



Rebekah of the violet eyes heard a voice that would haunt her the rest of her life.

“I know she’s only ten. I’ll be patient.”

She hugged her doll and tossed on her pallet. The heat, the flies, and the soothing words of the strange man in the next room interrupted her sleep. Visitors were rare in her home. Her widowed mother left at dawn to wash other people’s laundry. In the evenings, Rebekah learned from her mother to bake pistachio cookies and crispy rice, to differentiate between aromatic herbs, and to flatter the man who would one day take care of her.

Rebekah pressed her ear to the makeshift wall.

Her mother’s cough shattered the silence.

As if the cough had originated from her own lungs, Rebekah clutched her chest.

“She’s the prettiest girl in Persia. I’m saving her for a rich husband.”

Suspended between wakefulness and sleep, Rebekah heard the man’s melodious persistence, promises of china dolls and lace skirts, chickpea candies and saffron halva, fantasies peculiar to her dreams.



Soon after, Rebekah and her mother went to the house of bougainvillea to visit the Ancient Zoroastrian, a clairvoyant who had witnessed the rise and fall of dynasties. She was the only person alive who had seen a time before evil was introduced into the world, a time when the great prophet Ahura Mazda of goodness ruled.

At the end of the alley of pomegranate trees, Rebekah and her mother approached the single room buried under lavish flowers. They parted the branches, searching for the low entrance, and nudged open the door that was never locked. Lingering at the threshold, they waited to be acknowledged.

The old woman sat cross-legged next to a brazier heaped with blazing coals on which seeds of rue crackled and smoked, permeating the air with anticipation. The Zoroastrian's ash-colored skin stretched taut over fragile bones. She had lost all her hair to the ravages of time. Her purple eyelids concealed inquisitive eyes.

Rebekah's mother averted her gaze from the turquoise amulets that hung around the woman's neck, and the red chicken eyes that were set in gold and glared at her from the Zoroastrian's pierced earlobes. "Holy One, I've promised Rebekah's hand in marriage. She's here to ask for your blessing."

The Zoroastrian did not lift her head, open her eyes, or ask any question. She had gazed into her fire and had seen Rebekah and her mother approach. The old one had clutched her bony knees and had chuckled out in glee. She had shifted closer to the flames to better inhale the scent of pearls, silk, rapture, and bliss. Neither the mother nor the child was aware that marvelous miracles were about to occur in Rebekah's life.

"Rebekah's fate is sealed," the Ancient Zoroastrian murmured in a voice that had retained the vigor of youth. "Her

future is embellished with crowns and jewels. A life of lust and passion, conspiracy and love. At times, it will be difficult, but never, ever hopeless.”

The Ancient Zoroastrian set her veined hand on Rebekah’s head. “May Ahura Mazda bless you and may he grant me more years on this earth to revel in the impending miracles.”



In the synagogue of the One-Eyed Rabbi, Rebekah’s mother folded a parchment and handed it to Rebekah. “This is signed proof you’re a married woman.” She pressed her lips to her daughter’s golden curls. “Your husband is rich. You’ll live in comfort.”

Glancing at the parchment that dangled from her fingers, Rebekah knew she had to accept her fate. She was sad but not scared. Promises of toys and veils and sweets, of kindness and patience and love reverberated in her head. Her mother had married her to the stranger with the sweet voice.

“Your husband will not join you in bed before your first menstrual period,” her mother whispered, tears in her voice. “Since I won’t be here for long, you must demand that he keep his word.”

For the first time Rebekah understood the gravity of her mother’s endless coughing and the terrible wheezing in her chest, and why she had found it necessary to discuss the importance of a wife’s responsibilities.

Rebekah held her mother’s hand as she led her past the stalls in the bazaar toward her husband’s house. The ground was thick with chicken feathers, horse manure, and decayed melon rinds. The cries of the vendors of ice water, hookah pipes, and hot tea filled the air. Lopsided poles held white canvases that sheltered vendors from the fierce sunshine. Goods

were exhibited at the entrances—strings of figs suspended overhead, roasted nuts and dried beans overflowing canvas sacks, cones of sugar perched on sloping counters. The green-grocer in his skirted robe, belted at the waist with a multicolored shawl, lifted his cone-shaped hat and scratched his shaved head. He wet his henna-tinged forefinger in his mouth, then smeared his saliva on Rebekah's cheeks to scare away the evil eye. From an assortment of persimmons, pomegranates, and yellow melons open to the flies and street dust, he chose a pomegranate, quartered it, and offered her a slice. "For the violet-eyed beauty."

She bit into the bloody fruit, sucked on the seeds, and tasted the familiar tang of powdered nutmeg and ice flowers. She dropped the rest in her pocket to save for her husband.

They reached the end of the Alley of Ezekiel the Cobbler. "This is your home," her mother whispered. "Your husband is thirty-four years old. He'll take care of you."

Her home was the color of mud. From behind an iron fence that protected the house, she saw jasmine bushes, a walnut tree, and a patch of arid land.

"Rebekah," her mother said. "Look! Enough space for you to plant geranium and flowering almond and myrtle like your garden back home."

"Water our garden, Madar. Don't let it dry like this."

At her mother's touch, the gate groaned open. Rebekah stepped into the smell of hot coals. She pressed her nose to her mother's chador to inhale her scent of caramelized sugar and licorice.

Her mother squeezed her to her breasts. "You'll never be alone. I'll always be looking over you," she said, releasing her and walking out the door.

Rebekah ran to the window and peered out through the curtains, past the rusting iron gate. Clutching her doll in one

hand and the parchment in another, she watched her mother's wide hips disappear around the turn of the alley. A bird fluttered against the window. The breeze ruffled the leaves of the ancient walnut tree. She turned around to look for the stranger, her husband with the lullaby voice of a storyteller.

Heavy, gold-colored drapes darkened the room. Silver masks, features frozen in laughter, stared down at her from a mantelpiece above a massive kiln in the center. Her stomach churned at the glitter. She averted her gaze from the flames in the hearth, from the poker; mesh glove and tongs suspended from hooks hammered into the cracks in the baked mud walls around the furnace.

"I am Jacob the Fatherless." A fat man with crossed eyes that quivered under heavy brows faced her.

His grating voice shattered her dreams. This was not the man with a voice like music.

His hand that smelled of burning metal grabbed her doll and sent it flying toward the kiln. She rushed to catch the doll. Flames licked the cotton face and devoured the wool dress. Rebekah leaned over the ledge that faced the kiln and thrust her hand into the fire. Jumping back, she stuffed her fingers into her mouth to soothe the burnt flesh. Her doll sizzled into black smoke, gray ash, nothing.

Jacob the Fatherless bowed in mock courtesy and straightened, lifting his stomach with a groan. Spidery legs sprouted from his swollen body, and dark, knotted curls framed his bloated cheeks. "I am a blacksmith—a creator," he said, his crossed eyes struggling for balance. "I melt iron into any shape and alloy I want. All my life I've worked toward a day when everything I melt will turn into gold."

Her mind reeled, trying to contain the scream that choked her. Why had her mother abandoned her to this man?

He spat into the fire, tilted his head, and paused to relish the sizzle. “Your mother negotiated a bargain. She married you to Jacob the Fatherless. A man born without a father.”

Her mother’s lessons came to her rescue, and she gazed at Jacob with wet, violet eyes, blew on her hand, and fluttered her lashes, pretending fascination.

“Soon I’ll become the richest man in the Jewish Quarter. Do you know why? I’m one of the few who endures this fire. The heat has ignited a permanent furnace in my heart. Even in my sleep, flames lash behind my lids.” He shot another stream of spittle into the flames, then stared back at her. “I know a secret that will make me eternal like gold—remain forever in one form or another, liquid or solid. Then, like God, I’ll never die. Do you understand, Rebekah?”

Rebekah did not.

But that evening when she watched him melt objects in the man-sized furnace in the bedroom, she understood fear. Fear of the kiln, the fire, the madness in his eyes, the heat that turned into beads of sweat on his face while he molded metals into knives, cauldrons, and pots. In the kitchen, he nailed metal sheets on the counter and the wall behind the wood burner, in the dining room over the table and stools, in their bedroom on top of the baked-mud floors.

Past midnight, his eyes raked the house for scraps to feed his voracious flames. He formed ornamental trinkets from the remnants of metal and locked them in a box. He dangled the key in front of her face.

“Who are the trinkets for?” she asked, curiosity overcoming her fear.

He unbuttoned his coat and dropped the key in the secret pocket of his vest, stroking the place where it was buried. “One day you’ll know.”

When dawn glanced through the window, he nodded

toward one of the pallets that flanked the kiln in the bedroom.  
“You may retire now.”

He occupied the other pallet. He tossed about, grumbling for hours, then raised himself and approached her. He lingered overhead, tapped his small, feminine feet against her pallet. Lifted the blanket and stared down at her. She squeezed her eyes shut and pretended to be asleep. Pressing his thumb on the artery at the side of her neck, he counted the pulse of her fear. The acrid odor of liquid iron flowed from his hands and stung her nostrils.

“Open your legs!” he ordered.

“You promised!” she cried, her eyes springing open, her hands struggling to escape.

“No one,” he growled, “extracts promises from Jacob the Fatherless.”

“You gave your word of honor!”

“Honor! What honor?”

She fought to keep her thighs locked. “Madar!” She screamed, certain the urgency of her pain would summon her mother.

He thrust her thighs open and mounted her.

His howls sounded like a wolf’s, and his moans like those of wounded animals. Or were those her cries, her pain, her loss? Where was the man who had asked for her hand, who had promised to be patient?

Blood burned her thighs.

“Never, ever grow,” he panted, emptying himself.



By twelve, Rebekah’s violet eyes had acquired a defiant spark, her curls the sheen of gold, and her lips the blush of wine. The burned skin on her fingers had the pallor and snug fit of an old

glove that had, at last, conformed to her hand, and like her, had learned to cope with and survive the world of Jacob.

Her veiled gaze followed him as he shuffled around their home. Even in his absence, she didn't dare search the house for the gold bullion he amassed with the money he earned melting iron. Every evening he sent her into the garden before he made sure nothing was missing, then he changed the hiding places of his wealth. He sat down to dinner, calling her back.

Tonight he fished a large bone from a bowl of hot stew. The heat did not penetrate the thick skin of his fingers. He slammed the bone on a metal plate to empty the marrow, soaked bread and mint in it, and devoured the concoction. He stroked his bloated stomach, stuffed a skewer of ground kebab with mint leaves into his mouth, and belched. A smile of contentment hovered on his face. He complimented her on the freshness of the mint she picked daily, reminding her that without his money that bounty would not have been possible.

She looked forward to the hours she spent cultivating her herbs, not only because her patch of land evoked the home she longed for, but also because from behind the railings she could observe the dancing Gypsies. Rebekah fed the earth with leftover stew and chickpea paste and sprayed the leaves with a mixture of honey and wine to attract the praying mantis. On Fridays, when the first chorus of cymbals, tambourines, and shakers rang about the neighborhood, she walked to the fence, expecting the Gypsies. Colorful, flowing skirts and sleeve ruffles came into view first around the bend of the alley, then plump, feminine figures twirled and spun and swayed in dances Rebekah captured again in her dreams. The vegetation in her garden doubled in size and turned a deep, glossy green, and the dances in her dreams developed and matured in ways she did not understand. What she found out was that something as innocent as a bunch of herbs concealed a secret that helped her

subdue Jacob. The taste, the scent, the sizzle of burning mint must summon his lust for gold and pacify him. If he did not chew or smell mint, he seemed to appease himself with her body.

Selecting a sprig, she inhaled the tangy-sweet fragrance. Was it addictive? She touched a leaf to her tongue, tore and chewed on it, tasting its bitter tartness. Why did he prefer it toasted? She held the leaves over the embers on her stove. In her mouth, it was like fire, the acrid taste of her burned fingers. If only she could muster the courage to ask the wandering Gypsies if mint regulated some part of the body. Added to a man's sense of virility? Dampened his cruelty? Made a tight-fisted man sometimes generous?

Even Jacob, at times, strove to be generous. One warm Saturday evening, when nightingales and the scent of jasmine lured Rebekah to her herb garden, Jacob arrived with a rolled parchment.

"The plan for our new house. I'll build it even farther from the garbage pit."

Rebekah realized the importance of owning a home far from the pit, a mound of garbage in the center of the Jewish Quarter around which makeshift stalls displayed fruits, nuts, and spices. She missed the inviting scents and friendly voices; the comforting closeness of people, her mother's avid bargaining as she selected provisions. Didn't her mother know she was not allowed out of the house alone? Why didn't she visit? Did Jacob forbid it?

"Come inside, Rebekah," he called out. "Sit on my lap, while I explain. I'll build our house at the end of the Alley of Lanterns, where a plot of land is so expensive, your little mind won't grasp its value."

"Can I choose the furniture?"

"No," he replied.

“The fabrics for the curtains?”

“What do you know about fabrics?”

“My mother says I’ve a talent for colors.”

“You have none.”

“Yes, I do.”

His fleshy hands slid under her hips, raised her high in the air, and dropped her to the floor.

“Madar!” Her breath twisted in her lungs.

“She can’t hear you,” he barked.

Lying flat on her back, his shadow a dark blanket between her and the light of the oil burner, she swore that one day she would destroy Jacob the Fatherless.



Dawn after dawn, she splashed cool water on her face, tossed a chador over her head, and walked with Jacob to the Alley of Lanterns to watch him build their house with his own hands. He dug her an *estakhr* behind the house, paving it with turquoise tiles and filling it with fresh water from a well he had dug.

“Your private *estakhr*!” he announced, pausing for her appreciation.

Rebekah watched the sun dance on the golden waters and her heart beat with anticipation. Could the Ancient Zoroastrian’s prophecy of jewels and love and happiness come true in this house?

Jacob lifted a finger. “You must always swim fully dressed, or I’ll flog you to death. Even the stars of heaven must not set eyes on a single toenail of yours. Be chaste and virginal at all times, except in my bed, when you’ll transform yourself into a whore. And I’ll reward you by treating you like a queen.”

The next evening, Jacob arrived home carrying a dress of crushed velvet, a pair of kid boots, and a chador of China silk.

He flung them at Rebekah's feet, stepped back, and slapped his thighs with gleeful pride.

Rewarded for the evenings she had surrendered her body to him!

She slipped back into the kitchen to serve his dinner: shank, bone marrow, and mint. Tonight, as every other night, she hid a portion of the meal. Her loneliness was easier to bear if she imagined a time when the stranger with the sweet voice would knock on her door and ask her to collect provisions for the road because they were, at last, leaving for a safer place.

"Where's the mint?" Jacob demanded when Rebekah returned with the steaming stew.

She hurried back to the kitchen. Delicate leaves, slender sprigs, lush bunches of mint had become her friends. Most of his waking hours, while he labored over the kiln, he chewed or smelled mint she picked from her garden. It seemed she had trained him, like a dog, to associate the taste and smell of mint with that of liquid gold. Now the scent of mint made him feel as omnipotent as when he melted gold, so that he didn't seem to have to copulate with her as often to validate himself.

She heard his approaching steps, heard him linger at the door, enter the kitchen. She did not move. There was nowhere to flee. He was behind her, his stomach flattening her against the wood burner, his breath on her neck, his voice calling her a whore-wife, his hands tearing her vest, groping her buttocks, dragging her back into the room, pushing her down on the pile of garments he had purchased.

Not only had he thrust early womanhood upon her, but he felt he had made up for it with a heap of expensive fabrics and sheer veils she despised.

Her gaze roamed the ceiling, forming shadows of fantastical animals and birds and plants, a world where the pain of Jacob's body on top of her and the bitterness of his broken promise to

her mother did not matter. A place where the Ancient Zoroastrian's miracles would come true, where she would whirl around as free as the dancing Gypsies.

"Say you're my whore-wife!" Jacob's voice came from afar.

"Never."

"One day you will," he moaned, crushing her into velvet and silk.

Soon, she thought, he will rise and go about his work. For a few hours, she would be left alone in the refuge of her imagination. She tugged the chador of China silk from under her head and studied its shades of orange, red, and yellow. The colors of fire. She threw the veil over her face to inhale the smell of silk and dye and shame.

Jacob's breathing settled. He lifted himself and tossed a coat over his naked body. "Wait right here. I've a surprise for you."

Her palm sliding over her body, Rebekah watched her husband leave. Her hips were slightly fuller, her breasts beginning to ripen, and so was her shame.

"Come out," she heard Jacob calling from the garden.

She buried her face in the rustle of silk. She would not go out. She did not need any more garments or jewelry or perfumes that reeked of disgrace, favors that fed her grief.

Through the silk and velvet that covered her ears, she heard him summon her with the tone reserved for times he believed he was indulging her. Had he mistaken the humiliation on her face for gratitude? When his voice curdled with irritation, she lifted herself.

She leaned naked against the doorway. The breeze carried a biting coolness, and the moon sailed in a cloudless sky. A raucous noise came from behind the house. The stamping of hooves?

Jacob emerged into the garden, pulling a donkey by a rope tied around its neck and muzzle. Her breath caught at the most

beautiful sight she had ever seen. The animal's pelt was the color of onyx, with a goose-white band that stretched from its muzzle all the way down to its lush and restless tail. With every jerk of the rope, the donkey turned its neck, thrust its red tongue out, and spat at Jacob. The animal's hard kick sent Jacob flying to the ground. Rebekah pursed her lips to stifle her laughter. She felt an immediate affinity with the stubborn donkey.

Jacob ran after the donkey, pulling the animal around to face her. "This is the only male who may glance at a single strand of your hair."

Rebekah was ecstatic. She had found another who would spit at Jacob. She saw that the animal's penis dangled almost to the ground. To spite all signs of masculinity, she named him Venus.