

Forget Me Not extract

by Maryan Ishaq

The cat looks deep into my eyes before screeching in agony. It slowly dissolves into the fresh graves that have just emerged from the ground. That's six altogether now. I reach for it and try to grab a paw but it is too late, the cat is gone. There is no hug from the flowers this time. Instead, I feel the numbing connection of a solid object with the back of my head. My skull vibrates and I am put to sleep.

It is morning, but the gunshots are silent. Instead, the roosters that would harmonize with the call for Fajr Salah are especially loud and almost insistent. I see an image of Abo choking on his own blood. The image doesn't stay for long, but the burn mark it has imprinted makes it hard for me to think about anything else. Eventually, I throw up until the only offering my stomach has left, is green bile.

I feel the tickle of sweat on my forehead and wipe it off. I would do anything at this point to ease the pain in my head even for a fraction of a second. I would do anything to see Adam again.

'You're bleeding'

The voice comes from beside me. My hand travels back to the wetness on my head. What happened to me...?

'They brought you here last night with your brother'

Adam's here? I look around in the small room. There are boys scattered all around, they all look bruised and beaten. My head feels like a hammer is lodged into it.

'Where is...'

'They took him away this morning'

He looks as young as Ahmed but sounds a lot older. The room we are in bursts open and two men with rifles come inside. They scan the room before making their way to a sleeping teenager. They drag him to his feet and march out with him.

‘They’ve been doing that all morning. Taking us one by one’

‘Why?’

He shrugs in response to my question and this adds a hint of innocence to his stern features.

‘I’ve heard rumours that they are looking for relatives of Omar Hussein’

‘Who’s that?’

‘You don’t know him?’

He shifts his body towards me and stares in awe. I admit, the name sounds familiar but I can’t remember why.

‘He’s the one who led the coup last year’

‘His sons are missing’ It is another boy sitting behind me. His voice is so quiet; I almost miss what he says.

The name takes shape in my memories now. Omar Hussein was a good friend of my father.

‘I heard my abo say that they won’t stop this war until they cut off his bloodline completely’

‘Your brother told me to tell you to not say anything to them’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m not too sure; they dragged him out before he finished that sentence.’ He leans in before whispering: ‘I’m guessing it’s to do with... you know, being a Darood’

A tortured wail cuts through a momentary silence. A teenage boy is rocking himself back and forth. Each movement forward touches his forehead with the stone wall. He looks about Adam's age. I can't help but stare in wonder. I have never seen a boy Adam's age cry before. I have never seen *Adam* cry in my entire life.

'His whole family was killed in front of him. He's been like that for 2 days'

'You've been here for 2 whole days?'

'Some of us have been here longer. You see that boy with the bold head in the corner? He's been here since the war started.'

'What about your family?'

'The ship they boarded left me behind'

The sounds of gunshots vibrate in and out of the closed windows. I rest my head on the cool wall behind me and try to piece how Adam and I had come to this place- to enemy territory. The last thing I remember is my father's murder. The image is a consistent replay in my mind. I wrap my arms around myself. I wonder if hooyo knows what happened by now. I wonder if she will blame me.

It is two days later when it is my turn to leave with the men. I am so weak that I am almost glad of their support as they drag me from both sides.

I am in a dark room. The stench of blood reminds me of the goats we sacrifice on Eid, only more pungent. I want to vomit but there is nothing for my stomach to discharge. Men sitting on stools behind a small desk laugh and chat, oblivious to my presence. When they finally pay attention, they turn solemn and cold.

'Ayman is your name, correct?'

‘Yes uncle’

‘I am not your uncle’

A hard kick on my hip bone almost sends me down but the men holding me up force me to stand.

‘Your brother has already told us everything. We just need your conformation’

I stay silent remembering the message that Adam had left behind for me.

‘We know your tribe already. Don’t worry, we won’t kill you for being Darood... We just need to know about your family tree- your names.’

They want to know if I am related to Omar Hussein- I am not, but I keep silent anyway.

He pauses as he waits for my eyes to meet his. He smiles; showing sharp, yellow teeth that stand out on his dark face. I know he sees the fear in my eyes.

‘We are God fearing people. We keep our words. Tell me you and your family’s names, and I will let you go’

I recall my father’s last moments. His last words were God fearing. The prophet was God fearing when he spared his enemies. This man is not God fearing, I can feel it in the way the curve of his smile mirrors the shape of the knife he is holding.

I keep my silence. If there’s anything I have ever excelled in, it is in following instructions. The one time I failed, my father died, I won’t let it happen again.

‘We have your mother’