cawing of crows, and braying of mules, is profoundly different from the sensual chaos of Château Gabrielle.

The décor of our boudoir with its ancient mirror reflecting images in mottled hues is primitive. The divan is covered with my stitched-together petticoats. Gradually, tentatively, the house reveals its charm, and I come to realize that what would have been impossible in Château Gabrielle—to love one man—is probable here. Here it is possible to love a man who, in the high altitude of the mountains, dethorns wildflowers that might prick my fingers, who calls me *jounam*—my life—who gathers back his shoulder-length, silver-peppered hair, and who wears a red diamond earring. In a backward society where bare skin is not tolerated, his white shirt is left carelessly open to reveal a muscular chest the color of almond husks. This is his way of showing his disapproval of a rigid culture that continues to challenge his choice of a wife.

Nevertheless, Château Gabrielle and its women are ever present in the trunk I salvaged from Mama. I pull out her costumes, capes, and masks to coil threads of memory around the mountains and keep my family alive.

And on the mantelpiece above the wood burner, eternally visible as a reminder of what he lost and what he gained, is Cyrus's tallit bag. The taffeta bag is square and flat, and when sunlight pours through the window onto an embroidered Star of David, the threads cast silver webs on the ceiling. Tucked inside is Cyrus's Old Testament, skullcap, and tallit with tzitzit fringes on both edges. Although secularly inclined, he has started attending the synagogue in Mahaleh. His Bible and prayer shawl, his only inheritance, have reconnected him to his faith. In full view on the mantelpiece, the bag must remind him of more than I could guess.

"This prayer shawl and Torah," his mother said, "Are all you will have to turn to if you marry that goy."

"She is Jewish," Cyrus said.

"She is the daughter of prostitutes," his mother replied.