



The
Bride
of
Death

Three tasks to set her free.

F.M. ADEN

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**THE
BRIDE
OF
DEATH**

F.M. ADEN



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*To those of you who dream about a tall figure in a dark cloak beckoning you
to some unknown place and knowing in your heart that you would follow.*

This one is for you.

PART ONE
GIRLHOOD



THE BLACK WOLF

I t was the start of Midwinter and in a small, crooked house in western Anatolia, a little girl counted her bread.

Zerryn always counted her food before she ate to make sure the spirits didn't rob her when she was distracted. Her stomach clenched in hunger, but still she counted the unleavened dough that made her *yufka*. The house of Özdemir was lit with thin, fingerlike candles, and shadows covered her father's face where he sat at the head of the table, stroking the ends of his dark beard. On his right sat Derya, Zerryn's nursemaid, who had looked after her ever since her mother's lungs had collapsed from a weeks-long fever. Her plump form was folded tight on her cushion, and her rough fingers tore the edges of her bread with a viciousness that was almost predatory. Her face was as round as an apple with supple cheeks and a nose as sharp as a blade, as if it didn't quite fit.

Outside, nesting in the black pine tree, was a crow that watched her with its beaded eyes protruding like little walnuts. It opened its wide beak and cawed as if it were speaking to her.

“Do not play with your food, Zerryn,” Derya chided. “You know what happens to little girls who do not eat.”

“The black wolf will eat them,” she whispered.

At eight years old, Zerryn knew that there was magic in the world. A soft, silent magic that existed like a film between their world and the Underworld. And sometimes creatures broke through the curtains and got lost in the woodlands. It was why Zerryn avoided the woods. Especially the thick, frost-covered woods that surrounded their home. They called it the Dead Woods. There was rarely any whistling of crickets or the howling sound of a wolf from the Dead Woods. And when her father would dive into its moss-covered arms to hunt, all he'd find were carcasses.

Hakan Özdemir frowned at the sight of his only child. He turned to Derya with a sharp gaze.

“You fill the girl with so many tales, she is half afraid of her shadow,” he said. Zerryn didn't look at them as they spoke. Her eyes were stuck to the window as if she saw something they did not. She had been like that recently, he'd noticed. Her head stuffed full of rubbish and false tales; she could barely answer to her own name.

“Stories are the food of the mind,” Derya said. “We live so far from the village that there are no children for her to play with. She enjoys my tales, and

there is no harm in it.”

Sometimes he imagined that Derya had been here all along, that she had been made with the bones of their home and she had simply revealed herself to them because she knew that Zerryn needed her.

Eylül, his wife, had passed away a fortnight ago, and he had been trapped in the despairing hands of grief, drowning his sorrows in ale and neglecting Zerryn, who dutifully sat by her dead mother day and night. He had known he had failed her when he found her one night sleeping atop the grave, fingers clenched tight into the dirt, as if she held her mother’s hand. With her dark hair sprawled around her like a carpet woven of silk. His heart had stopped, and for one terrible moment, he wondered if she were dead as well.

But then Derya had arrived as a gift from the old gods, with her firm fingers and discipline. She kneaded their bread made their stew and stitched the torn fabric of their clothes. But most importantly, she nurtured Zerryn, breathing life into the empty girl.

Hakan lived a quiet life in the woods with his three milk cows, four weak-legged goats, and harvested fruit. And on Wednesdays and Fridays, he sold a basket of a dozen eggs at the market. During winter he was always paid better. Hungry mouths led to generous fingers. Derya often sewed cloaks that were sold at market as well, but she asked that the money be put into Zerryn’s dowry, always thinking of the little girl.

It was Derya's one request that Hakan ask no questions, and in return she would serve the Özdemir family for as long as she lived. So, Hakan never asked how she knew so many stories or why there had been no footprints in the wet mud the day she arrived. Or how she had found them so far from the village. Or why the wind had whistled so terribly before she knocked thrice on their wooden door.

Hakan knew that she had either been sent as a tide of blessing or as an omen of despair.

And he had never questioned which one it could be.



Zerryn was a wild girl with a mane of hair that coiled like a pit of serpents; a slim, almost foxlike face; and big curious eyes so green they seemed to reflect the forest. The villagers had always called her beautiful but strange. As if her beauty were tainted with something unnamable, twisted, and crooked like a broken bone that had been set the wrong way. The villagers often gave them a wide berth. The Özdemirs were not people who joined them for prayer or their village folk dances. So, the villagers had no care for them. They coexisted like thread rotating on a spinning wheel, creaking under the pressure of their unspoken words.

Zerryn had never cared that she was odd. She spent so much time in her head that she could never keep track of time, and she certainly could not keep

track of the villagers' opinions. The hours slipped away like rain pouring down the windowpane. Slowly and languidly, months passed her at a time, and when clarity finally hit, she felt as though she had awoken from a great slumber.

It was late that night when Zerryn crept out of her bedroom to play in her mother's old garden. Her father had buried her mother between the winter jasmines and the crocus to purify her soul, he said, and to grant her peace. Zerryn had always found it quite beautiful. She imagined her mother tangled in brambles and vines like a trapped princess.

Zerryn danced under the moonlight. She liked to dance and pretend that she was performing before a great crowd. The curls of her hair fanned around her, drifting like a bridal veil. Garden tulips were tucked between each of her little fingers, soil caked beneath the crescents of her nails. She could feel the eyes of a thousand creatures watching her. Some joined her, lacing their ghostly palms together and intertwining their translucent bodies in grotesque mimics of couples. Others watched; lips curled beneath unseen fangs. She did not hear them, but their hisses escaped them all the same. She knew they were the Unseen. They were the *jinn*. The ones Derya had warned her to always seek protection from.

“Dance, *little lamb*,” they whispered. “The black wolf awaits.”

A grim black cat watched her from the shadows. Its eyes narrowed in malice, and when he struck out at her legs, Zerryn could do little to stop

herself from toppling over like an untethered cypress tree. The roots of her limbs collapsed in a tangle, her legs slipped out from under her, and she fell and fell and fell.

Zerryn didn't know how long it was until she heard a sickening crack and felt the blinding touch of pain and then darkness. So much darkness, it suffocated her. It slithered between her nostrils and the gape of her mouth.

Zerryn knew of death as surely as she knew of life. She knew that Erlik, the voice of evil and darkness, welcomed wicked children to his murky domain. In the myths, Erlik had once been worshipped as a deity and given offerings and prayers by the villagers. But as the years passed, he had been rejected and treated no better than any of the servant demons who tormented the world on his behalf. With the rise of Christianity, he had been forgotten, but there were those who said he still lived among the dead, trapped in a shadow realm and waiting to break free.

Her eyes adjusted to the abyss, and Zerryn made her way toward the gates, where she knew the iron warriors stood. The dark sons and daughters were said to be the offspring of the Lord of Death and had been sent to guide her past the Lake of Tears and to the halls of Erlik Khan. They wore matching black kaftans with thick fur hoods pulled over their heads. And all the boys looked like one, and all the girls looked like one, so you could scarcely tell one from the other. But all of them were achingly beautiful.

Just as she was to cross into the Underworld, a slip of shadow slithered between the cracks of the earth. At the sight of it, the demon-eyed soldiers fell to their knees in greeting, heads bowed low, long hair scraping the uneven earth.

“We have brought you a soul, Baba,” they chimed, like toy soldiers. Zerryn found it oddly charming. Her eyes lifted to the murky form that took a distinctly human shape, with arms and legs and a head and four cavernous holes that would have held eyes if it had any.

Zerryn trembled, but she didn’t look away. Not when the bundle of shadow crept closer and the cold of it dampened her bones. The breath that escaped her lips was foggy, and she imagined her lips were tinged blue. But the shivers that wracked her body were not entirely caused by the cold. Some small voice within her told her that something terrible was going to happen and that she had little power to stop it.

“I wish to go home,” she whispered.

“You are a long way from home, little lamb,” the voice hummed. It sounded like power, old power, the kind that lived buried deep in the ground. The kind spun of darkness and cloaked in the drapes of death.

“I am no lamb,” Zerryn said, and she was certainly not a *little* lamb.

If shadows could smile, this one did.

“We shall see.”

THE GIRL WHO DREAMED OF DEATH

It had been late spring when Derya died.

Before she had died, Zerryn had felt in her bones that something wretched would come for her nursemaid. And for the first time in her life, she had dreamed of someone's death. She saw Derya walking through the Dead Woods, following the haunting sound of goblet drums played by the long, pale fingers of death. The trails of her old, maidenly nightgown soaked up the dirt and twigs with each step till she was fully submerged in the river. The moon slithered up her wrinkled skin, and her flesh ballooned with river water, lungs popping under the weight of the pressure. A strange, eerie smile hung on her face as she sank deeper into its cold embrace.

Zerryn wondered when she had become this way, so entwined with the icy fingers of death that at times she wondered if it were her companion. It must have been the morning she had awakened with one of her green eyes turned a startling black that reminded her of the crows she had once seen joyfully pecking at a dead cow. Their beaks had repeatedly stabbed the bloated corpse with vicious kisses. Derya had simply stared at her that morning, two years