

# *I Survived*

The air was full of smoke. I couldn't tell where it was coming from, but it was everywhere. My tongue wandered aimlessly around my mouth, searching for the water that wasn't there. I looked longingly at the empty well for possibly the last time. I stared down into its depths thinking, wishing, just *hoping*, that there will be water. There wasn't any for the last couple of weeks. Alas, it was bone-dry, *again*.

"Aisha! Come quick!" My mom's voice was faint and frantic as she called for me. Immediately, I knew something awful happened; my mother never yelled like that. Then my 7-year-old brother Amir's voice joined hers. "Aisha!"

I whipped around and ran back to my village as fast as I could. The well was about two kilometers away from my city gates, so once I reached the north entrance, I was out of breath. As soon as I jogged through them, I could already tell that something was wrong. Typically, the streets would be crowded with merchants and dancers, the road shrunken by the falafel and shawarma shops, the air filled with laughter and the smell of spices. But as I dashed through the roads, everything was just about the opposite of that. The streets were empty, shops closed, and the only smell in the air was smoke.

I hate smoke. It comes from fire, and fire was the reason my father died. He had worked at a factory until it was bombed by an army. He and the other workers were trapped inside with an enormous, raging fire. They couldn't escape.

I slowed down to process my thoughts. *What if--?* No, I couldn't think like that. I sped up my pace; whatever was happening, I did not like it.

When I arrived at my house (a small, one-story cottage), I hesitated at the door.

*What was happening? More importantly, why?* I pushed those thoughts out of my head. I could figure them out later. Right now, my family was my top priority. I just needed to know if they were safe. Taking a deep breath, I cautiously opened the door.

Someone had set my living room on fire.

The normally comfy and cozy rug and armchair were ablaze with fire. The table I had made so many memories at was now the center of a huge bonfire. The opened windows and chimney were spewing out black smoke. The air smelled of gasoline and burnt wood.

I shut the door as quickly as I had opened it, which was to say, slowly. A gust of heat escaped and would have scorched my face if a pair of small, nimble hands had not forced the door closed. I blinked a few times, then turned to face my rescuer.

I felt my face turn red. I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from a yelling. *He was supposed to be somewhere safe! Not wandering around the city!*

“Amir?!” I whisper-shouted. His curly brown hair was a mess and he had dirt smudged all over his face and hands. He nodded in acknowledgement. Then, he took my hand and slowly lead me away from our former house. Good thing he did, too. I was so shocked I would have stood there until it collapsed. My words became jumbled as I tried to ask all the questions in my head.

“What hap – where is – why did – see everyone?” I managed to get out.

Amir pressed a finger to his lips. “Now isn’t the time,” he whispered and took off down the street. Startled by his sudden matureness, I followed his lead and stayed quiet as we crept through the deserted streets.

After a while, we came to the south gate of our town. On a normal day, it would have been crowded with people entering and exiting our village, but today, there was one lone guard packing up his office’s contents. He nodded sadly to us as we passed through the gates, then continued his work. We’ve been walking for so long now that my feet begin to blister.

“Where are we going?” I asked Amir, trying not to let the pain show in my voice. I must have done a bad job because he looked at me sympathetically.

“We’re almost there,” he told me. Now it wasn’t just the blisters that were holding me up, but the fact that I hadn’t drunk a big, fresh glass of water in a while also contributed to my aching body. Only the thought of my mom kept me going.

After a while, I spotted a brown hut about half of a kilometer away. I assumed that was where we were going, and once Amir shifted slightly to the right, aligning himself to the hut, I knew I was right. Then I couldn’t help it and asked, “Will Mama be there?”

“Yes,” he said, but didn’t meet my eyes. Instead, his gaze was fixed on my feet.

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” I decided. “Is she alright?”

“Yes, but—”

He’s interrupted by a shriek. “Aisha!”

I tried to find the source of the shout and turned to find my mother running toward me. “Mama!” I cried in relief. Soon I was crushed in her hug. I noticed that she still smelled like roses after a spring shower. She pulled away and smiled at me. I smiled back; I didn’t have to be scared anymore. My mother was here. Suddenly, her smile melted into a frown as she turned to Amir. He was still staring at the floor.

“Amir Hashem Barakat!! You had me so worried!” Then she grabbed him into a fierce hug. “Don’t ever do that again,” she whispered.

“What happened?” I asked. “Start from the beginning. The empty streets? The fire? Why?”

“Oh Aisha,” my mama sighed. “You know why.”

And I did.

The war had arrived.

*I should have predicted this!* I angrily thought. Between the water shortages and the constant departures, I should have realized that the war was slowly making its way to my village. I bit my lip; all of this was bringing up horrible memories. I looked at my mom to see her holding back tears.

“Mama?” Amir asked.

She took a deep breath and began explaining.

“We all knew that the troops were going to arrive sooner or later. The rumors were that they had already taken over all the neighboring cities, and that our town was next. I had some emergency food and water saved up in case of a shortage, but we were running out, and fast. Then today, when you went to go check for more water, the army broke into the city’s east gate and marched up and down the roads, demanding surrender. Those who refused, well, you saw what happened to our house.” I shuddered, remembering the blackened windows and the heat. “I heard shouting from the Al-Abadi’s house down the block and rushed to the window to see what the commotion was. As soon as I saw the soldiers, I took Amir to the south gate and called you, so you could start heading home. My plan was to take Amir to the safe house along with the rest of our neighbors, then meet you on the way home, but there was a change in plan.”

For some reason, she glared at Amir, waiting for him to respond. He squirmed under her gaze. I looked back and forth between them, hoping for an explanation.

“W-well, I *had* to!” He protested. “Aisha got home much faster than you had thought and almost got burned by the fire at home! I saved her!”

“That is true,” I mumbled, and remembered how shocked and angry I was to see him in the middle of a deserted town. I wondered why our mother would send him into a warzone, unless...

“You snuck out,” I noted. “That’s what you were trying to tell me. Mama didn’t know you had left to look for me and thought she had lost you. But you crept away. To find *me*.” I grabbed him into the tightest hug I’ve ever given. “Thank you,” I said softly.

My mother’s face softened as she watched us. Soon, she had joined the hug. I relaxed for just a second. I wished I could preserve this moment forever. However, just as we were breaking apart, a rumble shook the ground. I felt my calmness evaporate. This sound I recognized.

“A tank,” I whispered. Immediately, Amir’s face went from sheepish to terrified. I felt like collapsing. My mother, however, had a determined look on her face.

“Did anyone see you leaving town?” she asked me.

“I don’t k-know,” I stuttered. “Maybe?”

“Then we can’t use the safe house anymore. There are soldiers everywhere who could be watching us this very minute,” she said.

“Where will we go? Isn’t the tank coming?” Amir asked.

“I don’t know quite yet, but we need to get as far away from here as possible,” Mama said while she scanned the horizon. “Follow me.”

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I stared up at the inky, black sky. No stars were out tonight. I shifted uncomfortably on the hay. We’ve been on this cart for over 5 hours, travelling farther and farther away from my hometown. We came across the driver with his donkeys in the desert and gave him the 20 dinars I had on me. He agreed to drive us to the border, where we could hopefully escape into Jordan.

I felt tears threatening to come out, so I tried to hold on to happy memories of home. Meeting my best friend, Aaliyah, when we both wanted the exact same date from the exact same date tree, surprising Amir with presents on his 5<sup>th</sup> birthday, and baking with my mom.

*Not* a good idea. My tears made wet paths as they trailed down my dusty face. I couldn't help but sniff a few times. Amir was already sleeping, but Mama heard me and scooted close.

“It’s okay, honey.” She reached out and stroked my hair. Her touch felt anchoring after what happened today. I fell asleep to the sound of her voice whispering, “Don’t worry, everything’s going to be okay.”

And I believed it.