Wisdom of Ages
The Story of Amu Nowruz

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The guardians of the valley tell it this way: The events set down in these pages began two days before the festival of *Chaharshanbe Suri*, in the waning breath of winter—at the hour when Amu Nowruz readied himself for his yearly journey from the village to the mill.

We have all known him since childhood—that ancient, wandering figure, the elder of the New Year. Amu Nowruz. Yet only a few have glimpsed what lies beneath the familiar: the unseen companions who walk beside him through the hidden corridors of time, the spring that renews his spirit, and the quiet sorrow that, now and then, softens his smile.

The villagers have long believed that when winter loosens its grip on the earth, his journey toward the valley begins. What they do not say—perhaps do not dare to ask—is whether he walks this path out of habit… or whether the turning of the year itself depends upon his witness.

Amu holds a different belief.

To him, traditions are like buried springs in the breast of the earth. Left untended, they do not simply fade—they fall silent, dry, and are lost.

And so, like a shepherd carrying embers from one village to the next, he bears the living thread of human memory—joy and sorrow alike—across the land. From village to valley, from valley to village. From century to century. He gathers fragments of forgotten wisdom and binds them, quietly, from one generation to the next.

Come, then—walk beside him a while. Drink, if you will, from the well of what he knows.

Not far from the ancient city of Hamadan, there lived a man whom everyone knew, and no one could claim.

He was gentle, lively, and strangely ageless. His presence felt as natural as the passing of seasons. Wherever he went, laughter followed—light as wind through reeds. The children, without needing to be taught, called him "Uncle."

On the morning before *Chaharshanbe Suri*—the last Wednesday of the year—the world seemed to pause in a kind of quiet expectancy. It was a morning like countless others before it, so ordinary that even memory struggled to hold it.

He rose at dawn. Drank a cup of warm water. Ate little. Then, as always, he turned to the small, familiar rituals that prepared him for the road.

He dressed with an ease that carried a hint of ceremony. Loose black trousers. His beard, carefully kept; his long hair, drawn straight by the comb. From his chest, he drew out a green robe, slit along both sides so his stride would not be hindered. Around his waist, he tied a red sash and tucked the slender stem of his pipe into its fold. Last came the black felt hat, settled firmly upon his head.

At the threshold, he paused.

For a moment, he sat on the low stone ledge beside the door, as though listening for something that had not yet spoken. Then he slipped on his shoes, lifted his worn pack onto his shoulder, and took up his staff from where it leaned against the wall.

This path—he had walked it more times than even he could remember.

And yet, each year, it felt slightly different.

There were moments—many, in fact—when he sensed he was not simply crossing the distance between village and valley, but moving through layers of time itself, carrying fragments of something older than memory from one age into another.

Once, the journey had been light. Effortless. Almost a game.

There had been a time when he believed—without question—that laughter could coax even the world, with all its chaos, into laughter.

But that morning, something was not as it should be.

It was not fear. Nor sorrow. It had no clear name.

Only a subtle disturbance—like the shifting of unseen gears deep within the world. As though some quiet order, long familiar, had slipped out of place… and something else had taken to walking the earth in its stead. Something patient. Watchful. A presence that chose whispers over storms.

He frowned, just slightly.

His thoughts turned to the village—the children most of all. To the laughter that had once filled these narrow lanes like birdsong at dawn.

"What has changed?" he murmured.

In years past, the morning would already be alive.

Children in bright, newly sewn clothes would come racing toward him, calling out from every direction—doorways, wooden platforms, rooftops, even

from the branches of trees. Their excitement would rise and spread like a flock of birds taking sudden flight.

Behind them came the musicians.

And then *Haji Firuz*—red cap flashing, face alight with mischief—dancing, singing, scattering the first notes of spring wherever he passed.

Last of all came the wanderers: performers with drum-led bears that swayed and stamped to heavy rhythms, and clowns whose monkeys mimicked the stiff seriousness of men to the delight of all.

Through it all, Amu would walk at an unhurried pace, smiling, answering greetings with warmth, offering a few simple words that seemed, somehow, to deepen the joy around him. Even after he had gone, that brightness lingered—like warmth left in sunlit stone.

But now—

Nothing.

The platforms stood empty. No child waited. No voice rose to meet him. Even the wind seemed reluctant, leaving the dust undisturbed in the narrow alleys.

Amu walked on, slower than before.

The silence pressed in, heavy and unfamiliar.

He remembered how the children would once follow him all the way to the foot of the mountain, their chatter tumbling over itself. How the elders would walk beside him to the fields, sending their wishes after him like ribbons cast into the air—

"A red scarf, if you remember!"

"A wooden horse for the boy!"

"Warm socks—this winter was a cruel one!"

"And if you find one—" a voice would add with a laugh, "—bring me a swift deer!"

He had always listened, nodding, patient as the earth.

"Yes," he would say gently. "I will remember. I will bring what I can."

When he reached the great rock where the youths once gathered, he stopped.

He turned and looked back.

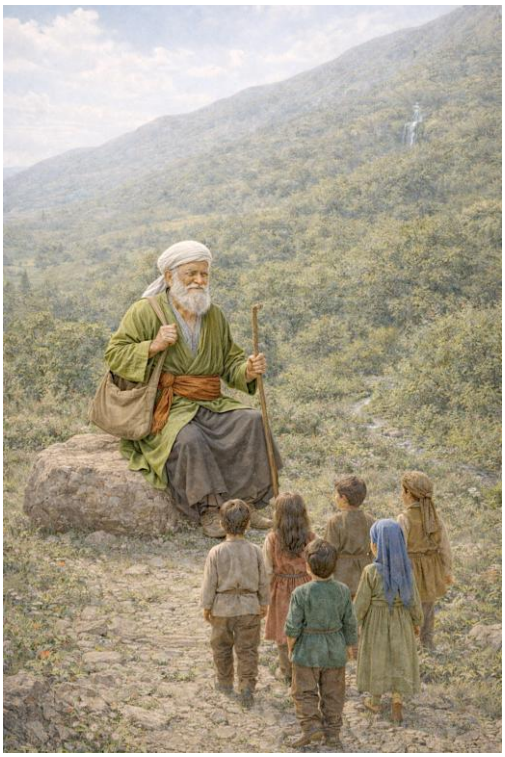
The village lay quiet. Too quiet.

A long breath escaped him.

"If only I knew how to wake them," he said softly. "How to call joy back from its sleep."

Still… not all was lost.

Beyond the mountain, he knew, there were those who still listened. Mashiya and Mashiyaneh would be waiting. They always were. And with them, perhaps, he might yet recover some measure of light.



About a mile before the slope steepened, a broad stone lay embedded in the earth. Below it, at the foot of the hillside, a spring emerged—its waters slipping quietly into a narrow, hidden stream that wound through the trees before spilling down toward the fields.

Amu stopped there.

As he always did.

He knelt and drank.

The water was cold—clear beyond clarity—and it moved through him like a memory returning. Something within him shifted, softly but unmistakably.

For a moment, the present loosened its hold.

In the deeper chambers of his mind, older voices stirred—older than the village, older even than Hamadan itself. They spoke without words, like wind threading through branches. Not commands. Not warnings.

Reminders.

He lingered there, listening—not with his ears, but with something quieter.

Then he rose, carrying with him a trace of what he had heard.

Something to be shared.

Something not yet forgotten.

The mountainside welcomed him like an old friend.

The air carried the scent of beginnings—wild rhubarb pushing through damp soil, red tulips opening themselves to the sun, pale orchids trembling among the grass.

Here, the earth still remembered how to wake.

And for a fleeting moment, so did he.

He climbed steadily, until the sun reached its height.

At last, he came to the great stone at the summit and rested his hand upon it.

Below him, Hamadan stretched wide beneath the light, its rooftops faded but enduring. The village he had left behind seemed distant now—muted, as though already half-forgotten.

Beyond the ridge, the valley opened.

Freed, at last, from winter.

Between two ancient mountain ranges, fed by springs older than memory, it spread in quiet vitality. A bright stream leapt down the slopes, threading its way through the broken remains of long-fallen fortresses before joining the river below.

Waterfalls shattered the sunlight into drifting shards.

A small grove shimmered in the breeze.

The villagers spoke of that valley in careful tones. Once, they said, its people had endured great hardship. Even now, the elders warned that beneath its calm, something restless remained.

"The *Viper* moves slowly," they would say. "But it does not forget."

Order, they insisted, was never permanent.

One must always be ready.

Through the leaves, the mill appeared at last—half-hidden in shadow. Beyond it lay the faint silver of distant lakes and fields.

That was where he was headed.

When he reached the place where the stream joined the river, he paused again.

Turtles lay motionless on sun-warmed stones. Snakes slipped through the grass in patient silence. Birds flickered from branch to branch, weightless as breath.

He stood among them for a while.

And there, without quite knowing why, he felt something ease within him.

As though, for a single moment, the long weight of the passing year had been lifted from his shoulders—

and he could walk, once more, with a lighter step.

The mill, with its low doors, moss-laden stone walls, and a roof of weathered straw, stood as it always had—steadfast, untouched. It was as though time itself had no wish to trouble it.

Uncle paused at the threshold and listened to the ceaseless murmur of water, turning the hidden millstone in its slow, patient cycle. Then he knocked.

Once.

Twice.

The door opened.

A middle-aged man stood there, his gray hair falling to his shoulders, his dress plain—a white shirt, black trousers—worn in the old Zoroastrian manner. At the sight of Uncle, his face brightened; he stepped forward without hesitation, drew him into a warm embrace, and ushered him inside.

Within, the mill opened into a wide, quiet hall. Persian carpets adorned the walls, their softened patterns alive in the filtered light. Deeper in, a *korsi* rested among deep cushions, draped with a heavy silk quilt. Upon it, beside a hookah, were set a basket of fruit, bowls of pomegranate seeds, and trays of roasted sunflower, pumpkin, and melon seeds. At the heart of the room, the *Haft-Seen* had been laid.

The spread floated upon a shallow pool, circled by flowers. Red fish moved languidly among the stems of early-blooming lotuses, and light trembled upon the water, so that fruit and blossom and their reflections seemed to hover between what was and what only appeared to be.

Uncle spoke softly, “Mashiya, a blessed Nowruz to you. May the new year bring you and Mashiyaneh a season full of joy and gladness.”

Mashiya smiled—a warmth that required no words. “And to you, a blessed Nowruz. May the year show kindness to us all.”

All of it was familiar. Deeply, almost achingly so. His bond with the ancient pair reached back to the first clear memories of his childhood. For years beyond counting, they had welcomed him with a kindness that surpassed hospitality, listened without haste, and eased the weight he carried from the world beyond. They had gathered others, too, to unfold for him the history and hidden textures of their world. And he, in turn, loved them with a quiet, steadfast devotion he seldom named.

He settled beside the *korsi*, drew the quilt over his legs, and let the gentle warmth seep into him. After a moment, he asked, “Where is Mashiyaneh?”

“She will return soon,” Mashiya said. “She has gone down to the river, to tend to the animals.”

As if summoned by the words, the door opened again, and Mashiyaneh entered.

She wore a long white garment, with a light outer robe that she slipped from her shoulders as she crossed the threshold. Passing the Nowruz spread, she paused—just for a breath—as though acknowledging something unseen within its quiet order.

Her gray hair fell loose upon her shoulders. Her smile—soft, untroubled—stirred something distant in Uncle’s heart: memories of beginnings so far removed they felt more like dreams than recollections.

She came to the *korsi*, bent slightly, lifted the edge of the quilt, and slipped her feet beneath it. Uncle felt the lingering chill of river water upon her skin—and with it, unexpectedly, the faintest stirring of hope.

A brazier burned at her side, its fire low and patient. A small teapot murmured upon it. The scent of tea leaves mingled with the fragrance of flowers, and with that elusive, delicate trace that seemed always to follow her—something fleeting, almost beyond naming. With unhurried grace, she poured a cup and placed it before him. Mashiya set beside it a small dish of fruit, almonds, and pistachios—the valley's simple offerings.

In years past, the mere sight of them had been enough. Enough to loosen the burden of the year gone by, enough to draw him into the strange, half-remembered realm that seemed to gather about them—a place woven of half-dreams and fading memory, beyond command or conflict, where the strife of men dissolved like morning mist.

But not this year.

This year, something in him resisted.

The world beyond the mountains had grown too troubled, too fractured, for such quiet consolations to take root. And he found he no longer wished to retreat into a refuge shaped from gentle illusions.

Mashiya had sensed it at once—had read the unrest in him the moment he crossed the threshold. Seeking to ease the air, he said, in a tone carefully measured, "It was a harsh winter, my son. We scarcely gathered enough *senjed* for the table."

Uncle's gaze drifted to the *Haft-Seen*—the still axis about which the celebration turned. Upon the round wooden tray lay the seven sacred emblems: garlic at the center, a bowl of new-grown greens, a bowl of *samanu*, a red apple like a small sun, the ruddy fruit of *senjed*, a mound of sumac, and a cup of vinegar, dark as old remembrance.

To him, they were never merely tokens of spring. They were the last visible echoes of something lost to the fog of time—fragments of an ancient rite belonging to absent forebearers, the sacred immortals who had once held the world's order in their keeping. Even now, a trace of them seemed to linger here, lending the arrangement a quiet, unspoken authority.

At length, Mashiya said, "And yet, it is not the cold that troubles people. The thought of spring—the blossoming of trees, the cleansing of homes for Nowruz—awakens hope, even in the most doubtful hearts."

Across the *korsi*, Mashiyaneh watched Uncle closely. She saw how the sorrow in his face had deepened—how it had taken root more firmly than in years before.

Gently, she asked, "Spring has come. What shadow could darken the joy of Nowruz?"

Uncle let out a slow breath. "Spring has come, yes. But does its light still dwell among the people? Each year, Nowruz loses something of its old radiance. The ways of our forebearers are no longer kept. Fewer stain their hands with henna, fewer dye eggs, fewer roast wheat or seeds. Instead of visiting one another, they flee their villages. Some even travel during the holidays, to escape what was once sacred duty. Many leave altogether—settling among strangers, never once turning back. At least… that is what I see around us."

Mashiya inclined his head, slowly, as though acknowledging a truth long known.

Uncle went on, "This change is no sudden thing. Year by year, it lengthens—like the shadow of evening climbing a wall. Last year was the worst. It was as though we lived in unending mourning. The village wore black in every season. But for whom did we grieve? The dead we wept for were not our own."

Mashiyaneh had listened without interruption. Now she spoke, her voice soft but steady. “My son, do not yield yourself to sorrow. The world, like the moon, waxes and wanes—it rises and falls. Do not let grief take dominion over your heart. Be patient. The coming year will be kinder—I promise.”

Her words were gentle. Yet they left, in him, a faint hollow—an unease, as though she had not fully seen the depth of what stirred within him.

He answered quietly, “Your circumstances are not as mine—or rather, not as those of your children beyond the mountains. Forty, fifty years ago, I would never have believed I would speak such words. And yet now… beyond those mountains, it has all come to pass.”

Mashiyaneh met his gaze, her voice calm, though edged with a quiet firmness. “My son, we are not untouched by it. We, too, have endured.”

Her words stirred the old rumors of the village in his mind, and he understood that what he had heard was not without truth. Something was moving beneath the surface of things—something patient. Not a force that struck all at once, but one that crept, slowly and persistently, through generations, wearing all things down.

The elders had given it a name.

The *Viper*.

And long before he came to know it, he had already felt the faint passing of its shadow.

Mashiyaneh said, “Not so long ago, this valley lost nearly all its wealth and greenery. It was a dark time—before you were born.”

Uncle looked at her, startled. He had always admired the endurance of that ancient pair, how they bore the mountain winters with an unbreakable spirit; yet the disaster she spoke of had lived in his mind only as a rumor, half-believed.

“It sounds like a calamity,” he said. “What happened?”

Mashiyaneh’s voice lowered. “We brought it upon ourselves—or rather, it began when the old ways were set aside.”

Uncle turned to Mashiya. “And you? Tell me plainly—what became of the valley?”

Mashiya folded his hands and watched the embers in the brazier settle into a dull glow. For a moment he did not speak. Then: “It is a long tale. I will give you its bones. A demon came into our valley—a devouring *Viper* that took the form of a woman of unearthly beauty. The people, especially the young, were taken by her. They followed her without knowing it was a snare.

“Against our warnings, the *Viper* began to summon her kin from a far country—they said from Yemen—and settled them in the upper reaches of the

valley. They raised dams along the river and bent the water toward their own gardens and fields. Downstream, the current thinned. The mill fell silent. And before long, the green valley withered into dust. Livelihoods failed. Families drifted away."

Uncle's voice dropped. "Those waterfalls… are they the remains of those dams?"

"Yes," Mashiya said. "Their aim was nothing less than the whole valley. To take it, they sowed discord among us—until brother rose against brother, and a father's hand could fall upon his own child."

Uncle shook his head slowly. "And you endured this? Accepted it?"

"We did not see it clearly, not at first," Mashiya said. "They came cloaked in praise. They honored our customs, kept our festivals, even wrote verses for Nowruz. But inwardly they loathed them—*Chaharshanbe Suri*, Nowruz, all that bound us together. Quietly, they worked to empty those things of meaning. Given time, I could show you how they loosened the very roots of our traditions."

"I would hear it," Uncle said. "But still—I cannot understand. With all the wisdom I see in you, how did such ruin come to pass?"

Mashiya lifted a hand, as if to halt the question itself. "Wisdom was not the measure. The root lay deeper—in the diminishing of human dignity, of knowledge, of justice. They worked in silence, patiently, until the moment came. Then they took hold.

"Soon enough, their arrogance and cruelty reduced the people of the valley to something like servants. Even before they ruled openly, they had driven many away—especially those who might have stood against them. And when power was theirs, they reversed the current: those who had left were forbidden to return. Those who remained were broken.

"In all this, it was the women who suffered most. And in time, violence became ordinary—as common as dust."

He gestured toward the mountains. "You have seen the ruins—their fortresses, their places of worship."

"I have," Uncle said. "Many times. But I did not know what lay behind them."

He paused, his gaze distant. "Years ago, such a story would have frightened me. Now…" He let out a quiet breath. "Now it feels like something I have already lived."

Leaning closer, he asked, "Did they value human life at all?"

Mashiyaneh answered without hesitation. "They divided the world in two: their own, and the rest. The lives of the valley's people meant nothing. Their own were sacred. They spoke another tongue, wore other garments, and held fiercely to one another. Their women were seldom seen, and they themselves rarely came down among us. They preferred to rule from a distance—through others."

"And the animals?" Uncle asked.

Mashiya shook his head. "Not as we are. We honor all living beings—especially dogs, who guard our flocks and homes. They bore a strange hatred for them. They tormented them without cause. Their children were the worst."

Mashiyaneh added quietly, "The dogs suffered most, but no creature was safe. They hunted for sport. Had we not intervened, they would have wiped out the lions entirely—you would not see one today."

"And the land?" Uncle asked.

Mashiyaneh sighed. "You have heard of the river. They stripped the forests for firewood. The saplings we planted to heal the valley, they destroyed. If they held no regard for human life, what regard would they have for trees or beasts?"

Uncle nodded, grave. "One more question—an important one. Did they practice nepotism?"

A tired smile passed across Mashiyaneh's face. "I told you—they built a world of insiders and outsiders. Nepotism was their strength. Tribal loyalty, the pillar of their rule."

Mashiya continued, "They kept careful genealogies—hidden ledgers tracing every branch of kinship back to the *Viper* at the center. With these, they governed everything: work, shelter, water, land. Every privilege rested on belonging."

Uncle leaned forward. "And with such power—was there no moment when you could endure no more?"

"There was," Mashiyaneh said softly. "When they sought to replace our sacred beliefs with their own."

"In what way were they different?" Uncle asked.

"We believe in beings beyond this world," Mashiya said. "Forces that draw the mind toward harmony. Theirs were of the earth—figures with tombs in Yemen, and later temples raised in the upper valley."

"And if they had prevailed?"

"The valley would have sunk into ancestor worship," Mashiya said, his voice steady. "Their dead ancestors would have ruled the living. Worse still, in time, our own sacred beings would have faded from memory. That is why the elders said the *Viper's* first work was the slow undoing of belief. She taught people to forget the meaning of what they touched each day."

Silence gathered in the room.

At last Uncle spoke. "And how did you rid yourselves of her? Or did you?"

Mashiya's gaze drifted to the far mountains, where the waterfalls murmured like voices carried across centuries. "By then, they had become the upper class. Their children lived in comfort, studying in Hamadan, while the people of the valley labored in the wasteland their rule had made."

He fell silent.

Uncle turned to Mashiyaneh.

"That was when we understood," she said, "that the struggle against the *Viper* stood above all else—not only for the people, but for the valley itself. It was a struggle between life and death."

When her words ended, the room sank into stillness. Only the low murmur of the mill wheel, turning somewhere behind the wall, broke the quiet.

Uncle Nowruz sat for a long while. Then, as though weighing an old thought in his hands, he murmured, "So the *Viper* did not come with an army to destroy the valley… it came by awakening forgetfulness."

Mashiya inclined his head. "Yes. Armies come and go. What truly destroys a civilization is the slow abandonment of the principles that once gave it life. The valley did not fall in a single season. It unraveled—thread by thread—as forgetfulness seeped into the minds of its people. Expediency took the place of principle. Symbols stood in for thought. Rituals remained, but their meaning drained away."

"Give me an example," Uncle said. "From the life of the valley in those days."

"They replaced loyalty with betrayal," Mashiya said, "and named it prudence. They replaced truth with deceit—and called it wisdom. A few saw the danger, but too few. In time, later generations would trace the valley's decline to the moment the *Viper* first crossed their thresholds."

Uncle exhaled softly. "We so rarely heed the elders. They say force seldom destroys a civilization. It falls when memory falters, when truth is abandoned, and when people accept substitutes in place of what is real…"

Mashianeh finished, her voice barely above a whisper: "And the *Viper* waits—for exactly that moment."

"These substitutions," added Mashiya, "stripping the covenant of its force and setting falsehood in the place of truth—left us no choice but to rise against them."

Uncle frowned. "I hope not with weapons."

Mashiya shook his head. "No—with ancient wisdom. With trust in place of domination, and reverence for all living beings—human, animal, and plant."

"Ancient wisdom?" Uncle said. "I had thought you yourselves were its founders."

A faint smile touched Mashiya's lips. "No, my son. Before us, there was a world of thought in which the forces of good stood openly against the hosts of evil—the very forces of this *Viper*. Our ancestors, hidden within the rhubarb plant, fled that turmoil and found refuge in this valley. For centuries their descendants—ourselves—lived in peace. Then the *Viper* found its way here."

He paused, his gaze darkening.

"That was when we understood what it was: not merely cunning, but shape-shifting and deathless—difficult to discern, and never wholly destroyed."

Uncle leaned forward. "How can such a thing be?"

"It had ruled in Yemen so long that no chronicle could mark the beginning of its reign," Mashiya said. "Whenever scribes tried, their accounts unraveled into contradiction. Most rulers plan for the span of a lifetime—this one planned for the span of civilizations. Some even claimed that when their grandfathers were children, it was already on the throne."

Uncle exhaled slowly. "Then there is something more troubling still. Your *Viper* may not belong to this valley alone. It may be the same shadow now moving among the people of Hamadan."

Mashiya bowed his head. "That could well be. It advances by way of misunderstanding, expediency, sloth of mind—and by replacing concepts with mere objects. The *Viper* you speak of, as I understand it, does no differently."

"And how did you face such a thing?" Uncle asked.

"We diminished its power."

"How?"

"In two ways. First, by keeping the water pure—and truth alive within thought. Second, by learning to recognize its deceptions. It sought to replace our divine forces with the spirits of Yemeni ancestors, to substitute objects for concepts, and to offer simple tales in place of truth. Against all this, we stood."

Uncle frowned. "What has water to do with thought?"

Mashiyaneh answered, her voice low and even, like water over stone. "Water and thought are the first links in two chains that sustain life. Pure water, springing from the heart of stone, nourishes plant, animal, and human alike. It clears the air and gives the sun's generative light leave to work. Where such water flows, evil finds little room to dwell."

She lifted her eyes.

"Thought is no different. When shaped by truth and guided by good intent, it forms patterns that give rise to just and generous deeds—and so the hand of evil is stayed."

After a moment, she added, her gaze steady, "In the end, it was this union—pure water and right thought—that restored peace to the valley. And the valley flourished once more."

Uncle fell silent, struck by the weight of her words. At length he said, "Our water now is just so—clouded and unfit to drink. And as I told you, I believe those stirring unrest in Hamadan are of the same lineage as your *Viper*. But tell me—how did you stand against a culture woven from lies?"

Mashiyaneh regarded him with quiet patience. "My son, they were clever—but neither seasoned nor wise. They lacked discipline and hurried always toward

deception. It was their very show of refinement that opened the doors of our institutions to them, and their cleverness carried them into positions of power."

She folded her hands.

"We weakened that power by returning to the ancient path: good thoughts, good words, good deeds. A simple rule—older than memory itself. Slowly, it set them apart. Little by little, they became a people apart. No one in the valley trusted them; few would trade with them."

She paused.

"In time, we withdrew from them."

"And how did they answer that?" Uncle asked.

"With hatred," she said. "Only hatred. The more we honored the inheritance of our ancestors and refused their false gods—the more we turned away from their temples and their rites of mourning—the deeper their resentment grew."

A faint hardness entered her voice.

"But by then, the people of the valley had awakened. The spell of the *Viper's* followers no longer held. One by one, they gathered their things and departed by the road they had come."

Uncle shook his head. "Even so, something escapes me. Withdrawal alone cannot heal so deep a wound."

Mashiya's voice softened. "No. Nothing in this world is healed in a single stroke. Withdrawal was only the outward sign. The true work began when we taught the people once more the inheritance of our ancestors."

He glanced toward Mashiyaneh.

"And we did so with care—lest outsiders twist those truths and feed them to the unwary."

Mashiyaneh inclined her head. "In truth, what angered them most was this: their lies no longer held—not even over their own followers. Good thoughts, good words, good deeds—these unraveled their web, thread by thread."

Mashiya drew the quilt aside and stirred the embers beneath the *korsi*, turning them until the heat spread softer, more even. Firelight breathed through the dim room, a slow, steady pulse against the walls.

He went on, "To answer you fully, I must add this: we made use of one of their own instruments—secrecy. Their leaders were few, and that served us well. We began with small, quiet gatherings, weighing where our laws had been bent out of true. From those meetings a hidden council took shape. It cast off the imposed rules and set new ones in their place.

"Then, in an open assembly of the valley's people, those laws were accepted, and a council of elders was formed. Under their guidance—and by those laws—a body of leaders was chosen to lead us out of the dark."

Uncle leaned forward, eyes intent. "A leader? Someone I might know?"

A faint smile crossed Mashiya's face. "A blacksmith. A simple man—but one who knew the spirit of the valley, and the ways of the *Viper*. With patience—and with courage—he drew us out of the mire that had begun to swallow us."

"And that was the end of them?" Uncle asked. "You were free of them for good?"

Mashiya shook his head slowly. "No, my son. It was not so easily done. In the long years of their rule, we had grown like them. We lied, as they lied. We ceased to turn from wrongdoing. Even our children were raised beneath that shadow. What once brought shame had come to seem ordinary."

The fire shifted; a faint crack sounded.

"So we began a return—slow, deliberate. Step by step, we restored truthfulness among ourselves. More than that, we tried to awaken them as well."

He paused, as if measuring the memory.

"Some among them began to weigh their thoughts, to measure their words, to reckon with the consequences of their deeds. Those who accepted the new order—and took part in the valley's renewal—were allowed to remain."

Uncle let out a quiet breath. "I'm glad no weapons were taken up in this struggle."

"We judged it the most human path," Mashiya said. "In our humanity, we were no different from them. Only their deeds—greed, cruelty, arrogance—set them apart. And once their lies were laid bare, they saw that no one regarded them as conquerors any longer."

Uncle lowered his gaze. "It shames me that I knew nothing of this part of the valley's history, though I have walked these paths since childhood. Tell me—how did you restore what had been lost?"

Mashiya was silent for a moment, then said, "Their wrongs were bound together, like links in a chain. The life of man depends on animal and plant—and both depend on pure water. I do not know how they failed to grasp so plain a truth."

Mashiyaneh spoke softly, her voice scarcely rising above the hush of the room. "The elders have kept only part of the meaning. That is why you have not heard it in full."

"Even so," Uncle said, "there are those who claim these words were preserved exactly."

Mashiya gave a slight shake of his head. "That matters little. Some words are always lost. What endures is this: we began with water and air. Pure water revived the soil; clean air restored the trees. Instead of felling forests for firewood, we planted new groves. We guarded the dwellings of animals and put an end to needless killing."

His voice grew firmer.

"Among ourselves, we forbade violence—no more mutilation, no more hangings, no more the killing of one's neighbor. Each person was set to work suited

to their nature. Those who sought leadership entered into open and just contest. Some remnants of the *Viper's* order remain—but they no longer possess the strength to do lasting harm."

Uncle looked up. "But all this must have required wealth. Where did it come from?"

Mashiya's smile returned, quiet and knowing. "The wealth was always here. It had only been misused. When the outsiders laid waste to the fields, they destroyed our livelihood—and in draining the treasury, they weakened themselves. Once the valley's resources slipped from their grasp, balance returned, little by little."

"And the dams?" Uncle asked. "After they left—did you tear them down?"

"No," said Mashiya. "We did not destroy them. We lessened the waters diverted upstream and shared what remained. Then, over time, we reshaped the dams—so that where they had once scarred the valley, they came to belong to its beauty."

Uncle's gaze drifted to the *Avesta* resting beside the Nowruz spread. "It seems the spirits of their ancestors held no decisive power over the valley's fate."

"That is so," Mashiya said. "Had it been otherwise—God forbid—our end would have been another thing entirely."

Uncle murmured, "Like the fate of Hamadan… And yet—there is hope in this."

"There is always hope," Mashiya said. "But hope asks for patience—and for steadfastness in good thoughts, good words, and good deeds."

Mashiyaneh, who had been silent for some time, lifted her head.

"There is one thing more that must never be forgotten," she said. "Leadership."

The firelight caught in her eyes.

"That blacksmith did not shrink from danger. With the elders and the council behind him, he went straight into its heart and faced the leader of the outsiders. He spoke plainly—without concealment: your followers have two paths before them. They may remain among us as equals, and share in the life of the valley—or they may depart, and seek their fortune with the *Viper*."

The night had deepened, and Mashiya knew Uncle still had a long road before him. He said quietly, "My son, we grieve for the hardships you have spoken of. I fear you may be right—perhaps the lineage of that ancient *Viper* has stirred once more in the world. If so, do not forget the lesson of the bull-fish."

Uncle's gaze drifted to the mirror laid upon the Nowruz table. A single white egg rested upon it, still and expectant—awaiting the turning of the year, and that hidden tremor said to pass through the world when the bull-fish shifts it from one horn to the other.

Mashiya went on, his voice low and steady. "Learn patience from the bull-fish. Sow the seed, and wait for its hour. What sustained us may yet sustain you."

Uncle rose, though not without reluctance. “As always, I cannot remain for Nowruz. The children are waiting. Their tables must be set. I must see that they greet *Chaharshanbe Suri* with fire, and welcome the New Year with laughter. And more than that…” He paused, glancing toward the dark beyond the doorway. “I must carry some measure of this valley’s joy across the mountain.”

A soft silence settled over the room. Each of them, in their own way, turned their thoughts toward the coming Nowruz.

At last, Mashiya spoke. “I do not understand why our children turn away from it. The Nowruz runs in our blood. How can it be forgotten?”

Uncle’s reply came gently, but there was weariness beneath it. “Some are raised as though Nowruz had never been. Their minds are led elsewhere. They are forbidden even to speak of it. And each year, there are more of them.” He hesitated. “I fear we are becoming strangers to the world—though once, we were among its most luminous people.”

Uncle’s eyes moved slowly about the room—the fish gliding in their bowl, the colored eggs, the simple dishes of flour and cheese. “Something is missing,” he said at last. “Perhaps, in those days, life was simpler. People worked the land, tended their animals, and were content in their blessings. There was a warmth that bound them together.” His voice lowered. “That warmth is fading.”

Mashiyaneh inclined her head. “Life itself does not change, my son. It is the gaze upon it that shifts—beliefs without root in truth, and the habits that grow from them.” She studied him for a moment. “We spoke of this before. You said there would be no celebration.”

Uncle gave a faint, humorless smile. “No. I said they would not allow it.”

“And yet, it was held.”

“Yes,” he said. “But not as it should have been.” His voice darkened. “On the morning of Nowruz, just as the children set out, two young men were hanged in the village square.”

Mashiyaneh drew in a sharp breath. “And the children?”

“What could they do?” Uncle said, bitterness breaking through. “Cruelty has become ordinary to them. Even when the condemned are their own—brother, father, uncle—people stand and watch in silence.”

Mashiya reached out and placed a steady hand upon his shoulder. “My son, your burden is heavy—but your work is sacred. Nowruz is not merely a custom; it is the root of our inheritance. We keep it here, in the valley. You carry it forward to the children.”

He held Uncle’s gaze. “You are a bearer of joy. When they gather at the table, remind them: laughter is a gift of the Divine, music is the pulse of life, and despair belongs to darkness. Tell them this as well—small shoulders may yet bear great weights.”

At those words, something ancient stirred within Uncle. Memory rose—not as a vision, but as a presence: the courts of kings, the terraces of Persepolis, the solemn rites of ages long past. For a fleeting moment, the centuries thinned and fell away like mist.

He lowered his eyes. "I should be ashamed," he said quietly. "Each year I come to you with nothing but complaints."

After a pause, he added, almost to himself, "But who else listens?"

Mashiya's smile was gentle. "Seeing you renews us as well. Do not forget—this is your home. You are our child, as are all the children of the world. We labor a year for the sake of even one of their smiles."

Uncle nodded. He filled his pipe, lit it, and drew in a slow breath before rising. "Then it is time."

Mashiyaneh's voice softened. "It is always a joy to see our children. If only you could remain until *Sizdah Bedar*."

"I wish I could," he said. "I will carry your greetings to the village. I will do what I can to see that no one passes this Nowruz in sorrow."

He slung the sack of toys over his shoulder, took up his staff, and stepped out into the night.

Mashiya and Mashiyaneh watched in silence as he passed among the trees, his figure thinning into shadow, until at last the darkness of the valley gathered around him like a cloak and he was gone.

He walked swiftly along the river's edge. The sound of water kept pace with him as he passed the broken remains of dams and the husks of silent fortresses. As he went, a question pressed upon him: would his own time ever see the rise of a blacksmith—one with the strength to bind people and land together once more?

The mountain loomed ahead. Soon he would reach its height. He found himself wondering whether, beyond it, fires were already kindled—whether children were even now leaping through the flames, their voices ringing out into the night:

"My pallor to you, your redness to me!"

A faint smile touched his lips. In his mind, he turned over the story he would soon tell:

"Once, long ago, there was a man named Mashiya, and he had a wife, Mashiyaneh. They were brother and sister…"

But even as the words formed, something stirred uneasily within him.

Somewhere in the depths of the night—beyond a bend in the river—another traveler was moving. One who did not wait for spring. One who appeared only when beliefs began to shift, and the year turned upon itself.

Uncle had not yet seen him.

And far within the mountains, in a cave few had ever entered, five shadows had begun to stir—though their hour had not yet come.

Another Nowruz, another trip. The night lay calm and luminous beneath the full moon. Though Uncle had walked the road between village and mill for many years, he had seldom begun the climb so early. The moon stood poised above the ridgelines—white, unclouded—and its quiet radiance called Mashiyaneh to mind.

Their last meeting lingered with him still. There had been something in her presence—something both strange and deeply familiar—and in her knowledge of ages long past that had settled into him like a seed. It had stirred more than thought; it had widened the very horizon of his understanding. Since then, whenever he glimpsed a difference between the customs of his village and the ways of the valley, his mind would not rest until he had traced it back to its hidden root.

Some of what Mashiya and Mashiyaneh had told him had eased burdens he had carried for years. Yet other things had done the opposite—they had awakened questions that would no longer be silenced. The old unease remained, though altered: no longer a shapeless doubt, but something sharper, more insistent—a quiet anxiety for the fate of the village, and for the children who would one day inherit it.

He passed the familiar rock where the older children would sit and watch him climb. This time, he did not stop. He went on, drawn by the sound of water, until he reached the spring that broke from the mountain's side. In the dark he could not see it, but he followed its voice—the soft threading of water through stone.

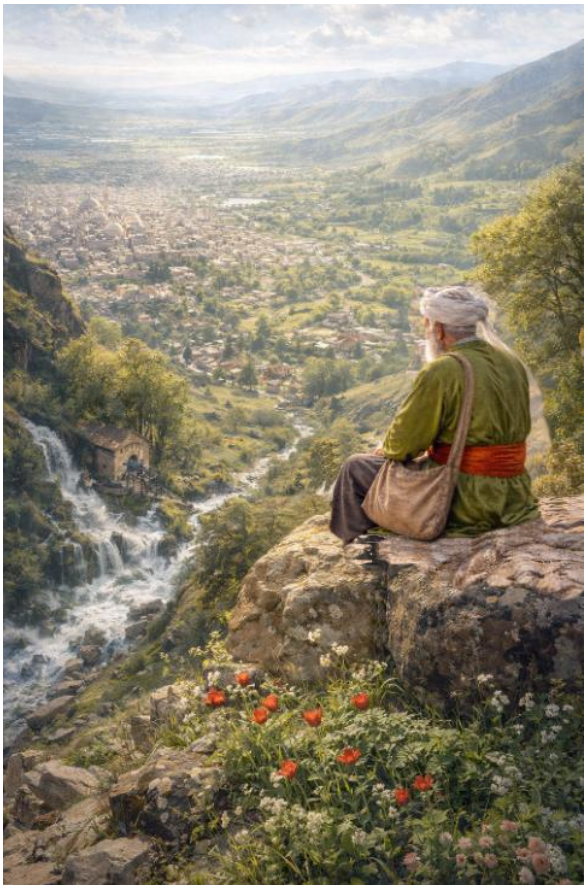
He knelt, cupped his hands, and drank.

At once, the feeling returned.

That hidden window—opening, at times, upon the past—stood ajar again. He felt himself joined to the long chain of those who had come before him, as though their breath moved faintly within his own. These moments were among the most luminous of his life—though now they had grown gentler, more inward, like an old song remembered rather than heard.

By the time the sun rose, he had reached the summit.

He sat beside the ancient slab and drew from his satchel a simple meal: bread, honey, and cheese. As he ate, he looked out across the plain, where Hamadan lay spread in the morning light. He was glad of his early start. The questions from his last visit still pressed upon him, unanswered. If he reached the mill before the day's labor began, perhaps there would be time.



As he descended, those questions returned, circling him. Mashiya and Mashiyaneh had spoken of a distant age when the people of the valley had driven out foreigners who sought to bind them. The ruins scattered along the slopes—broken fortresses, abandoned temples—stood as silent witnesses to that struggle.

They had also said that those foreigners buried their dead beneath grand structures, raising temples of great beauty to honor their ancestors—structures said to resemble those in the lands of Yemen.

And yet, in Hamadan, too, there were buildings of that same design.

Why?

The histories he had learned spoke of no such dominion, no such incursion. Had something been lost in the telling? Or was there a gap in his own knowing—a blind spot he had never thought to question?

Some of this, he told himself, might be answered by seeing such a place with his own eyes. But another question troubled him more deeply: if the foreigners had once sought to impose the worship of ancestors—and if that had kindled

rebellion—then why did Hamadan now bear temples and shrines that seemed to echo that very same custom?

Before long, he stood at the mill door, listening to the deep rush of water plunging into the well below. He knocked.

Mashiya opened, as he always did, clad in his plain white shirt and loose black trousers.

"You've come early," he said, studying him. "When did you leave?"

"Long before dawn," Uncle replied. "Nearly two hours before sunrise."

From within the hall, Mashiyaneh's voice reached them. "Have you eaten?"

"I have. Bread, honey, and cheese. I sat by the great stone on the rise and watched the sun come up."

A faint smile touched Mashiya's face. "That stone? Do you know what place it once held in the life of this valley?"

Uncle shook his head. "Only that I rest there, now and then."

Mashiyaneh's voice softened. "It is a remnant of the valley's darkest days—the time I told you of. Once, it stood at the heart of one of the foreigners' temples."

Uncle frowned slightly. "There are carved stones around it. I've seen them… though I never looked closely."

"They once encircled a tomb," Mashiya said. "One of their great ancestors was laid there."

"Ancestors…" Uncle repeated, as if testing the word.

"Their dead were held in great reverence," Mashiya continued. "Their leaders and forebears were buried beneath splendid halls. This stone once stood within such a place—built of rare Yemeni wood. The walls were adorned with gold and silver, with precious stones, with brocades woven by maidens of that land. Now—" he gestured lightly "—nothing remains but the stone, and a few scattered fragments."

Uncle's gaze lingered somewhere beyond the walls. "And the body? Is it still there?"

"No one knows," Mashiya said. "The tomb may have remained untouched… or the remains may have been taken long ago. What endures is only the memory of it."

Uncle nodded slowly. "It looks like a place of gathering. The stones—like seats, set in a circle. Perhaps they held rites there."

"Perhaps," Mashiyaneh said. "Time veils such things."

Then she smiled, and the weight in her voice eased. "Mashiya, let the man breathe before you bury him in centuries."

"I have said no more than he asked," Mashiya replied, though there was a trace of amusement in it. He stepped aside. "Come in, my son. Tell us—how fares the village?"

Uncle slipped off his worn shoes at the threshold. "The village endures. But Hamadan…" He paused. "Hamadan is restless. As you said, the people have lost patience with those who rule them."

Mashiya inclined his head, neither surprised nor pleased.

"But the blacksmith has not yet appeared," Uncle added.

Mashiyaneh joined them beneath the *korsi*, drawing the warmth about them. "That is the hardest part," she said. "Such souls rarely come when they are called. Many reach for leadership—but once they hold it, they feed the very forces they meant to break. The valley was fortunate."

"May Hamadan be so as well," Uncle said.

"It will be," she answered quietly. "There was a time when Hamadan gave law to the world, when other lands wandered in darkness. Its people will remember themselves."

The climb had taken its toll. Uncle rested beneath the *korsi*, letting the warmth settle into his bones. After a while, he said, "Do you remember what you told me last year—about the moment the people of the valley could endure no more?"

"I remember," Mashiya said.

"What drove them to it?"

"The foreigners burdened them with laws," Mashiya replied. "Many laws—none for the people's good. That was what broke their patience."

Uncle nodded. "That I can understand. But there is something else."

Mashiya's attention sharpened.

"You said they sought to replace the valley's immortal beings with the authority of their ancestors' spirits."

"Yes."

"And when I asked what would have come of it, you said we would have become like them." He hesitated. "But we…"

Mashiyaneh's voice, when it came, was calm—but unyielding. "No, my son. You—and most of Hamadan—have already become as they were. You have turned toward the ancestors. We have not."

Uncle stared at her, the words striking deeper than he had expected. "But I have held to my old belief."

She regarded him gently. "Yes. That is what has kept you apart." Then, more quietly: "But many in Hamadan—and even some in your own village—have already slipped into the coils of the *Viper*."

Uncle said, "I remember—someone else once said something about the *Viper* as well."

"Who?"

"I can't quite recall. But how did this come to pass? How did the immortal beings—even the hero-saints—of Hamadan lose their places?"

Mashianeh folded her hands, fingers interlacing as though to steady the weight of memory. “Last time, I told you how the *Viper* first entered our world in the form of a beautiful woman. That was only the beginning. What you ask now belongs to a longer telling—a more recent chapter in her works.”

“So the *Viper* is the same,” the uncle said, “only clothed in different guises?”

“Exactly. Though her victims seldom understand this—until it is too late.”

“In other words,” he said dryly, “you are avoiding the answer.”

A faint smile touched Mashiyaneh’s lips. “No. I am only saying that such transformations do not unfold within a single generation. This is one of the secrets of belief—it moves slowly, almost imperceptibly. Under guidance, it may change, deepen… even decay.” She paused, then continued more quietly. “Let me say again what I told you before: some hear a story and sense a warning hidden within it—and they are right. But the one who understands the power of belief… is the one who shapes the destiny of nations. That is the heart of it. The cunning of the *Viper* rests there.”

Mashiya rose, stretching stiffly, as though the past itself had settled into his bones. “Even the elders of the valley hold only fragments of meaning,” he said. At the doorway, he glanced back. “Mashiyaneh tells the newer stories better than I do. I’ll see to the animals.”

When he had gone, Mashiyaneh stepped closer, lowering her voice. “I saw the Mo’bad last night. He is coming for the midday meal. No one knows the recent history of Hamadan as he does.” She held his gaze. “That is what you need—the recent past.”

Even as she spoke, a knock sounded—firm, measured.

Mashiyaneh tilted her head. “Ah… perhaps it is he.”

She slipped outside. A moment later, the Mo’bad entered, bringing with him the cool air of the courtyard. His presence filled the room with a quiet authority.

“Welcome, my son,” he said warmly. “It has been too long. Tell me—how fares the world?”

The uncle gave a weary breath. “Harder than it ought to be.”

The Mo’bad sighed, easing himself down beneath the *korsi*. “That is the burden of long memory. Those who live but once taste joy and sorrow quickly, and pass on. But those who endure through ages…” He shook his head faintly. “They carry both across centuries.”

He settled, then looked up. “Mashiyaneh tells me you have questions about the *Viper*.”

“Yes,” Uncle said. “About her more recent manifestation. Everyone speaks of the distant past. I cannot help but feel that certain parts of this culture are being kept from me. Is that by design?”

The Mo'bad inclined his head slowly, as though unsealing an old chamber within himself. When he spoke, his voice had deepened.

"On the surface, it is simple. But its roots run deep. Long ago, outsiders sought to replace the immortals of the valley with the spirits of their own great ones."

"Their own deities, you mean."

"No," the Mo'bad said gently. "At first, they had no deity, no saints. Only spirits—the spirits of their ancestors."

"And these spirits?"

"They believed such spirits lingered near the bodies of the dead. They honored them… and sought their favor."

Uncle frowned. "But the immortals of the valley were never human. They did not walk the earth. They have no tombs."

A quiet light flared in the Mo'bad's eyes. "Just so. And that difference altered the fate of Hamadan. Is that not the root of your question?"

"It is," Uncle said. "Why did the people of Hamadan not cast them out, as the valley folk did?"

"Because," said the Mo'bad, "the *Viper* devised a new stratagem—one that made the Yemeni spirits and the hero-saints of Hamadan seem as one."

Uncle stared at him. "How could that be done?"

The Mo'bad's gaze lingered on him. "I will tell you."

At that moment, Mashiyaneh appeared at the threshold, brushing dust from her hands. "When you come to the story of the cave," she said, "call me. I would not miss that part."

The Mo'bad smiled faintly. "You shall not."

Then his expression grew grave as he turned back to Uncle. "What I am about to say is for you alone. Not for others—least of all for children."

"I understand."

"Good."

The Mo'bad folded his hands. "Centuries passed after the outsiders were driven from the valley. All who took part in that invasion died. Their kingdoms faded. Their temples fell to dust. What remains are the ruins you have seen."

He paused, letting the silence settle.

"But the force behind their dominion did not vanish."

Uncle's voice dropped to a murmur. "You mean the devices of the immortal *Viper*."

"Yes. As ever—though now in a form more subtle… more enduring."

"What grants her such power?"

The Mo'bad's eyes shone with a steady, inward light. "Because the *Viper* has found a window into the human soul. She knows how opinion ripens into

belief—and belief into miracle. And more than that, she knows this: whoever commands belief… commands the future."

A chill moved through Uncle. "Then the more people bind themselves to the spirits of their ancestors—especially those of her lineage—the stronger her dominion grows."

"Precisely," said the Mo'bad. "Their shrines held no charm for the people of the valley; they were seen as occupiers. But after the conquest of Hamadan—once the *Viper* had fully learned the beliefs of the people of Hamadan—she made her foundation here: the careful blending, the equalizing, of Hamadani faith with that of Yemen."

"And the cave?" Uncle asked.

A shadow of a smile passed over the Mo'bad's face. "A perfect example of her craft—of what men would call her miracles. When you hear the story of the cave, much will become clear to you. Especially if you understand this: the cave itself was never the heart of it. What mattered was the story people carried away."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice lowering.

"For it was in that cave that the first threads of Hamadan's fate were woven. Five souls fled into the darkness of a cave—and when they emerged… they found themselves in another world."

From the doorway, Mashiyaneh's voice came, soft as breath: "And the last of their line vanished."

The Mo'bad bowed his head. "Vanished from the sight of men," he said. "Yet his name endured—and through it, the *Blessed Lineage* was kept alive across the centuries."

By then, lunch was ready. Mashiyaneh entered with quiet composure. "Forgive me," she said. "It is time to eat. We will have the whole afternoon to continue."

The Mo'bad turned to Uncle. "Come, my son. We have covered the heart of it. Before you leave, we can bring the rest to its end."

Though it was still a little early in the season for sitting outdoors, Mashiyaneh had laid the meal on the veranda. Enclosed on two sides, it held the noon warmth like a shallow bowl of light.

She gestured toward the horizon. "I wanted you to see the mountain opposite—and the green of its slopes, with those last patches of snow clinging on."

The Mo'bad followed her gaze. "You are kind," he said. "Blessed are you and Mashiya, to wake to such a sight each day."

Mashiya had just returned. He stood a moment, looking out, as if measuring the mountain against some private memory. "And no two days are ever the same," he said. "Not truly. In spring and autumn least of all."

Mashiyaneh inclined her head, then turned to Uncle. “He has been awake since before dawn,” she said, half in concern, half in quiet reproach. “Not a moment’s rest. I do not know how he means to set out this afternoon—and reach the village by tomorrow.”

“If it is the story you fear will be left unfinished,” the Mo’bad said gently, “set your mind at ease. I will bring it to a fitting place.”

“That is some comfort,” Mashiyaneh said. “Though I would keep him longer if I could… still, it may be better that he leaves sooner.”

“I will carry it only as far as the disappearance,” the Mo’bad said.

Uncle looked up. “The disappearance? Who disappears?”

The Mo’bad’s expression did not change. “That,” he said, “is for another time. Either the Herbad or I will come and tell you.”

Then, after a pause, he added, more quietly, “I am surprised you have not heard of it. In these days, its importance is greater even than before.”

“He did not care for such matters,” Mashiyaneh said. “Not until recently. But in these past years… he has grown curious.”

She looked at Uncle, her eyes intent but not unkind. “And without curiosity, no knowledge is born—is it not so?”

“Just so,” the Mo’bad said. “Give him time. By this hour next year, he will have understood the tale of the disappearance for himself. A year is no small gift for thinking. Still…” He let the thought trail off. “These days, it is on many tongues. But let it rest for now.”

The meal was simple and carefully prepared: fresh bread, still warm from the oven; fish taken from the pond beyond the veranda; eggs, cheese, honey, and an assortment of herbs and fruit whose scents rose faintly in the sun.

The Mo’bad asked once or twice about Hamadan, but Uncle—unlike in years past—kept his answers brief. He had no wish to stir unrest in the old man.

They finished within the hour.

As the dishes were being gathered, Mashiyaneh asked, “My lord—did you speak to him of the cave?”

“Not yet,” the Mo’bad said. “I was about to begin.”

Uncle said nothing. Together they rose and drifted back into the hall, the cool dimness closing around them. The Mobed lingered a moment, drank a mouthful of water, and then spoke.

“The event of the cave,” he said, “is among the most meaningful—and most fateful—in the recent history of Hamadan. In it, one sees clearly the imprint of Yemeni culture upon the order, the beliefs, the very manner of living of its people.”

His voice lowered, as though he were unsealing an old record.

"I will pass over the conquest itself, the capture of Spandar—the ruler's son—and the rest. What concerns us occurred six months before Lady Vajiheh and Spandar were to depart for Hamadan."

He folded his hands.

"It is said that on an auspicious morning, the *Viper* summoned her son, her eldest daughter, her husband, and Princess Vajiheh. She proposed a hunt in a valley not far from the palace. Spandar remained behind, detained by one of the sessions of the 'Transition Committee'—those indefatigable men who, even years after victory, still dispute how best to govern what they have taken."

A faint smile touched his lips. "Committees," he said, "often outlive the empires that give them birth."

He continued.

"They rode out with only a small escort—guards and a handful of attendants. The hunt began in high spirits. Riders scattered across the valley, and soon were so intent on the chase that few marked the slow turning of the sky.

"Near midday, clouds gathered along the ridges—dark and heavy, like ranks of soldiers assembling along the heights. Some among them warned the *Viper* that a storm was coming."

The Mo'bad lifted a hand slightly.

"She paid them no mind. 'It will be over soon,' she said."

A brief pause.

"But instead of turning back, they pressed deeper into the valley—higher along the slopes. The guards followed, unwilling, yet silent. Before long, the light failed. What began as a fine rain thickened, within minutes, into a hard and driving downpour.

"They abandoned the hunt and searched for shelter. At last they found a cave, half-concealed behind great slabs of stone. A massive rock blocked most of the entrance; only a narrow gap remained above it. The hunters climbed over and entered. The others stayed behind.

"Inside, the ground sloped toward a deep hollow. Keeping to its edge, they passed through a tight passage and emerged into a larger cavern—where another hollow lay waiting."

The Mo'bad's voice softened.

"It was as though they stood between two caverns, joined by a throat of stone."

The *Viper's* eldest daughter spoke first, her voice unsteady. "What are we to do?"

"We wait," the *Viper* said. Calmly. "The storm will pass. Until then, we may look further in. When the rain ceases, the others will come."

Outside, however, the storm was only beginning to show its full strength.

Rain fell in sheets, gathering on the mountainside, then breaking loose as torrents. One such surge struck the rock at the cave's mouth and forced its way inside. In a short time, the hollow of the first cavern began to fill.

The hunters withdrew to the passage and watched in silence.

A shallow depression became a pool. The pool darkened, deepened—until it seemed a black well without a bottom. When the water reached the lip of the passage, it spilled through, creeping toward the second cavern.

Vajiheh's voice trembled. "And if this one fills as well?"

The *Viper* did not hesitate.

"It will not," she said.

"But the certainty had gone from her voice.

"The water rose and lapped at their feet. The *Viper* urged them onward—to search the far side of the cave before it climbed any higher. At the end, they found their way barred by a wall of stone. Near its base, a small opening showed—a narrow throat through which a thin thread of water escaped.

"At the sight of it, hope flickered. But the flood pouring in was far greater than that frail passage could ever bear.

"The water climbed—past their ankles, higher still. Before long, their world had shrunk to a narrow ledge of stone. And they were not alone. A small white bird had taken refuge there as well, clinging to the wall, driven in by the storm.

"The *Viper* cast her gaze about her—uneasy now, though not for herself…"

Here Uncle Nowruz raised his hand. "Were not some of them her own children?" he asked. "Did they not share in her immortality?"

"No," said the Mo'bad quietly. "They were born of mortal fathers."

He continued:

"The water reached their knees. There was no path left to them.

"Then—suddenly—something occurred. What later generations would call the "Miracle of the Bird."

"The bird stirred upon its perch and opened one wing. It spread—wider, and wider still—beyond the measure of any living bird, until at last it stretched across the passage like a veil of pale light.

"The torrent struck it—and recoiled.

"Only a thin spill of water slipped past along the edges. Behind that single trembling wing, the flood churned and twisted in upon itself, but could go no farther.

"The hunters, stranded upon that narrow ledge, stared in silence. They could not understand what they were seeing—how such a fragile creature could withstand the fury of the mountain.

"And yet… that small bird had become their only hope."

The Mo'bad fell silent and looked from Uncle to Mashiyaneh. "The tale goes on," he said at last, "but for now, let it rest here."

A deep, listening silence settled over the hall.

Uncle Nowruz lowered his gaze. He was not only struck with wonder, but with something nearer recognition—as though a half-forgotten thought had stirred within him. After a time, he said, "You once told me the miracle itself was not the most important thing. What did you mean?"

A faint smile touched the Mo'bad's face. "I meant the story that was made of it," he said. "The shape it took in the minds of men—their beliefs, their thoughts, their knowing."

Mashiayneh poured the tea, her movements unhurried. "That is why," she said, "they have always said: events pass, but stories remain."

And in the years that followed, the learned would say: belief does not begin with command, nor with instruction. It begins in those moments that stir the imagination. An event becomes a story; a story, told and retold, becomes a wonder; and a wonder, once believed, takes on the form of a miracle—a miracle that gathers such power that even rulers bow before it.

This was the *Viper's* secret.

And at that time, no one else knew it.

The Mo'bad turned to Uncle. "You see, my son—miracles are not born in palaces."

He spoke more softly now. "They are shaped in the speech of shepherds, merchants, and ordinary people. The unknowing cherish wonder more readily than truth—and they give it life."

Mashiyaneh inclined her head. "And it is through such changes—the shifting of names, the weaving of new stories—that the world is altered, little by little."

Uncle frowned slightly, thinking. "I have heard the saying, 'The *Viper* has been here,' many times," he said. "But I never stopped to ask what it meant."

Mashiyaneh glanced at him. "It means," she said, "that this is how faith comes into being."

The Mo'bad nodded. "What happened in that cave was not merely the saving of five hunters. It was the planting of a story—one that traveled from village to village, until it took root in the hearts of the people."

"And in time," he went on, "those five came to be called the "Five of the Cave," and their descendants the "Blessed Line."

Then, after a pause, more quietly: "Yet on that very day, the hunters themselves knew nothing of what they would become. They knew only this—that in that moment, their lives hung upon the wing of a bird."

Uncle looked up. "Did it truly happen?"

The Mo'ba'd regarded him steadily. "For the people of that time," he said, "such a thing was not beyond belief. Their forebears, too, once thought the sun and the moon were fastened to the sky."

He let the words linger, then added, "And perhaps—even now—some have not entirely let go of such imaginings."

Uncle hesitated. "And those who remained outside?"

The Mo'bad's gaze grew distant. "It was said," he replied, "that the water, driven back by the bird's wing, turned within the cave and poured outward again. And it was also said… that when the rain had passed, no one came out of the cave."

When the news reached Spandar, he did not delegate it. He went himself.

The ground around the cave still trembled with the memory of the flood. Mud clung to the rocks; the air smelled of damp stone and uprooted earth. Voices overlapped—fear, speculation, fragments of what had been seen and what had only been imagined. Spandar said nothing at first. He walked the perimeter, eyes narrowed, taking in the churned ground, the slick stone, the dark mouth of the cave.

He listened to the servants who had witnessed the torrent—each account breathless, each detail slightly at odds with the next. When they had finished, he stood for a long while in silence.

At last, he spoke, more to the scene than to the men around him. "No living creature could have survived this. The cave must have filled to its very ceiling. Whatever was within it would have been dragged inward by the force of the flood."

The judgment settled heavily. It was the kind that closed doors.

He dispatched an attendant to carry the news back to the palace. Then, with a handful of royal guards, he began a more methodical search—circling outward, testing the rock face, tracing cracks and shadows where a hidden passage might lie. They climbed, scraped their hands raw, peered into narrow fissures where only darkness answered.

Nothing.

At length, Spandar drew a breath, slow and controlled, and turned away. The search was over. He returned to the palace with the same restraint with which he had arrived.

The Mo'bad's voice lowered.

"For several days, the court sank into mourning. The 'Viper'—whom many had come to think of as deathless—had vanished, and with her those bound to the future of Hamadan: the heir, her children, her son-in-law. There were whispers that without her, the kingdom itself might begin to loosen at its seams."

Uncle leaned forward, astonishment plain on his face.

"Was there no clear account of her? Her appearance—her voice?"

The Mo'bad inclined his head slightly, "Those who claim to have heard her agree on one thing: her voice was quiet. Not weak—never that—but tempered, almost gentle. She did not press; she drew. And when the conversation ended, one often found—too late—that one had yielded to things never intended."

He paused, as if weighing the memory of a woman he had never seen.

"As for her gaze…" A faint breath of a smile. "Some called it beautiful. Others found it unbearable. But all say the same: when she looked at you, it was as though she listened—not to your words, but to the thoughts you had not yet dared to shape."

Uncle said nothing.

The Mo'bad continued, more thoughtfully now: "These are striking qualities. But if you ask me, they were not her greatest strength. That was her patience. A kingly patience. She did not hurry. For her, time was not something to endure—it was something to use. She favored designs that ripened slowly, over years… over generations."

Silence gathered for a moment before he went on.

"Grief spread across the land. Yet grief, where imagination is fertile, does not long remain unchallenged. Within days, a different story began to move through the people: that those five had not perished in the flooded cave, but had been sheltered—saved—by a small bird, which spread its wings against the waters and led them out through hidden ways known only to the sky."

The Mo'bad opened his hands slightly, as if releasing the thought into the room.

"At first, the tale was dismissed. Absurd. Childish. But people do not love explanations—they endure them. What they love is wonder. And so, little by little, doubt gave way. The story hardened. A miracle had taken place. And grief…" He exhaled softly. "Grief gave way to joy almost overnight."

Uncle frowned.

"And Spandar?"

A faint, knowing smile touched the Mo'bad's lips. "He doubted it—of course he did. Any thinking man would. But he was also a ruler. And rulers learn, sooner or later, that belief moves men more readily than truth ever can."

He glanced at Uncle.

"So he did what rulers do. He allowed the story to stand. He lent it his voice. The royal family had been saved—so it was said—by a blessed creature."

A brief pause.

"And yet," he added, "those who claimed to have witnessed the miracle could never agree on what they had seen."

Uncle let out a quiet breath.

"Then answer me this: was it a miracle? Or was it… shaped into one? Did the *Viper*, perhaps, recast failure into legend—to steady the faith of the Yemenis? After all, only a handful were there. Yet in time, thousands spoke of it as though they themselves had stood at the cave's mouth."

The Mo'bad's expression did not change.

"By then," he said, "it no longer mattered."

He leaned back slightly. "One said the bird's right wing held back the flood. Another swore it was the left. Some claimed both wings spread like a curtain across the passage. Others insisted its tail sealed the mouth of the cave. There were those who spoke of larger birds—or many birds. And the skeptics…" A faint shrug. "The skeptics spoke only of a cave, and bats."

Mashiyaneh, who had been silent until now, smiled faintly. "So which is it?"

The Mo'bad looked at her with quiet patience. "You always return to that question. It was what it was. And it remains what it is: a mystery that does not yield."

He leaned forward, his voice softening, but gaining weight.

"This is the way of such things. Some insist the story is told exactly as it occurred. Others are certain that parts have been lost, or altered. Who among us can judge between them?"

His gaze moved between them.

"But understand this: the truth of the event was never the point. What endured was the faith it awakened—and the image it fixed of the *Viper* in the minds of the people."

He paused, then continued more quietly: "No one knows how she truly spoke. Or how she truly was. But what befell Hamadan—and how its people answered it—that is known. After that day, the spirit of Hamadan turned, slowly but unmistakably, toward Yemen. And in time, they were no longer called as they had been before, but by another name: the Yamadanies."

Uncle shifted, troubled. "This… resembles what you told us of our ancestors. The nails of the sky…"

Mashiya's expression sharpened at once. "No," he said, his voice firm but not raised. "There is no resemblance."

He held Uncle's gaze.

"Those ancestors built something that upheld justice—something that guarded the dignity of human beings. But those who were 'saved' by the bird…" A slight shake of his head. "They remade Hamadan into the very thing that unsettles you now."

Uncle's brow tightened. "And that—" he said slowly, "that is what I am waiting to understand."

The Mo'bad inclined his head.

"We will come to it."

A brief silence followed, heavier now.

"For the moment," he said, "it is enough to know this: those who stood behind the boulder and saw the violence of the waters… agreed on one thing."

Mashiya lifted hir head slightly. "In what?"

"In this," the Mo'bad said, "that a blessed bird saved the royal family."

A faint pause settled between his words. "And that," he added, "is the difference between our ancestors and them: the nails that held the sun and the moon were never called sacred."

He let that linger, then continued, his tone returning to its steady cadence.

"But the story moves on. The plan for Vajiheh and Spandar's journey to Hamadan did not change—only its shape. Spandar remained behind, and Vajiheh's husband went in his place. The matter of the cave had already found its way into the deliberations of the Committee of Transition, and it was decided that Spandar's presence was required in Yemen."

He folded his hands loosely. "The Yemeni scholars, guided—as always—by the thought of the *Viper*, came to a conclusion: miracles are rare. But when they

occur, they are not without meaning. Wonder, by itself, is nothing. It becomes a miracle only when it delivers."

Uncle frowned slightly. "I'm not sure I follow. What is the connection between wonder and miracle?"

The Mo'bad inclined his head, as if acknowledging the difficulty.

"That is precisely the question they wished to raise. If those five were spared by the will of heaven, then the question is not how—but why. What is required of them in return? What burden do they carry? And how are they to stand between the people and God?"

Uncle let out a soft, doubtful laugh. "And you don't think this sounds like something the *Viper* herself would devise?"

Before the Mo'bad could answer, Mashiyaneh, already at the threshold, spoke without turning.

"Perhaps it is," she said. "But if you want to understand the *Viper's* power, don't begin with her words. Find what feeds them. When you reach the source, the larger riddle will begin to loosen."

She was gone before anyone replied. The Mo'bad's gaze lingered on the doorway for a moment, then returned.

"In the midst of these arguments," he said, "another event intervened. The Viper's eldest daughter died."

The air seemed to tighten.

"The news did more than revive the memory of the cave. It forced the Committee to confront something new—something that touched the structure of belief itself."

His voice lowered.

"For the first time, the Yemenis—taking their cue from the hero-saints of Hamadan—drew a line between the spirits of ordinary ancestors and those set apart as sacred. The *Viper's* daughter became the first to cross that line."

A brief pause.

"They called her the "First Blessed."

He spoke the title without emphasis, which gave it weight.

"A great stone was set upon her grave. Around it, a shrine was raised—large, deliberate, unmistakable. The land surrounding it was declared holy."

Uncle shifted, half-rising, unsettled.

"This is not new," he said. "It echoes what you told us of the valley. It sounds very much like that stone Mashiya described this morning—the one I sat beside."

The Mo'bad shook his head slowly.

"It resembles it," he said. "But resemblance is not meaning. The spirit beneath the valley stone belonged to a named ancestor—a figure remembered. But here…" He gestured faintly. "Here, sanctity was made."

He held Uncle's gaze.

"Until that moment, the Yemenis had no sacred ancestors. Now, they had their first."

He continued without haste.

"Less than ten years passed before word arrived that the *Viper's* son—one of the five—had died. He too was laid beneath a great stone. A smaller shrine was built above him. He became the "Second Blessed."

A faint rhythm entered his voice, as though reciting something already set into memory.

"At first, the people would visit the "First Blessed" on Fridays. Then they would walk—no more than a mile—to the "Second." Only after that did they go on to the graves of their older dead."

He lowered his voice again.

"And so, gradually, the ancient Yemeni ancestors receded. Not erased—but diminished. Their place taken, step by step, by the newly sanctified."

A pause.

"Then came the next movement. This belief was no longer to remain confined. It was to be carried outward. Spandar was given that task."

Uncle's brow tightened. "And Hamadan? How did they receive it?"

The Mo'bad gave a faint, almost weary smile. "The Mo'bads expected restraint. They expected continuity—respect for the immortals the old hero-saints."

A slight shake of his head.

"But Spandar did not hesitate."

His voice sharpened, just a degree.

"He carried out the *Viper's* reforms without delay. Graves replaced the Towers of Silence. Inscriptions were no longer written in the old script, but in the Yemeni hand. Shrines rose—one after another—across the land, and new holidays."

He paused, then added:

"When Vajiheh herself died, her tomb in Hamadan rivaled the greatest shrines of Yemen. And before long, the Yamadanies would go to her first—before turning to their own ancestors."

He turned fully toward Uncle.

"The old Hamadani order was distant. Abstract. It asked for imagination where there was little to sustain it. The *Viper* understood this."

"But they were only human," Uncle insisted. "Those five."

The Mo'bad's expression did not shift.

"Yes," he said. "Human. But humans who faced death… vanished… and returned marked by something no one could quite name."

He let the silence settle.

"No old theology can compete with a story like that."

He continued more quietly:

"The change did not come all at once—but it came. The Committee saw to it that the children of Hamadan were raised within this new frame. Those who resisted learned to bend—or were pushed aside. In time, the descendants of the cave survivors came to be known as the "Blessed Lineage." Their influence spread—quietly at first, then everywhere."

Uncle's voice dropped.

"And without a heavenly intermediary… how did people reach them?"

The Mo'bad smiled, though there was little warmth in it.

"That question," he said, "was left—like many others—to time. And to interpretation."

He clasped his hands behind his back.

"The *Viper* has never been overly concerned with method. Only with outcome."

A faint pause.

"In time, it was said that the five appeared in dreams. In visions. That they guided the faithful while they slept."

He looked at Uncle.

"It is enough to say that many who became Yamadanies did so not in the daylight—but in their dreams."

"And Spandar?" Uncle asked.

The Mo'bad's smile thinned.

"He is absent from those dreams," he said. "As absent as the bird."

Uncle leaned forward, intent now.

"Is that what Mashiyaneh meant—when she spoke of 'disappearance'?"

The Mo'bad rose slowly to his feet.

"No," he said. "Not that."

A small pause.

"But it is not unrelated."

He adjusted his robe, as though closing the matter for now.

"We will come to it. Not yet."

He inclined his head, the gesture both courteous and final.

"Think on what you've heard."

Then, more softly:

"Safe travels. And may your *Chaharshanbe Suri* be blessed."

He turned slightly toward the doorway.

"Give my greetings to the village," he added. "Especially to the children."

As Uncle made ready to depart, word came that the Herbad was passing nearby with an extra horse and had offered it for his use. When the moment arrived,

they tightened the straps, secured the bundles, and set out beneath the pale, watchful light of the moon.

For a time, they rode without speaking. The land lay hushed around them, and the slow rhythm of hooves seemed to settle into the silence rather than disturb it.

At last, Uncle said, "I spent most of today in the presence of the Mo'bad."

The Herbad turned his head slightly.

"And what did you speak of?"

"Many things," Uncle said. "Most of them unfamiliar to me." A brief pause. "He told me that after the *Viper* conquered Hamadan, the Yemenis began to call it 'Yamadan.' Why?"

A faint smile touched the Herbad's face, though his eyes remained on the road ahead.

"Because from the beginning," he said, "human beings have lived under two kinds of gravity. Some are drawn toward justice and life… others toward

dominion and gain. The sun, the air, the waters of the earth—they belong equally to all. But it is the direction of one's pull that shapes where one finally comes to rest."

Uncle absorbed this in silence, though a trace of unease lingered in his expression. Then, as if unwilling to dwell there, he shifted.

"The Mo'bad also spoke of the worship of ancestors…"

The Herbad gave a small nod.

"He would," he said. "In such matters, he is difficult to fault. More often than not, ancestor worship belongs to those who lack clarity of sight. Their desires open a door—and through it, the dead enter. Sometimes they lead toward what is noble. Just as often, toward decay."

Uncle let out a quiet laugh.

"I had thought I would never make sense of the Mo'bad's words."

The Herbad tilted his head back, glancing up at the full moon.

"Perhaps it is the moon's doing," he said lightly. "It has a way of turning men into philosophers."

They rode on.

After a while, Uncle spoke again, more slowly now.

"Why is it that the people of Hamadan—once they understood the *Viper's* deception—did not return, as the people of the valley did, to their old ways?"

The Herbad shook his head, not sharply, but with a kind of settled certainty.

"Because in Hamadan, the *Viper* did not merely pass through," he said. "She entered more deeply—and struck more deliberately. The "Five of the Cave" was not an accident. Through them, she reached into the inner grain of the people."

A pause.

"And once that happens, something changes. A new generation is born—not merely by blood, but by belief. The Yamadanies. Hamadanis who no longer stand between two worlds, but belong entirely to the new one."

His voice grew quieter.

"What she did in the valley was shallow. What she did in Hamadan… was not."

Uncle drew a breath. "Then the sacred order of old Hamadan slowly gave way to the Blessed of Yemen—is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," the Herbad said. "That is what happened. And with time, the knowledge of the ancient path dimmed."

"And the 'Blessed Lineage'?" Uncle asked.

"The *Viper* set them apart," the Herbad said. "Sanctified them. Shrines were raised for them—first in Yemen, then in Hamadan. Generation after generation."

He glanced briefly toward Uncle.

"What remained of the old ways did not vanish entirely. But it withdrew. Into exile… or into silence."

Uncle's gaze drifted along the road, silvered by moonlight. "Do you think the *Viper* will return?"

The Herbad answered at once. "She has not gone anywhere."

A slight pause followed. "Her design does not require her presence. What she set in motion continues without her."

He looked ahead, his voice steady. "The vision of her new Yemen demands more than rule. It demands erasure—the complete unmaking of Hamadan's older inheritance. And beyond that…" He exhaled softly. "She does not seek Hamadan alone. Nor the valley. She seeks the world—to refashion it so that all things, and all people, bow before the "Five of the Cave"… and that "Blessed Lineage."

By then, they had reached Uncle's house. The horses slowed, then came to a halt.

The Herbad dismounted first. Together, they worked in silence, loosening straps, lowering bundles, setting each piece carefully upon the ground. When the last of it was done, the Herbad gave a brief nod, then turned and rode off, his figure soon swallowed by the dark.

Uncle did not move.

He stood for a long while in the moonlight, the quiet pressing gently around him.

In his mind, another future began to form—uncertain, fragile, but persistent. A future in which a man like the Herbad, a smith by trade, might yet help the Yamadanies recover what had been lost to them.

After a time, the Mo'bad's tale returned to him—not as argument, but as something simpler. A story meant for children.

He lowered his voice, almost to a whisper. "Once upon a time… in the distant land of Yemen, there stood a mountain, very high…"

A pause.

"And at the summit of that mountain… there was a cave."

Two days remained until *Chaharshanbe Suri*. Uncle was making ready for his yearly journey to the mill, where he would visit Mashiyaneh and Mashiya. Yet this morning, unlike all the others, he could not begin with his customary cup of warm water. The wells had gone bad. Their water had darkened, taken on a sour stench, thickened with a sluggish sediment that clung to the bucket's rim. It had been so for days—long enough to unsettle—but no one in the village seemed willing to give it a name.

He dressed as he always did, methodically, as if routine might steady the unease. He checked his small bundle, tightened its knot, and stepped out into the pale hour before sunrise.

His plan was simple: to stop at the clear spring beyond the great rock, drink deeply, eat his modest meal in the shade of the large rock, and, if the valley's dust allowed, rest a moment and take in the distant outline of the mill—and beyond it, the faint, wavering shape of Hamadan.

At the mountain's foot—the very place where children would gather to watch him climb—he saw it: a dark shape against the stone. At first it seemed like an animal, crouched and still. But as he drew nearer, it resolved into a man.

An old peasant sat upon the rock, one hand raised in quiet greeting.

Uncle slowed, then climbed toward him.

"You're up early," the man said, his voice warm, as though continuing a conversation already begun. He motioned to the stone beside him. "What news?"

"Little enough," Uncle replied, though his gaze lingered, searching the man's face. There was nothing familiar in it. "You're not from here. If you were, I'd know you. I know nearly everyone in these parts."

The old man smiled, untroubled. "You're right. I've come from far off."

The hour made the meeting feel out of joint. Now and then, villagers went out before dawn for firewood—but this man bore none of their haste or purpose. He sat as though he had always been there.

"What brings you this way?" Uncle asked.

"I farm," the old man said. "Or I did. These days, I wander more than I till. I have a taste for poetry, you see. When the fields sleep, I go from valley to valley and speak with people."

"Speak with them—how?"

"I listen," he said simply. "I ask, I answer. A life tells itself in fragments. If you gather enough of them, you begin to see your own more clearly."

Uncle considered this. "And what kind of tales do you gather?"

"Old ones," the man said, and something in his eyes sharpened. "The older, the better. I look for those I haven't heard yet. There are not many left."

Uncle gave a short laugh. "Then we may suit each other. I know a fair number of such stories—most from the old days. A few more recent ones, too."

The old man leaned forward, pleased. "Then I've met you at the right hour."

"Perhaps." Uncle shifted slightly, glancing uphill. "Though I'd trade stories for clean water just now. Our wells have turned against us—muddy, foul, thick with rot. I meant to drink from the spring up there before I went on."

The old man followed his gaze, then lifted a hand and pointed along the slope.

"That spring? There's no water there."

Uncle frowned. “No water?”

“I came down from that side not long ago,” the old man said. “There’s nothing left but a dry channel.”

A chill passed through Uncle, quick and unwelcome. Without meaning to, he thought of the old tale—the valley, the coming of the *Viper*.

“A spring doesn’t vanish overnight,” he said. “What could empty it?”

The old man’s shoulders rose in a slight shrug. “Anything. A shift in the earth. A long thirst. Drought, if you prefer a simpler word.”

“Perhaps,” Uncle said, though the word sat uneasily with him. “Still… it’s a strange thing.”

The old man slipped down from the rock and stretched, as though setting his limbs back into motion.

“I saw another spring on my way here,” he said. “It lies a little off your road. Not far, if you don’t mind the turn. I can take you.”

Uncle hesitated only a moment. “I’d be grateful. And along the way, you can tell me your stories. There’s a question I’ve been carrying—perhaps you’ll have an answer for it.”

The old man smiled, amused. “That’s a change. I’m usually the one asking. What is it?”

“I’ll tell you as we walk.”

The man turned at once and set off along a narrow path—one Uncle had never taken, leading away from the mill.

Uncle followed, then called after him, “You said you came from the spring. This path runs the other way.”

“I know,” the old man said without turning. “I followed the dry stream up to its source—there, above. That’s how I knew you’d find nothing.”

They walked in silence for a time. The ground shifted underfoot, the slope easing, the air thinning into a pale, wind-brushed stillness.

After a while, the old man spoke again. "Tell me about yourself. You live in that village below?"

"I do," Uncle said. "I teach there. And beyond this mountain, in the next valley, I have kin. I go to them each year at this time."

"And the stories you carry—are they theirs?"

"Most of them…" He paused, then amended, more firmly, "All of them."

"Would they speak to me as well, do you think?"

"Perhaps."

The path narrowed through a thinning stand of trees. Branches gave way to open sky, and before long the forest fell behind them entirely, replaced by a wide, bare stretch of land where the wind moved freely.

Uncle broke the silence. "Do you know the tale of the demon—the *Viper*—that fell upon the valley I'm bound for?"

"The one they fed each morning?" the old man said. "Two youths' brains, carried up at dawn?"

Uncle nodded slowly. "Yes. Though it wasn't as simple as that. There was a woman at the heart of it."

The old man glanced at him. "A woman? I hadn't heard that part."

"Nor had I, until recently."

"From your kin in the valley?"

"Yes."

"And the blacksmith?" the old man asked.

"They spoke of him too," Uncle said. "And of the *Viper's* reach as far as Hamadan." He gave a faint, humorless breath. "Though Hamadan, it seems, had no blacksmith when it needed one."

The old man said nothing to that. Instead, he lifted his hand and pointed ahead.

In the distance stood a single tree, its shape stark against the open land.

"There," he said. "We've arrived."

Beneath the tree lay a small pool, clear as polished glass, so limpid that one could count the pebbles at its deepest point. Uncle knelt and drank. The water was cool, clean—but when he rose and lifted his gaze to the sky, he felt something lacking. That flicker that would sometimes stir in him after drinking from a spring—something like a quiet inspiration—was absent here. He wondered whether it belonged to the place, or to the company.

The old man settled beneath the tree, stretching out his legs. "Age," he said lightly, as though explaining the stiffness in his limbs. Then, after a pause: "And your question—was it about the *Viper*?"

"I'm not certain," Uncle said. "They told me it had more to do with a 'disappearance.'"

"By 'they,' you mean your kin in the valley?"

"Yes. Do you know anything of this 'disappearance'?"

The old man inclined his head. "Of course. It took place long after the valley was freed—but before the coming of the Lawgiver—"

Uncle cut in, frowning. "No. This disappearance came after the assault on Hamadan."

The old man's expression tightened. "That cannot be. The disappearance preceded the Lawgiver. In fact, the ruler who vanished was the one who foretold the coming of the Lawgiver."

"There have been many lawgivers," Uncle said. "Perhaps if you tell what you know, and I what I've heard, we might bring the matter into the light."

"A fair bargain," the old man said. "And perhaps you'll carry a new story back to your kin."

"I doubt it," Uncle replied. "They know every story—or so they believe. Last time, I didn't hear the end of this one. They left the finding of it to me."

"And did you find it?"

"I've tried," Uncle said. "But I'm still in the dark. I thought perhaps you might offer a clue."

"Then listen," the old man said. He shifted slightly, his tone taking on the cadence of a teller. "You know the tale of the dragon, and of the blacksmith—but there is another figure: the Lord of the Valley."

Uncle shook his head. "I've heard nothing of him."

"And yet you say you know the dragon's tale."

"I do."

"Then hear the rest. The Lord of the Valley was the force behind the blacksmith. It was he, in truth, who brought down the dragon's rule. He had three sons, and in the last years of his reign he divided his lands among them. The one who vanished was his great-grandson."

"How did he vanish?" Uncle asked.

"That is a tale of its own," the old man said. "But in brief: when he came to believe the world had nothing left to offer him, he abandoned it."

He paused, then added, almost philosophically, "He concluded that life itself—with all its rises and falls—might erode the purity of his being."

Uncle smiled faintly. "You speak much like my friend, the Herbad. I would have liked to see the two of you in debate."

Then, more quietly: "Did anyone vanish with him?"

"No," the old man said, firm. "Only he possessed the qualities required for such a departure."

Uncle hesitated. “Your account leaves much unsaid. For instance—you’ve said nothing of the ‘Blessed Bird.’”

The old man blinked. “What ‘Blessed Bird’?”

“The one who saved the ‘Five of the Cave,’” Uncle said. “And what of the ‘Blessed Lineage’?”

The old man stared at him, caught off guard. “What are these things you’re speaking of?”

“You’ve never heard of the ‘Blessed Bird’?” Uncle asked gently.

“Never,” the old man said, a sharp edge entering his voice. “What has a bird to do with disappearance?”

Uncle met his gaze steadily. “There’s no need for offense. I listened to your story with respect. It would be fitting if you heard mine before passing judgment.”

For a moment, the old man said nothing. Then he rose, went to the pool, drank his fill, and returned. He crouched before Uncle.

“I’m listening.”

Uncle chose his words carefully. “It seems we are speaking of two different accounts of the same event. The one I’ve heard begins with a miracle, in a cave in Yemen, and appears to have no link to the Lord of the Valley or his sons.”

The old man’s brow furrowed, but he did not interrupt.

“Five people—three women and two men—were trapped in a cave by a sudden flood. They would have died was it not for the miracle of a small bird. From that day the bird was called the ‘Blessed Bird’—a messenger from above. And the five became renowned as the ‘Five of the Cave.’ After each of their deaths, a shrine was raised in their honor. The one who vanished was the last of their line—the final remnant of that ‘Blessed Lineage.’”

The old man watched him in silence. “That’s all?”

“That’s all I’ve heard,” Uncle said. “Perhaps the rest will be told when I reach the mill.”

A shadow passed over the old man’s face. “So these are the stories your family tells?”

“They consider them history,” Uncle said carefully. “Though they may resemble tales more than truth.”

“And you teach these things to children?”

“I do not teach them,” Uncle said quietly. “Nor should I. I only acquaint them with the stories.”

The old man shook his head. “My son, do not cloud children’s minds with tales of caves and blessed birds. Teach them the truth.”

He fell silent for a moment, then muttered, almost to himself, “I should have stopped you the moment you spoke of miracles. But we had an understanding—and in our custom, a pledge is not broken.”

He lifted a hand and pointed toward a distant opening between two mountains. “Do you see that valley? Take the path that runs through it, and you will come again to the great rock. Before you go, fill your vessel. Take water with you.”

Then he turned away, his voice softening. “I will not visit your kin. There are disputes I have never allowed into my life. Still—it was good to meet you.”

Without another word, he set off—away from the spring, away from the tree.

Uncle watched him go.

The old man’s figure grew smaller in the pale light of the open land, fading into the thin brightness of the desert—until, without sound or trace, he was gone.

The chamber within the mill had not been shaped by craftsmen’s hands, but by the quiet compulsions of life itself. Rough-hewn trunks stood shoulder to shoulder, their bark still clinging like memories unwilling to loosen their hold. From the center of the floor rose a great stone, and upon it the mill was set—ancient, unyielding, patient—as though it had listened to the passing of generations and kept each one within its silence.

There was no ornament in the room. In one corner, a low brazier breathed a steady heat, a kettle murmuring atop its embers. Beyond, in a smaller recess, the millstone turned with a subdued, unceasing rhythm, grinding grain into dust.

At the far end sat the ancient family.

Uncle Nowruz had only just arrived; the dust of the road still clung to the hem of his garment. Across from him sat the Mo’bad, the weight of memory settled

upon his brow like an old, familiar burden. Beside him were Mashia and Mashiyaneh, listening not only to what was spoken, but to what moved beneath speech. And the Herbad, guardian of knowledge, leaned upon his staff of almond wood, worn smooth by years of thought and handling.

For a while, no one spoke.

At last, Uncle Nowruz cleared his throat.

"On my way here," he said quietly, "I came upon an old man—a teller of tales. He spoke as though he had once sat beside Ferdowsi himself, in the days when the *Shahnameh* was still being breathed into verse."

The Herbad lifted his head at once. "A dangerous likeness," he said. "Ferdowsi does not admit of equals."

"True," Uncle said. "And yet… the man carried something of that same gravity. He spoke of Hamadan as though it still stood at the heart of the old world—a seat of kings and champions, whose passing marked the earth like constellations."

Mashiya inclined his head slightly. "Why should that astonish you? Hamadan has always been a cradle for what endures."

Uncle nodded, then continued. "But when his tale turned toward later times—to those who broke the old order—his voice changed. It was as if nothing had ever been written of those years."

The Mo'bad folded his hands together. "Such is the way of true narrators. The keeper of a flame does not dwell on the wind that would snuff it out."

Mashiyaneh studied Uncle's face. "My son—what, in his words, unsettled you?"

Uncle leaned forward, his voice lowering. "He spoke of this place—of your valley. But his telling did not accord with yours, Mo'bad. In his account, the lineage that vanished before the coming of the Lawgiver was not of the *Viper's* blood—but of another house entirely."

The kettle gave a soft, restless hiss.

The Herbad's gaze sharpened. "Did you ask him who it was that vanished?"

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

Uncle hesitated. "He did not answer at once. He paused—as though even he was unsure, if only for a moment."

Mashiya's voice was low. "That is no small thing."

The Mo'bad spoke with quiet gravity. "Our people remember being cast out from our first dwelling. The mind behind that exile was the cunning of the *Viper*."

At the sound of the name, the air seemed to draw inward, as though tightening upon itself.

Mashiyaneh added, with care, "She came in the form of a woman—of a beauty beyond what the mind can easily hold."

"So the elders have said," the Mo'bad replied. "She entered the valley like a blessing—and turned it, soon enough, into a battleground of souls."

The Herbad's staff struck the ground, sharp and final. "And she was brought down."

Mashiya's voice followed, steady as stone. "By the blacksmith—and by the Lord of the Valley."

Uncle inclined his head. "The old man did not dispute any of this. But he said nothing of her form. And when I asked about her lineage—he fell silent once more."

Mashiyaneh leaned closer. "Silent—as in refusal?"

"No," Uncle said. "Not refusal. Restraint. He would not name."

A breath escaped the Herbad, sudden and quiet. "Ah."

Mashiya turned to him. "You see something we do not?"

A faint, knowing smile touched the Herbad's lips. "Turn to the *Shahnameh*. When Zahhak rules, serpents upon his shoulders, the poet does not linger over the full breadth of his power. He passes swiftly to Kaveh the blacksmith—to the rising—and it is there that his voice dwells."

Uncle frowned slightly. "And that tells us… what?"

"That the form of the tyrant is of little consequence," the Herbad said. "What matters is the force that animates it. The *Viper's* shape—her womanhood—is no more than a veil."

The Mo'bad inclined his head in agreement. "A tyrant endures in memory only insofar as he clears the path for truth."

Mashiyaneh spoke softly. "The old man understood this. He chose his silence with care."

Uncle looked from one face to another. "Then speak plainly to me. What is it I am meant to see?"

Mashiya answered, "The *Viper's* strength has never been in her violence alone—it lies in her power to draw all attention toward herself."

The Mo'bad added, "To dwell endlessly on falsehood is to feed it—to grant it weight—until, in time, it begins to pass for truth."

The Herbad's eyes caught the firelight. "Every storyteller knows this: what is most often spoken becomes most enduring."

"And so," Mashiyaneh said, almost to herself, "the wise, more often than not, choose silence."

A long stillness settled over the chamber. Even the millstone seemed, for a moment, to recede into the background of things.

At last, Uncle drew a slow breath.

"Then you believe…" he said, his voice quiet but steady, "…that the old man knew."

The Mo'bad said, "Yes. He saw the *Viper's* hand in that confusion—and chose not to give her stratagems a wider tongue. Let me show you."

He lifted his hand toward the *Haft-Seen* Mashiyaneh had arranged.

"Look closely."

All eyes turned. Before them lay the seven modest offerings of the New Year, set in quiet order.

"From the beginning," the Mo'bad went on, his voice low but steady, "the *Viper* and those who follow her have sought to weaken the undying force of Nowruz—not through destruction, but by hollowing out these symbols, emptying them of what they carry."

Uncle leaned forward, studying them. "They seem… ordinary. Simple foods."

A faint smile passed over the Mo'bad's face. "Just so. And that is why they endure. Their strength lies in renewal. Each one points beyond itself—to a deeper truth—and calls for that truth to be made living again."

He gestured toward the *seer*—the garlic—at the center of the spread.

"This garlic is not only a sign of healing. It speaks of the first principle: the encompassing sky, and the guardianship of *Ahura Mazda* against what would undo creation."

Uncle's gaze sharpened. "Then each holds an older name beneath it?"

"And an older act," the Herbad said quietly.

The Mo'bad inclined his head. "It has long been said: *somaq* (sumac) reflects right thought and the life-giving waters. The *sib* (apple) recalls the earth—and the humility that sustains it."

Mashiyaneh added, "*Sabzeh*—the greens—remind us of the order of truth that keeps the fields alive."

"And *samanu* (wheat pudding)," the Mo'bad continued, "speaks of the force that builds and nourishes civilization. *Senjed* (oleaster fruit) recalls the striving toward wholeness—toward health."

Mashiya's voice came soft, almost like an echo. "And *serekh* (vinegar) remains—the sign of endurance, and of the final aim of creation."

Silence gathered in the room, deep and unbroken.

The Mo'bad spoke again, more gravely now. "It is this very heart of Nowruz that has suffered most from the *Viper's* touch. For she does not contend in the open. She works through substitution—small, deliberate, almost unseen—making use of carelessness, of forgetfulness."

Uncle said, "Few remember any of this."

"Just so," the Mo'bad replied. "Because the symbols have been reduced to a single letter—the letter 'S.' And yet that letter once came from *Spenta*—the living force that sustains the world. Now it is said that anything beginning with that sound—a coin, a stone, a samovar—may take the place of any of those. And so,

without knowing it, the unwary trades the essential for the trivial… and begins to unmake a culture—his own."

He leaned forward slightly, his voice firming.

"Teach your students the depth of what they inherit. Tell them: each thing must stand upon its true meaning. If there is no garlic, let them plant it. If sumac is scarce, let them seek it. But let them never replace truth for the sake of ease."

The Herbad, who had been still, now spoke.

"In short, the old man did not take up arms against the *Viper* with words. He turned the *Viper's* own method upon her. This is the golden rule of memory."

Mashiyaneh inclined her head. "To overcome falsehood, do not give it wings. Guard what is true."

Outside, the wind shifted. The mill wheel answered with a low, drawn-out groan.

Uncle Nowruz spoke slowly. "Then… the disappearance—"

"The last of the *Viper's* line vanished long ago," the Mo'bad said. "But her followers did not. They remain. They bend what is true, and wait—for her return."

Mashiya added, "And the 'Five of the Cave'—her kin, her companions—were, in later memory, raised to sanctity, and so continued her path under another name."

"Now you see," the Herbad said, "how the *Viper* overturns all things—how she drapes her shadow in the garments of the sacred."

Mashiyaneh said, "And that old man refused to strengthen the illusion by repeating her name."

Understanding came to Uncle Nowruz slowly, like light rising at the edge of dawn. He saw, then, that each of his companions held a portion of something greater—memory, meaning, teaching, lived knowing. And perhaps that was why he had been brought among them: to carry these fragments forward, into another spring.

For a fleeting moment, the room seemed to brighten.

"So," he said at last, "the old man did not speak in harshness. He was teaching. He entrusted me with something."

"Yes," said the Mo'bad.

Mashiya added, "As a teacher, you must learn what to bring into the light—and what to leave in shadow. Remember this: the herald of spring does not recount the victories of winter."

Outside, the stream went on turning the millstone, steady and unhurried.

Uncle Nowruz rose.

"Then the *Viper* is not overcome in a single struggle," he said. "Her work is in distortion—in small substitutions—in the quiet deception of the careless. She works through erosion… wearing meaning away, little by little."

Mashiya said, “Then perhaps she must be answered in the same manner. Let the futility of her shrines be revealed, grain by grain—and replaced with what is true, as the people of the valley once did.”

The Herbad nodded. “Pure water restores the earth. Pure thought restores the mind. And a pure festival—like Nowruz—restores the soul of a people.”

Mashiyaneh poured tea. The steam rose between them, slow and silent, like a blessing that asked for no words.

And so the conversation in the mill beside the river came to its end.

Those who heard the tale in later years would say that night marked a turning for Hamadan. And those who remembered it would warn their children: fear the day when the symbols remain, but their meanings are lost.

Years passed. Still, the elders would say that on that evening—beside the turning stone of the mill—Uncle Nowruz first understood the true nature of the *Viper’s* work.

Cultural and Mythological Notes

The following cultural, historical, and mythological references are intended to guide readers unfamiliar with Iranian heritage, helping them perceive the deeper layers of meaning woven into the narrative.

1. Nowruz (Persian New Year)

Nowruz begins on the spring equinox (usually March 20 or 21). It predates Islam and originates in the Zoroastrian tradition. Its central themes are the renewal of nature, the cleansing of both home and spirit, and the reaffirmation of social bonds. Nowruz symbolizes a cosmic rebirth—harmony between humanity and nature, and the triumph of light over darkness.

2. Amu Nowruz (Uncle Nowruz)

Amu Nowruz is a beloved mythical figure who heralds the arrival of spring. With his long beard, felt hat, and walking staff, he resembles a quiet guardian of the seasons. He symbolizes wisdom, continuity, and cultural memory,

embodying the benevolent spirit of the New Year. He is often paired with *Haji Firuz*, the joyful herald who announces his coming. Amu Nowruz's journey reflects an ancient motif: the passing of ancestral wisdom from one age to the next.

3. *Chaharshanbe Suri* (The Festival of Fire)

Held on the last Wednesday before Nowruz, *Chaharshanbe Suri* is an ancient ritual in which people leap over fire to cast off the misfortunes of the old year. Rooted in pre-Zoroastrian fire rites, it represents purification and the enduring victory of light over darkness. In later periods of Iranian history—especially during times of political or religious transformation—this festival was sometimes criticized or restricted due to its ancient, non-Islamic origins.

4. Mashiya and Mashiyaneh

Mashiya and Mashiyaneh are the first human couple in Zoroastrian cosmology, analogous to Adam and Eve in Abrahamic traditions. Created by Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, they were entrusted with populating and stewarding the earth. They embody humanity's role in the ongoing cosmic struggle against evil. In the narrative, their presence in the valley suggests a mythic plane beyond ordinary time. Their encounters with Amu Nowruz evoke a meeting between primordial creation and the memory of humankind.

5. The Haft-Seen Table

The *Haft-Seen* is a Nowruz spread composed of seven items beginning with the Persian letter "س" (S), each symbolizing a blessing:

***Sabzeh* (sprouts): renewal**
***Senjed* (oleaster fruit): love and wisdom**
***Seer* (garlic): protection**
***Sib* (apple): beauty and health**
***Samanu* (wheat pudding): abundance**
***Somaq* (sumac): sunrise and patience**
***Serkeh* (vinegar): age and endurance**

Together, these elements preserve fragments of ancient Zoroastrian symbolism tied to fertility, cosmic order, and seasonal harmony.

6. The Viper: A Mythic and Historical Motif

In Iranian storytelling, the viper often represents hidden corruption, quiet division within a community, and slow but inevitable decay. Its roots lie in

Zoroastrian dualism, where Ahriman—the spirit of evil—dispatches deceptive agents to undermine creation. Across Iranian history, the viper reappears as a symbol of foreign invasions, internal betrayals, or ideological shifts that erode ancient customs.

7. Zoroastrianism and Its Legacy

As the state religion of pre-Islamic Iran, Zoroastrianism shaped Iranian identity for millennia. Its core concepts—fire as a symbol of truth and purity, water as a vessel of life and memory, and the dualistic struggle between good and evil—remain deeply embedded in the culture. Even after the rise of Islam, Zoroastrian cosmology continued to influence festivals, folklore, ethical frameworks, and artistic expression.

8. Valleys, Springs, and Mountains as Sacred Geography

Nature holds a sacred place in Iranian myth. Mountains symbolize refuge, revelation, and ancestral memory. Springs embody renewal and hidden wisdom. Valleys, though centers of life and civilization, also carry vulnerability. Amu Nowruz's passage through these landscapes echoes the journeys of ancient heroes such as Jamshid or Zal—figures who traversed both physical and metaphysical realms.

9. The Role of Music, Humor, and Performance

Figures like *Haji Firuz*, wandering performers, and musicians reflect Iran's enduring tradition of festive arts. Though rooted in pre-Islamic culture, these forms survived through adaptation. Their gradual disappearance in certain eras mirrors broader social and political transformations, where joy itself becomes fragile.

10. Historical Shifts Affecting Iranian Traditions

Over centuries, waves of change have reshaped or threatened older customs. These include the Islamization of the 7th century, the Arab conquests, later Turkic and Mongol invasions, Safavid religious consolidation in the 16th century, modernization in the 19th and 20th centuries, and recent political revolutions and reforms. Each era imposed new meanings upon inherited rituals—some reviving Nowruz, others suppressing or reshaping it. The story reflects the emotional weight of these long historical tensions.

11. Themes of Cultural Erosion and Memory Preservation

Throughout Iranian history, both internal and external forces have endangered local customs, oral traditions, village festivals, and communal bonds. Amu Nowruz stands as a figure of resilience. His fear that traditions are "falling silent" echoes a deep cultural anxiety—one that has persisted across generations.

12. Animals in Iranian Symbolism

Animals such as turtles, snakes, birds, and bears occupy a symbolic space in Iranian folklore and Zoroastrian myth. Birds serve as messengers of divine inspiration. Snakes embody both wisdom and danger, often linked to deceitful forces. Turtles represent patience and longevity. Through these creatures, the story evokes an ancient intimacy between humans and the natural world.

13. Hamadan: A Timeless Landscape

The ancient city of Hamadan (Ecbatana) is among the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. Once the seat of Median kings, it stands at a crossroads of Zoroastrian, Jewish, Islamic, and local folklore. Rich with stories of magic, prophecy, and sovereignty, Hamadan situates the narrative in a realm that exists between history and myth.

14. Order vs. Disorder: A Zoroastrian Ethical Frame

The narrative frequently contrasts ***Asha*** (Truth, Order) with ***Druj*** (Lie, Corruption). This dualism underlies the rise of the Viper, the decay of traditions, and the suffering of Hamadan. These elements are not merely fantastical—they reflect a historical lens through which Iranians have understood upheaval and change.

15. The Fading of Festivals and the Diaspora Experience

The quiet lament—"fewer dyed eggs, fewer roasted wheat"—speaks to modern realities: emigration, urbanization, the erosion of communal rituals, and the fading transmission between generations. It echoes the experience of many cultures confronting fragmentation, where memory becomes both burden and refuge.