

The Hasher

THE VILLAGE NAHREBALA HAD NOTHING BUT HARMONIOUS PEOPLE and a big stream that flowed in the middle of its fertile lands. The *padawan* would take the cows, sheep, horses, and donkeys from the villagers and graze them in the rich pastures beneath the western mountains. The weather was cold and the mountains full of trees the villagers used for winter fuel. The wild river, after hitting hundreds of large rocks, would flow from the middle of the mountains all the way to the eastern borders of the village, and even further to the next province. Trees encircled each house, and the village itself was separated from other villages by denser forests. Houses were made of clay and wood for the most part. The distance from the new city was far enough to make the villagers arrange their visits only on a weekly basis, and together. The rest of the week, they would spend their time working in their fields. It was the only source of income.

In order to help each other, the villagers had something called *hasher*, volunteer work in the field of any villager who called for it. Everyone in the village had the right to call *hasher*. The host would then provide good food for the workers at lunch. This was not only an event of zealous work but also of great socialization. Jokes, bluffing, sometimes wrestling, making fun of each other, discussions about the climate and, of course, working, were the main activities of such collective activity. The women would stay at home, take care of the children, and prepare food.

The winter was nearly ending and people of our village were planning on cultivating their wheat. Our family was the first to call for *hasher*. I went to search for all the tools we had in order to facilitate the harvest. I found some of the tools we needed: shovels, axes and the like, but there were too few to accommodate the number of people who would work our land, so I went and borrowed the rest from our neighbors. I gathered them in the corner of our yard beside the room where we kept our animals. The night passed. My father and I went out early in the morning to make sure everything we needed was present before the villagers arrived. We worked on leveling the field until the first man showed up.

"Look! He never comes second," my father said, pointing to Qazi Mama arriving with his shovel on his shoulders. By the time Qazi Mama reached the field and greeted us, other workers began to leave their homes and make

their way over. Qazi came with his two sons Ajmal and Faisal. Mahboob, Qazi's younger brother came with his fifteen-year-old son Karim. My cousins, Jawad and Saifullah also arrived. The only other person who was expected to come was Hayatullah who was Qazi and Mahboob's elder brother, but he did not show up. The workers picked up their tools and followed my father's instructions.

"The soil is very hard," said Qazi hitting a clod with his naked foot.

"But not harder than you," said my father.

"Oh! There he comes, Mr. Chief Guest," said Mahboob, shouting to Hayatullah who was coming very slowly towards the field with his six-year-old son, Bahram.

"You should have taken a lantern with you," my father said and the other workers laughed.

Hayatullah would always carry his Russian Kalashnikov with a leather belt. He put his gun in the corner of the field beside a tree. Hayatullah took a shovel and started working on the field. The work got serious. The sun felt like a set of hands on our backs. There was three hours of work and after that, the workers demanded a tea break and I was the one to bring it. I went home where my mother prepared tea for the guests and I returned to the field, balancing the tray of small glasses. The workers sat dispersed and started chatting with each other and drinking.

Everyone started in with each other and Hayatullah was the focus of our kidding because of his style of speaking, the way he would look angrily at Qazi, and most importantly, how he would swear on his white hat by taking it off and hitting it on the ground. The funniest part was when he would pretend that a *djinn* had taken hold of him, and he would begin beating himself, as though to rid himself of the others' recriminations. Today, the joking was not as bad because of everyone's exhaustion from the heat.

Only Qazi Mama would not give up. "Was it you who used to steal hens?" he asked. Hayatullah continued looking down as if he heard nothing, but when everyone started shouting at him, he threw his shovel aside, came towards Qazi, and told him that he was the biggest liar in the village, saliva from his mouth hitting Qazi's face.

"Why then do you always hide from the old women of the village?" asked Qazi, wiping his face with his sleeve.

"Because you are not a Muslim, you annoy the weak and fear the strong, after all, you are my younger brother and you should respect me," said Hayatullah.

THE TEA BREAK WAS OVER; everyone went back to their places and continued leveling the land until it was lunch. I called upon everyone to wash our hands and gather beneath a tree where we would normally collect the harvest. It had good shade and there was a folded gray carpet spread out. I cleaned it of leaves. My younger brother Tariq came and told me that my mother was calling me. I knew that the food was prepared. I started walking towards home and on the way I saw Bahram holding his father's Kalashnikov. He was taking it from its belt, then, raising it to his chest, he aimed at something. "Be careful boy," I told him.

I went directly to the kitchen, which was located in the middle of our house. A thick layer of smoke covered the wooden ceiling beams; they were completely black with soot. The kitchen was all clay work and it had an uneven stairwell of clay, too. I climbed the stairs to see if the food was ready to be served but I ran back to the door as I heard a gunshot. I knew that it was Bahram. From the door, I saw all the workers gathering around one person lying on the ground. I ran and ran until I reached the crowd where Hayatullah was lying insensible with blood flowing from his chest. He was hit with five bullets. He was severely injured and no one thought that he would survive. Bahram was crying next to his father. Soon after, people from the village were rushing towards the field and I did not know how to react to the situation for it was the first time I'd heard of death, and the first time I'd seen it.

Qazi was the first to notice that Hayatullah was no longer alive. He bent down and closed his eyes, then took his handkerchief from his waistcoat and wrapped Hayatullah's head with it.

"Go and get a woven bed from your house," Qazi said hastily. I rushed to the house and took the bed and came back to the field without noticing how I got there and how I returned. We put the deceased on the woven bed and raised it on our shoulders and the whole crowd was following us all the way to Hayatullah's house. Bibi Gula was standing in front of her house when we brought her dead son. She was screaming so loudly and with such anguish that almost everyone was in tears. My father took care of Bahram so that no one would harm him.

The relatives of Hayatullah were coming one after the other until his house was full of people. The mullah of our mosque came, too. He started inquiring about the murder.

"The deceased should not be kept at home any longer. We should bury him as soon as possible," he advised. The funeral started immediately. Qazi and Mahboob washed Hayatullah's body. Mullah Haya Khan led the funeral prayer outside the mosque. The deceased was then taken to the graveyard.

The grave was dug approximately one meter deep, two meters long and sixty centimeters wide. We put Hayatullah in that grave and put some flat stones on top of him, without touching him. Then, everyone was hurrying to cover the stones with soil. The shovels were there and people participated, taking their turns burying him. When the dirt rose to a mound, the mullah preached to the crowd and reminded them of the inevitability of death. The funeral was over. Everyone went back home. I too went home with my father.

In the morning, I heard that Mahboob, the brother of Hayatullah, was intending to kill his nephew to avenge his brother. Lyla, the widow of Hayatullah, was from a neighboring village. I told my father about Mahboob's intentions and he told me that Hayatullah was wealthy among the villagers and Mahboob wanted to deprive Hayatullah's son and heir so that his wealth would go to his brothers. It was not until lunch that my father and I were invited to a *Jirga* in the house of Mohammad Jan.

"Please, my son is innocent. He is only six. It was unintentional," said Lyla, beating the door of Mohammad Jan's house where the elders of the village were gathered to decide the fate of Bahram. I thought so many times to go out of the room and console her, but I was a witness who needed to be there in order for the just elders to determine whether or not to kill Bahram. Mohammad Jan hosted every *Jirga* in our village. He not only had wealth and power but also had a very sharp mind and had recently solved a major dispute between two families of our village and that of the neighboring one. The other attendees of the *Jirga* were Mahboob, Qazi, Aminullah, the brothers of the deceased, and Subhan, the maternal uncle of Bahram. My father and I were witnesses.

The brothers of the deceased insisted on killing their nephew for the general rule in the village was an eye for an eye, irrespective of age. Mahboob, the elder brother of the deceased, was sitting next to Mohammad Jan, reclining on a pillow shaped like a ship.

"There is nothing to be said or told about the general rule of our village. We will kill the boy and we have the right to do so," said Mahboob leaning forth and beating the carpet with the back of his hand. Qazi and Aminullah appreciated their brother and said that this rule was an old rule and must be maintained. No one in the room disagreed with the rule. Subhan declared, loud and clear, that he would avenge his nephew no matter who killed him or what *Jirga* justified it. Hearing this, Mahboob's eyes grew bigger, his forehead forming four waves. We could see he wanted to jump on Subhan and finish him but he did not utter a single word.

After a pause, Mohammad Jan got up and sat in front of Mahboob and put his hands on his lap and told him that killing Bahram would not do him good for Mohammad Jan foresaw a new enmity forming. "Fear Allah, and suppress this satan of yours who demands nothing but taking the life of an innocent soul."

"We will lose our dignity by not killing the killer of our brother," said Mahboob, his voice rising.

"The village has always respected the one who forgives his enemy," said Subhan. By now, the only change I observed was in the faces of Qazi and Aminullah.

"We have only one way to resolve this and that is that Subhan's daughter is going to be married to Mahboob," said Qazi, and Aminullah nodded. Mohammad Jan went back to his place. Mahboob looked down as if he were reflecting. Subhan said that his daughter was only twelve and Mahboob was forty.

"If you want your nephew forgiven, then this is the only way," said Mohammad Jan, turning his face to Subhan.

The *Jirga* was adjourned and Subhan requested some days to think about this. After a week, we heard that Subhan agreed to give his child to Mahboob. The wedding party was arranged for the next week. The week had passed and both families were preparing for the wedding that in no way was like a wedding celebration.

None of our family members attended the wedding party and from that day forward, there was no more *hasher* in our village.