

FREEDOM'S FURNACE

BY JEANETTE WINDLE

PROLOGUE

PASHTUN TERRITORY, AFGHANISTAN

The girl was breathing hard as she climbed steep outdoor stairs, carrying the basin of dirty water in which she'd been scrubbing vegetables. Sliding the basin onto a flat rooftop, she scrambled after it. She was high enough here to see out over the compound's mud-brick perimeter wall. A narrow river gorge ran between two gently rising mountain ridges. The compound sat halfway up one flank, its crenellated exterior fortification curving out from the mountainside to enclose an area large enough for a *buzkashi* tournament, the Afghan free-for-all version of polo.

Above the girl on the highest parapet, a teenage sentry squatted, an ancient AK-47 across his thighs. Catching his eyes on her, the girl pulled her headscarf higher across her face. But she did not stoop immediately to complete her task, stepping forward instead to the edge of the roof.

Today's sun had already dropped behind the opposite mountain ridge, leaving behind a spectacular display of reds and oranges and purples above the sharp geometry of rock formations. Overhead, a rare *saker* falcon wheeled lazily against the first pale stars. Perched on a boulder across the river, a shepherd boy played a wooden *toola* flute, the rush of water over stones offering harmony to his plaintive tune. Behind him, a herd of mountain sheep scrambled over terraces where crops would grow when spring runoff overflowed a stream bed winding through the valley floor.

The girl saw little beauty in the scene. The narrow vista of this isolated mountain valley, varied only by white of winter snow and green of summer growth, was no less a prison than the compound walls. Just as the bright red and pink of poppy blooms within the compound enclosure below meant only backbreaking hours of hand-irrigating and weeding.

But today that would be finished. Before nightfall was complete, the compound gates that had slammed her inside--how long had it been? five winters now?--would swing wide. Perhaps her new home would be a town with markets and people and freedom to emerge into the streets. Perhaps there would be womenfolk her own age who would welcome her as sister.

Perhaps there would be books. Oh, to study again!

Will there be love?

Her searching gaze had finally spotted what she'd been seeking. A single track scratched the baked earth of the valley floor, paralleling the river bed. A dust devil moving along it was too large and fast to be the wind. A party of horsemen?

Then a vehicle separated itself from the whirlwind. A single-cab pickup, its bed crowded with human shapes, though still too distant to make out whether they were male or female.

One would certainly be male.

Her liberator.

Or new prison warden.

Her bridegroom.

“Worthless daughter of a camel! Will you take your rest while others labor?”

A blow rocked the girl back on her heels. As her uncle’s senior wife hurried on down the steps, the girl scrambled for the basin. Water was too precious to be just discarded, and she carefully carried the basin over to a row of potted tomato vines. But as she tilted it above the first pot, the girl abruptly dropped the scarf from her face to bend over the water’s murky surface.

Would her chosen mate find her attractive like the tales of ancient Persian princes and lovely slave girls her mother had whispered to her at night? If her bridegroom found her to his liking, he would be kinder. Even perhaps buy her gifts. So she’d observed from the younger women, wives of her uncle’s sons and his brothers and their sons who with their children made this compound a small village in itself. Her uncle’s own new bride too, a teenager not many winters older than herself, to whom he’d given gifts of clothing and jewelry that made his senior wife scream with rage when he was out of earshot.

Though her mirror was blurry, the girl could make out features pale as moonlight and thin. Food had been scarce this winter for such as she. Wisps of hair escaping her headscarf were only a shade darker than dried mud, long-lashed eyes somberly returning her gaze the blue of a hot summer sky. At least the face in the water was unmarred by scar or cleft-palate, her body under work-stained clothing whole and hardened to strenuous labor. This past winter she’d been touched by the monthly cycle of women.

Still, that wavering reflection was nothing like the smooth black tresses, golden oval features, and almond-shaped dark eyes of her wali’s new wife, who was the embodiment of captive beauties in her mother’s tales. What if her own bridegroom were dissatisfied? If he beat her? She’d seen the bruises on less favored household women. Heard their screams through thick walls of their sleeping quarters.

“Where is that girl? Can she do nothing as she is ordered?”

The girl hastily emptied the basin. But her footsteps slowed to reluctance as she started down the dirt stairs. She would miss this view more than the compound’s human residents. Though they had not been cruel, neither had they been kind. The raised voices and blows if she did not work hard or fast enough. The constant reminder that her refuge here was only by the most tenuous of blood ties to her guardian or *wali*, master of this compound. Most of the time she was simply invisible behind handed-down tunic and enveloping scarf.

She’d been too young for a head covering when her mother first brought her to those tall, wooden gates. No more than eight winters, though birthdays or even birth years meant little here. Making this her thirteenth year of life, if she’d calculated right. To the girl’s dismay, it was her mother who’d quickly insisted she cover herself. She’d not understood then the fear in her mother’s face when male eyes followed her young, lithe form around the courtyard. The fury of household women directed at her and not the watchers. She just knew she’d become suddenly invisible, the quick tugging of her scarf over her face when any male compound member approached now so automatic she no longer consciously registered the gesture.

Her mother had slipped away in the second winter of their refuge here. Of grief, the girl believed, though compound chatter said some sickness of the lungs. By then she’d come to feel that the individual living and breathing beneath her veil was

forgotten, her existence no more than an extra pair of hands and feet and grudging portion of food.

That she wasn't completely forgotten, she'd learned only this morning when she'd been informed her marriage was arranged. If sudden, she'd known this day must come. Not only because her labor from sunrise to nightfall didn't compensate for another mouth to feed. Even her ignorance knew the value a freshly nubile and healthy female represented. Her own initial terror and dismay had given way to rising anticipation. Whatever future awaited beyond those tall gates had to be an improvement. At the least, she would be wanted, her husband's valued possession, a member of his family.

Will there be love?

The girl knew what love was. Her mother's hand brushing fleetingly across her hair. The private smile that never banished sorrow when her mother slipped the girl extra food from her own portion. A soft voice murmuring stories into her ear when the day's work was done and mother and daughter could retire to their sleeping mat.

There were other memories, so distant the girl couldn't be sure they weren't imagined. A 'before' time and place that held painted walls and smooth tile beneath her feet. A swirl of vividly-colored silks and female laughter. Children darting like butterflies in their own bright tunics. A scent of sandalwood and taste of richly spiced food until one's stomach was satisfied. Bearded features and masculine voices that were loud, but not angry. Her father? Brothers? Above all, one smiling youthful face, still beardless, bending close above her as a patient hand guided small fingers in loops and swirls and dots that made up the name that was no longer hers.

But those images she did not like to relive. Not just because of the aching inaccessibility of such warmth and joy and laughter. But because with them came the blackness. Horrible images of torn, scarlet-stained bodies. Screaming explosions. Running until her chest hurt. Hiding in dark places. Terror that choked her as much as her mother's hand tight over her mouth. Bitter cold, stomach-gnawing hunger and a mouth parched with thirst. So that when her mother had brought her at last to this compound, the girl had been grateful to leave outside that other world, a past life swallowed up by winter's night.

"There you are! Why have you lingered so long? The guests arrive at the gates. Go make yourself decent lest your husband consider we have cheated him."

Meeting the girl at the bottom of the stairs, the senior wife snatched away the basin. Behind her in the dirt courtyard, smoke rose from a cylindrical clay bread oven. Women stirred pots over an open fire. The girl's mouth watered at the aroma of a sheep roasting on a spit. Though this feast commemorated her nuptials, she'd be fortunate to suck the marrow of a discarded bone.

No one glanced up as the girl filled a pail with clean water at the well. Did anybody in this place care if she stayed or left? Hoisting the bucket, the girl hurried toward her sleeping quarters, a small, windowless room she'd shared since her mother's death with an ancient female whose polio-twisted limbs explained her unmarried status. At least she'd leave with new clothing, she discovered when she ducked through the door. Not the red and green and gold traditional to weddings, trimmed with sequins, glass beads, bright embroidery. A tunic and drawstring pants lying on her sleeping mat, their matching head scarf, were the sober brown of daily wear, signal that today was less celebration than business transaction.

Stripping dirty clothing away, she dipped a rag in the cold water, shivering as she scrubbed herself clean. She tugged the tunic over her shoulders and tightened the drawstring around her waist. A plastic brush with broken bristles coaxed tangles from her hair. She twisted it up under the head scarf. If her mother were alive, she would not be doing this alone. There might even be festivities such as had accompanied her *wali's* recent wedding. A henna-decorating party with the compound's women. A ceremonial sauna and bath.

But then if her mother were alive, perhaps she would not be bartered this day to a stranger.

Will there be love?

The answer to that question became so urgent she could not breathe. Sinking to her sleeping mat, she shut her eyes, arms wrapped around her knees as she rocked back and forth in soundless anguish. It took gentle shaking, a worried murmur, to draw her back to her surroundings. She opened her eyes to her elderly roommate's anxious gaze. Some wordless sympathy she glimpsed there gave her strength to push to her feet.

The compound's largest room was the reception chamber. *Tushaks*, the padded mats used for sitting and sleeping, lined the room, hand-woven rugs hiding the dirt floor. Whitewashed walls held photos of mujahedeen freedom fighters and a tattered poster of Herat's famed blue-domed mosque. The party taking their seats around a vinyl feasting cloth was a small one as befit the insignificance of this celebration. Half a dozen men in turbans, robes and embroidered vests, their dark, curly beards and hooked noses similar enough to indicate a common gene pool. Her *wali's* new bride was leading away three female shapes draped in burqas.

None of the men were less than middle-aged, the oldest tall and heavy, his full beard streaked with white. Neither were they the strangers she'd expected. The girl choked down disappointment. She'd glimpsed these men when she'd accompanied the household to a compound at the far end of the gorge for her guardian's wedding festivities. Her new home would offer no escape from this valley. It only remained to see which of those hard-faced men had purchased her for their own. Two male cousins were now bringing in a huge copper tray holding the roasted sheep, stretched whole on a bed of yellow rice. Women scurried in with samovars and tea glasses. Placing a platter of *mantu* dumplings among piles of *naan* bread, the girl slid a glance sideways to see which guest had been seated at the head of feasting cloth.

It was well she'd set the platter down because horror convulsed her grip. The guest of honor was not one of those middle-aged men, but the patriarch himself.

A once powerful frame was now soft like uncooked dough, the white-streaked beard spilling over a well-rounded belly. But there was cruelty in his compressed lips, the deeply grooved frown lines. During those scant hours she'd spent among his household women, she'd seen their nervous tension any time the *khan* approached as though bracing for a blow. She had seen the meager leftovers from the men's feasting even on such a day of celebration, the tattered clothing and rheumy-eyed malnutrition among the children.

At the clap of her *wali's* hands, she reluctantly straightened to move closer. As a twitch at her scarf left her face bare, she stood, eyes lowered, under the *khan's* leisured scrutiny. The whites of his eyes were blood-shot as well as yellowed with age. An opium smoker. Something hot and avid in that stare, the touch of his tongue, red, moist, to full

lips, deepened the girl's nausea. Then the khan gave an approving grunt, and her uncle's sharp handclap released the girl to retreat back into the courtyard.

The visiting burqas, now unveiled, were drinking tea with her guardian's young bride. The girl took one involuntary step in their direction, then froze as heads turned toward her. The animosity in their unified glare chilled her to the bone. No, there would be no welcome from the womenfolk of her new family.

She headed instead to where her guardian's own senior wife was supervising the final relay of serving dishes, emotion bursting out hot and choking. "Tell me if it is not true! Did my uncle trade me for his new wife? Is that why she is here, and I--I am to go that place?"

As her voice cracked, the older woman raised disbelieving eyebrows. "But of course. How else do you think he could afford the bride price of such a beautiful young virgin? And why do you complain? To be a khan's wife, senior to other women, is more than you could hope. You should be grateful. It was I who insisted your wedding day be delayed until you had become a woman."

Her tone became less brusque as the girl swayed, blood draining from her face. "Now go, wash the fear from your face and eat something lest you faint. When the men have done feasting, they will call for you, and this will be finished."

Call for her as men called for their food! No wedding ceremony such as her guardian's new wife had enjoyed. No bridal canopy or vows taken upon a wrapped Quran. No veil thrown over her and her bridegroom, a mirror thrust beneath so the new couple might 'see' each other for the first time in its bright surface.

But then she was no daughter of the household. Just an orphan woman child tossed as a bonus into her guardian's own dowry bid, now to be handed over like a bundle of market goods.

The cooked food had all been carried inside now, but a stack of naan too charred and hard to serve at the feast was piled beside the bread oven. Grabbing a slab, the girl slipped up the dirt steps to the rooftop where she'd watered the potted tomatoes.

Sunset's flaming colors had now faded to night, the stars bright above the far ridge. In the courtyard below, a soft glow of oil lanterns added their yellow light to the cook fires. A staccato of *tabla* drums and twang of *rubab* strings signaled the evening's entertainment. The teenage sentry had gone to join the feast. In his place crouched a younger sibling, close in age and size to the girl herself so that the AK-47's metallic length balanced awkwardly across his lap.

Retreating into a corner where roof overhang met the perimeter wall, the girl nibbled at the bread. But despite her stomach's hungry twisting, she couldn't eat. Was all of life no more than smashed dreams?

The girl's slight frame shivered, and not because of the icy breeze, as her eye fell on the nearest doorway. The master of the compound's apartment from which he could enjoy the view as well as his new bride. At least those captive slave girls in her mother's tales had in compensation the attentions of handsome, young princes. And always ultimately, in her mother's telling at any rate, their love. While tonight she would be sharing such quarters with--

Her mind reeled, refusing the image. *I can't! I can't!*

But she had no choice. No woman ever did. It was the penalty of being female. The recognition that even before Allah Himself, Creator of Heaven and Earth, she held little value in comparison to her male counterparts.

Or was she so completely without choice? The lovely heroines of her mother's tales had with resolute courage shaped adverse circumstances to their own advantage. Just such courage as had propelled a woman with girl child in tow through winter's icy breath with bombs crashing all around and enemies at their heels until they had reached the safety of this compound.

Did her mother's daughter possess less valor and determination?

Heading across the roof, the girl scrambled up a flight of steps.

Her cousin had made himself comfortable in his sentry assignment. A discarded soft drink bottle was refilled with water at his side. One *patu* covered his shoulders, another wrapped his waist against the cold. He was alleviating boredom by whittling a new slingshot base from a forked branch. In those early days before she'd vanished behind a woman's veil, the two had played together, and if not friendly, his glance was tolerant as the girl emerged onto the parapet.

"If you wish, I will watch for you so you may reach the feasting before it is all gone."

Even up here, one could smell the rich fragrance of roasted mutton, fried dumplings, fresh-baked naan. The boy rose with an alacrity that said just such a worry had been on his own mind. Shedding the blanket draped around his waist, he dropped machine gun and whittling kit onto its folds, then bounded down the dirt stairs.

The girl briefly settled the weapon across her own thighs. It was dark enough now that a casual glance would not note the exchange. She waited only until she saw the boy duck into the reception chamber. She knew her cousin too well to worry he'd hurry back. Unless the older sibling who'd ordered him to sentry duty noted his dereliction.

Suddenly panicked, the girl pushed to her feet. The rooftop where she stood placed her at chest level below the top of the crenellated perimeter wall. Wrapping the abandoned *patu* around her own shoulders, she picked up the water bottle, then shook the whittling knife free of branch and shavings, tucking both along with the *naan* bread into a blanket fold. The gun she left abandoned on the parapet. Mud brick crumbled under her hands as she braced to pull herself up onto the wall. She hesitated. Was it courage or insanity to commit herself to that barren landscape? To a future no more promising and far less certain than the one awaiting below?

Bloodshot, avid eyes rose sharply to her mind. A cruel mouth with moist tongue flickering out in anticipation. Squat, round-bellied frame. The images were enough to propel the girl onto the top of the wall.

The drop to the other side was further than anticipated, knocking the air from her with the landing. Using hands and feet like a mountain goat, she scrambled up the mountain flank behind the compound until she could no longer glimpse the light of cook fires and lanterns. Feeling her way along the top of the ridge, she blinked back tears as bare feet caught repeatedly on protruding stones. But she did not slow. She was under no delusion her *wali* and bridegroom would do nothing to retrieve their property, and once the sun was up, her stumbling trail would be easy to follow.

Only when a rising moon returned some light to her path did she stop briefly. Sheltering behind a stone outcropping, she fumbled for the whittling knife. It sliced neatly through the thick, curly length of her hair. She dug a shallow hole, burying the tell-tale strands under a mound of earth and pebbles.

The girl was now exhausted and limping badly. But instead of resting, she drank half her water, ate half the *naan* bread, then pushed herself again to her feet. If she

followed the gorge downstream, she would be retracing the route by which she and her mother had arrived at those gates far behind her now. Which should bring her sooner or later to a real road and town.

Where she would go then, she had no idea. Nor how she would survive. All that counted was what she was leaving behind.

The thought should have been cause for terror. Instead, the smallest flame of anticipation gave the girl fresh strength.

Like my mother's tales, I go in search of a new world and new life.

But not love.

Love is an illusion.