

## Advance Praise for The Language of Water

“The diverse ensemble of characters in Elizabeth Clark-Stern’s debut novel includes royalty and subsistence farmers, teens and the elderly, fierce warriors, and dedicated pacifists. Each character is compelling, complex, and struggling with the types of difficult decisions that can shatter souls. But the core protagonist in the novel, the only one truly powerful, is the natural environment.

“The action takes place in 2100, when climate change has created extremes in the global distribution of, and access to, water. The divide between Haves and Have Nots is an ever-widening chasm. Regional conflicts sparked by dwindling natural resources are rampant. Agriculturalists have developed a plant, the pea cactus, that grows in harsh environments and can be processed into a variety of goods, but worsening floods and periods of drought make this, at best, a last-gasp measure.

“It is a world severely out of balance, but not quite out of hope. Clark-Stern captures the inflection point toward which we are barreling at break-neck speed, the moment when humans—having contorted ourselves to our limits in a desperate effort to maintain life as it was before climate change—are forced to decide if we want to die clinging to old ways or give up illusions of power and embrace something new.

“*The Language of Water* is a balm for nerves frayed by the fear of impending environmental disaster and a bracing vision of how balance might be restored to our off-kilter world.”

—Kate Boyes, author of *Trapped in the R.A.W.*

“Elizabeth Clark-Stern has created a marvelous adventure that takes us into a mysterious future where the climate is out of control. Her characters vibrate with creativity, passion, and imagination as they bring an evolving world to life.”

—Beverly Olevin, Kirkus Award-winner for *The Good Side of Bad*

“I found this novel’s complex characters and the richness of their relationships—in love and in war—tremendously compelling. Sara, Kethuda, Ruqia, and the rest of the cast are skillfully drawn. A story about the future devastation wrought by climate change has the potential to be a grim read, but instead Elizabeth Clark-Stern has written a gripping feminist tale exploring love and power, violence and forgiveness, despair and hope. *The Language of Water* is a page-turner and a paean to resistance.”

—Gwynne Garfinkle, author of *Can’t Find My Way Home*



# The Language of Water



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by  
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This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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*Dedicated to my beloved author, Dylan Nicole Hansen,  
who tells me her stories, and helps me tell mine.*





In memory of Masha Amini, whose Kurdish name is Zhina. She died at the hands of Iranian police for daring to modestly adjust her hijab to show more of her proud beauty as a woman of independence and value. May she rest in peace and continue to inspire women all over the world.



PART ONE  
WIND



## 1 – Sara

HER given name was Fatima, a perfectly respectable Kurdish name, but she called herself Sara, the code name of her revolutionary heroine, Sakine Cansiz.

On this quiet morning, Sara hurried barefoot across the dusty floor, her heart quickening as she opened the cracked windowpane. A glimpse of her face appeared in the glass: broad Kurdish nose, thick black braid coiled onto her shoulder, eyes that Papoo used to call “the darkest jewels in the night sky.”

She leaned out the window, searching the village streets for movement. The soldiers of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Unit, the famous YPJ, would arrive at any moment for recruitment day, January 1, 2100.

Sara shouted out the window, “YPJ. I am here. On this day I am eighteen!”

No sound but the wind whipping dust along the deserted stone streets.

Sara first saw this band of sister-soldiers when she was a little girl, pulling herself up to this very window to watch them rush by. Young women, proud, laughing, their heads bare, their bodies strong in vintage camo fatigues, their boots solid as small mountains. She used to march around the house, pretending to be the mighty Sara who led the YPJ against ISIS almost a hundred years ago. Mamoo and Papoo applauded, though Sara knew, even as a child, that her parents did not want a life of violence for their only child. But how else were women to find justice?

Sara was afraid. The YPJ of 2100 fought gangs of ISIS brides who sold young Kurdish virgins to wealthy men across

the Middle East. And there were rumors of other covert missions, even water poaching, punishable by death.

Sara swallowed, her throat dry as sand, as she took her tin cup off its peg and placed it beneath the spout of a small, covered bucket. She punched a code and watched grainy water fill the cup with the first eight ounces of her ration for the day, collected last night at what people called the “Kiss-Off Station.” A simple procedure: when Sara pressed her lips to a metal button on a metal pipe, the sensor in the button read her weight, age, and state of hydration, dispensing the minimum quantity required to sustain her existence for 24 hours. It also read her DNA, shutting off if she attempted to double dip.

Sara sipped, grimacing as the gritty liquid moistened her throat. There were rumors. Old men in the streets said, “Be grateful. Drink slowly.” What did they think was coming, mud? No matter. Soon she would no longer have to haul the stupid bucket from the public pump every evening. *When I am YPJ, my arms will be burdened only with an e-arrow rifle and a water canteen.*

Outside, the wind whipped through the brown haze, revealing houses of mud and stone in the hillside across the way. Laundry on clotheslines snapped with each gust of dust. The clothing of the Kurds used to be brilliantly colored: geometric patterns in the dark red of a child’s cheeks, the yellow of mountain wildflowers, the blue of the morning sky. Now, every garment was putrid green, like Sara’s own scratchy frock, fashioned from the pea cactus, a high protein succulent made of genetically engineered eatable cotton, cactus, and dried chickpeas. It required very little water, and could grow anywhere in the world, supplying food, clothing, and myriad necessities to the warming world. In Sara’s village there was no water for cleaning, so people hung their pea cactus garments out for the dust to scrub.

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Sara's country was Rojava, once a northern region of Syria, now its own nation; so beautiful in her youth, high mountains covered with rich green grass for goat-grazing and abundant snow whose melt-off swelled the Euphrates River. Now, the mountains were barren of snow, the bright green grasslands replaced with gray-green paddles of pea cactus as far as the eye could see. It was not so much the loss of the beauty that weighed so heavily on Sara. It was that Rojava suffered from the perma-drought, the final stage in the drying up of a city, a nation, a continent.

This left her homeland at the mercy of the country that controlled the headwaters of the Euphrates, the Kurd's time-honored enemy: Turkiye.

*All of that is about to change. The YPJ will fight for our water rights. And I will be with them.* She waved out the window, confident the YPJ were there, momentarily hidden by a cloak of dust. "I am here. Where do I sign up?"

No reply.

*What if they won't take me? I'm short. I've never shot an e-arrow rifle. My feet are soft as dainty pillows on a sultan's couch. I have no boots and no money to buy them.*

Her thoughts went wild, her fingers drumming the window ledge. She glanced around the room at the stiff couches, the cheap American movie posters. Nothing left of the Kurdish wall hanging her mother had sewn from fabrics of turquoise, orange, and gold. No smell of Mamoo's fig pie, No coughing from the smoke of Papoo's pipe.

*cha cha cha cha cha*

Sara saw a beloved winged visitor coming toward her out of the dust.

*cha cha cha cha cha*

She slid her cup onto the ledge. A tiny speckled bird landed, his long tail thrashing.

“Rexie, my darling.” She lifted her right baby finger, pointing it at his tiny lizard-like tongue, bobbing her finger up and down, capturing an image of the full reach of Rexie’s tongue.

“Got it. My teacher doesn’t believe you’re devolving into a dinosaur. Now I have proof.” She moved her baby finger to the center of her forehead, sending the image through the In-Phone embedded just under her skin, the spot ancients referred to as the “third eye.”

“When Mr. Askay gets this picture, he will say, ‘I admit that tongue looks more reptile than bird, but Sara, birds *are* dinosaurs, so how can they devolve?’ I will say, ‘This is no bird tongue, it is adapted for a dry world. Punctuated equilibrium—evolution leaping forward.’”

She contemplated the photo of Rexie in the picture gallery just inside her frontal lobe. She was amused at the thought that phones used to exist outside the human body. They were said to be flat, funny, buzzing things. People kept dropping them into toilets or leaving them on barstools, so scientists, ever eager to prioritize convenience, discovered how to implant stable microscopic sensors into the human nervous system, centered in the brain, but with radiating sensors placed throughout the body. This genius innovation was crowned the In-Phone. All citizens of the world received them, in the first international technology treaty in history, a sign of true global benevolence, they said. How all of this was financed, and who controlled access to anyone’s personal In-Phone was left to the imagination of cynics and the overwhelmed. Sara’s belief was that the In-Phone was financed in the waning hours of the United Nations by elder billionaires from various countries who wanted to leave a truly democratic legacy for the world. They insisted on privacy laws as a condition of their philanthropy, but just as in the olden days of external phones, it was prudent to be cautious when sending information through a veil of intrusion.



Originally it was thought that the In-Phone would be an energy-saving device. But this claim, like so many others promised by scientists and government officials, proved false. A quota had to be set on the number of energy units used in any one In-Phone exchange. Certain transactions, such as snapping and sending a photo, depleted the weekly quota. The most expensive transaction of all, the holographic meeting of two or more parties, could cost up to a month in quota-usage.

Some believed the In-Phone had mystical properties, a portal to the chamber of our dreams and the cosmic Source of all energy. Sara had great curiosity about this and had enjoyed long discussions with her teacher about how to access images on the In-Phone from the dawn of time.

A shrill voice cried out from the other room.

Sara pushed Rexie off the cup. "Go. She will catch you and throw you into a stew." Rexie vanished into the dust. She gulped the remaining water.

Her stepmother, Fidan, a large woman in a vintage red gown, entered with a motion that brushed aside anyone else in the room. "Is it wise to gurgle down one-fifth of your ration so early in the day?"

"It is my choice."

Sara's stepsister, Nazan, shuffled in after her mother, carefully taking up as little space as possible.

Fidan ignored her compliant child and moved closer to Sara. "You think you are so special, my little Fato? Just because it is your birthday, you think the Turks will open their headwaters to us 'down-streamers' and give you all the water you want?"

Silence filled the room. For the moment, the three women were united in their hatred of the Turks.

"I was thirsty. And my name is not Fato, or Fatima. It is Sara."

Fidan laughed in open mockery. Nazan followed with a shrill giggle, squeezing something under her arm. Sara leaned

closer: folded blue fabric. A birthday gift? Surely not. She had received nothing from them since her father's death.

"You think by calling yourself Sara you will become a hero?" Fidan said. "You are Fato, who scrubs floors."

"Nazan can scrub the floors from now on. I am 18. I am joining the YPJ."

"Of course, you are," Fidan said in a sudden change of mood. "But first, tonight, is the festival." Her eyes slid to her meek daughter. "Show her."

Nazan brought forth a vintage gown of Kurdish design: deep blue green, triangles of white, an orange border, with a lemon-yellow hijab.

Sara touched the fabric, soft as Rexie's wings. "Where did you get it, a museum?"

"Your mother wore it when she presided at the Equal Voice Council," Fidan said. "She spun it herself, in light wool. I promised your father I would get you a good husband. You must debut in decent attire."

"I don't want a husband. My teacher, Mr. Askay, says that the independence of women—"

"Your teacher, he eyes you like a ripe pear."

"I remember pears," Nazan said, gazing out the window at a withered tree that had once borne fruit.

"At least try it on." The edge in Fidan's voice was clear: disobey and you get the lash. Sara had been whipped with much less provocation. She peeled off her flimsy pea cactus dress and stood naked, studying the face of her stepmother: what profit for Fidan was hidden in this "gift?"

Nazan pulled the resplendent gown over Sara's body, placing silky white slippers on her stepsister's feet.

"I have never felt anything so soft against my skin," Sara said, and, for a moment, she imagined herself a bride, valued by a compassionate man who would care for her. She had not known love since her parents died, and she longed for true,

abiding love, but rarely admitted it, even to herself. She had a deeper longing. Her feet seemed happy in these soft slippers, but they had a greater desire to slide into sturdy boots. And love? Surely it would come another way. Not in this masquerade.

Fidan glanced anxiously at the door. "You are very beautiful, little Fato. I am so sorry, but we will die, if we do not get our own well."

Sara stared, amazed, at the first tears she had ever seen in her stepmother's eyes. "Your own *well*...?"

"They promised they would not beat you, if you submit like a good whore."

A singing missile flew past Sara's ear, an e-arrow, made of electric charge, visible only when it hit the target, appearing as an arrow-shaped apparition burning with deadly precision.

The missile misfired, setting ablaze a movie poster of a bare-chested American cowboy.

Fidan crawled to the wall, pulling Nazan with her.

Sara hurried to the window. ISIS brides were heading toward the house, their eyes barely visible behind full-faced black hijabs.

Behind them came the women of the YPJ, their faces bare, their boots smacking the ground. Sara cried out in desperate joy as she saw a tall YPJ woman leap like a mountain goat, knocking down two ISIS babes in one blow. *She must be Ruqia, The Flying Warrior, as brave and fierce as my namesake, Sakine.*

"Ruqia!" Sara called, waving.

The Flying Warrior turned at the sound of her name, a face of angles and hard lines. A warrior's face Sara admired at once.

"Help me, Ruqia, I am sold for a well."

Their eyes met across the town square.

Sara's joy was short-lived. The sound of feet thumped up the stairs, and the door opened with a crash. ISIS women

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shoved a black hood over Sara's head. She screamed a muffled cry to Ruqia as they carried her away.

## 2 – Kethuda

SHE picked up her mother’s ruby necklace, a prized heirloom from the Ottoman Empire. *What about the down-streamers?* Her belly grew hot, her legs suddenly weak. “I can’t think about them now. I have to get through the next few minutes,” Kethuda said out loud.

An older woman with a spine like a question mark appeared. “Yes, Madam President?”

Kethuda tossed her head, feeling the slap of her perfectly knotted black hair on her back. “I’m not the President yet.” The room was barely a closet, used for storing supplies for Turkiye’s proud Kebon Dam. “Does a President need a conscience, Mihiri?”

The older woman bowed, her spine arching to the floor. “Yes, Madam, I believe it is beneficial.”

“How much do I owe, and to whom?” Kethuda asked.

“How much what, Madam?”

“Water.”

Mihiri was silent. Kethuda knew of the Kurdish blood in her servant’s body. Though the woman never spoke of it, on certain days, Kethuda glimpsed a turquoise and orange scarf, poking out from the neck of Mihiri’s dull pea cactus dress. The geometric design harkened back to the time when the northern part of Kurdish territory stretched into Turkiye. Uprisings were frequent, many Kurds and Turks slaughtered. Finally admitting defeat, the Kurds in Turkiye remained largely underground, while open rebellion rose in Rojava, Iraq, Iran. Now the question of achieving a united independent Kurdistan

was a distant dream. All they wanted was water: the “downstreamers,” a yawning mouth, begging to be quenched.

Mihiri fastened the ruby necklace around Kethuda’s throat.

“It’s lighter than I thought,” Kethuda said. “Mother wore it often. The rubies made her lips seem a dark, pomegranate red.”

“Yes, Madam President. You are beautiful.” Mihiri opened a crack in the shuttered window. They could see the massive expanse of the Kebon Dam, water splashing over the spillway in abundance.

“Allah is good,” Kethuda said, looking to the mountains dusted with snow. An old Turkish legend told of the Earth disappearing into the sky during winter, renewing the mating of the god and goddess that bore the children of humankind. No one spoke of this any longer. There was still snow in the mountains above the pea cactus fields, but how much longer would it be there?

“Now then, Madam. Have a look at yourself,” Mihiri said, guiding her mistress to a full-length mirror, hanging like an afterthought in this room packed with vintage cardboard boxes and old computers. Kethuda scrutinized her image: still youthful at forty, the strong bones of her cheeks and the line of her jaw etching the perfect profile for her office: feminine, but with masculine strength, her long golden gown the color of the sun. Perhaps this was an error. Recalling an image of what was scorching, dehydrating. The sun seemed to follow everyone these days, even in their dreams.

“Mihiri, bring another gown, white for clouds, the snow, with a tinge of pale blue, for water.” Kethuda knew she must deliver an image to her people that illustrated what could happen when the ravages of climate change intersected with female power. From this inaugural day forward, she would no longer be Kethuda. She would be a fountainhead of security, even a hint of the divine. She would not claim to be a goddess, yet she must look like one: A Goddess of Water.

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Mihiri said, “We only brought a few items, your keepsake trunk—”

“Find something,” Kethuda said, realizing her voice sounded too high-pitched—too, God forbid, *needy*. She slipped off the golden dress and stood naked before the open window, snapping the shutters shut with her jeweled hand. *No, no, this is not right*. She peeled off the rings and bracelets and unclasped the ruby necklace. The Goddess of Water must be at one with her people, without vain trappings, one message: I am terrified of *thirst*, just as you are.

Mihiri hurried in with a gown Kethuda had not seen for years. “Couldn’t you find something else?” she said in a voice that betrayed deep sadness.

The older woman bowed low. “There was nothing else. You said it must be white, like a cloud—”

“Stand up, woman. You have done your best. It will serve.”

Mihiri stood as tall as her curved spine would allow, slipping the white dress over her mistress’s naked body.

“My mother’s wedding gown,” Kethuda said, imagining her mother’s enveloping embrace. Ayse named her daughter Kethuda after a powerful queen of the Ottoman Empire. Her father had never liked the name, claiming that it sounded like a twentieth century bicycle horn, *Kay-tho000-dah*. Her mother ignored him, loving everything about her only child.

Tears came, unbidden, as Kethuda saw herself in her mother’s wedding gown. “No, not a day for feeling,” she said, wiping her face with her strong hands and pulling on her pea cactus boots covered with alum so they shone like silver bullets.

She peeked through the shutters at the workers on the platform installing floodlights to enhance the live feed of her image on the World Board, a global feed that would broadcast the Inauguration on the In-Phone of every person on the planet.

Turkish people—now *her* people—were arriving in large numbers: young and old, rich and poor, many women and

nongendered, not as many men, some coming with the blind hope that *this time* the person on the Inaugural podium could guarantee they would never know thirst, others coming to heckle the newly elected President, a *woman*.

She touched her forehead, bringing up images of world leaders peering at the Inaugural platform on their In-Phones. The predictable crowd appeared: male members of The World Water Rationing and Refugee Team, referred to on the street as RAT, an alliance of the United States, Europe, Scandinavia, Canada, Japan, the new United Korea, and Turkiye. Russia and China remained isolated, maintaining their own In-Phone system and water refugee policy.

Relations between the former Ottoman Empire and the West had always been tense, especially between Turkiye and the United States. It was worse in this new alliance, responsible for regulating water rations at “Kiss-Off” stations across the globe. The quantity of water was always under review based on a country’s policy of being “Closed” or “Open,” to water refugees. RAT took over water ration management from local authorities on the questionable wisdom that it would lessen the prevalence of the greatest crime in the late twenty-first century: water poaching.

The male RAT leaders seemed impatient with Kethuda. (“When will this woman get the show on the road?”), bemused, (“The true power in Turkiye has nothing to do with this dolly”), or wary, (“She is either being manipulated, or manipulating the world for nefarious ends”). This onslaught of babbling was pure conjecture on Kethuda’s part, but she knew these men and the fear that propelled them into public office. Some of them may have feared that she would do an end-run around RAT and team up with the Closed alliance of Russia and China to create a new authoritarian empire that would push all water refugees into the remaining countries. This was



a card she would have to keep in mind, as a threat, if not a reality...or the other way around.

She switched away from the men, digging her fingernail into her forehead at an angle, opening a private channel where she could find the faces of women. When water scarcity became a permanent global pandemic, terrified nations found the illusion of security in male-dominated regimes. The ascent of women in the early twenty-first century had rapidly declined. The one exception was the world-wide Right to Abortion, as political opportunists and ideologues alike crumbled in the face of *thirst*. Hailed as the beginning of International cooperation to fight over-population, it was paired with the Global One Child Act. This spawned grief rituals in every country, as women and men on both sides of the political divide mourned the loss of siblings in families, and the beginning of life in the womb.

Kethuda's private In-Phone pathway brought up the face of Shogofa in Afghanistan, where women had defied decades of Taliban rule by establishing a network of home schools for girls. These women wore burkas and moved in secret, establishing grass roots justice at Kiss-Off stations, now led by a groundswell of women and men who monitored water rations for tampering.

Kethuda sent a silent message to Shogofa, "I am with you. The women of Turkiye are with you."

Shogofa did not lower her burka—was any In-Phone channel really secure?—but she blew a kiss, signaling her support for Kethuda's ascent to power.

"They are waiting, Madam," Mihiri said.

"Yes, yes." Kethuda scanned the hopeful faces of the world's women, stopping when she found the round white face and dark blue eyes of Nina Navalny, descended from the early twenty-first century dissident, Alexie Navalny. Nina was young, too young to be leading an underground revolution, but since the economic and spiritual collapse of Russia, young

women and men rallied with the cry, “Democracy at Last” for the country of Pussy Riot, Anna Akhmatova, and Tolstoy.

Kethuda could feel the scrutiny in Nina’s eyes. “She looks to me to bring female power to our shattered world.”

“Who, Madam?”

“Women. They look to me, wondering if I will keep Turkiye Open. Will I continue to send water from Kebon to the down-streamers, or will I curdle, like over-cooked pudding.”

Mihiri attempted to suppress a giggle.

“Laugh,” Kethuda said. “I will not beat you!”

“Yes, Madam,” Mihiri said. “I think you are not a wiggly dessert. You are a woman of flesh and blood.”

“That remains to be seen,” Kethuda said, wiggling her hips. They laughed, their bodies momentarily relaxing.

Kethuda released the pressure on her “third eye” and turned back to the male leaders leering down at the podium from the safety of their In-Phones. The bulbous, white-whiskered face of the American President, Sam Boatwright, came into view, flashing her a “thumbs up.” Kethuda longed for the days when the predominantly Latinx United States was ruled by a woman Hispanic President. In those days, as an Open country, it was home to millions of water refugees from South and Central America. But the country had been thrown into panic as the sidewalks of Florida, New York, and all coastal states disappeared under the swelling sea. The white minority imposed strict limitations on the immigration of Latin American water refugees. Mr. Boatwright, a Mississippi politician who had moved to Ohio when his state went under water, was catapulted into the Presidency by a slim white majority. He declared America Closed, sending troupes to the Southern border armed with hi-powered, cowboy-style e-arrow rifles. As thousands of water refugees amassed on the Mexican side of the border, they built “Temples of Return,” out of dry sagebrush and pea cactus tumbleweeds. These beautiful, ghostly

structures were replicated in perma-drought countries across the world. Sacred structures that gave meaning and the presence of divine love to where “the dry go to die.”

Kethuda hated Boatwright, and yet, she knew Closing his country had saved American lives. Since her election, Mr. Boatwright had turned a sympathetic eye to Turkiye, calling her “President Babe.”

Boatwright’s cozying up was a radical shift from America’s long-standing critique of Turkiye’s human rights policies. Even the term “human rights,” had fallen out of use in favor of “water rights,” defined as which humans in which countries were entitled to how much water, for how long.

“I will tell them you are almost ready,” Mihiri, said, hurrying off.

Kethuda’s sweating body churned with terror and excitement. She had dreamed of this day as far back as she could remember, watching her mother bow, always bow, to the will of men, especially her father, President Hamza the Great, whose power was as natural to him as her mother’s subservience was to her.

A hand touched her shoulder. “Mother?”

She sighed. “No, Papa. It’s me.”

“Of course,” he said, resting his forehead against his daughter’s back. “I thought, for a moment—the gown—”

“Do I look like her, on your wedding day?”

He cupped his large hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. She was always surprised when she saw him this close, his face cracked with age; but the aura of his power shone through as if he were still a young man, with a forehead descended from the sultans of the Ottoman Empire, metal-gray eyes, full lips parted, to devour, or kiss. “She would be so proud of you.”

Kethuda caught the slight tightness in the corners of his eyes. She leaned back. “Would she? I think she would give me

that look that always shot right through me when I laughed too loud, or jumped too high, or beat boys in a foot race. ‘Don’t blow your own horn, Kethuda.’”

His hands were heavy on her shoulders. He said, “She would be amazed, frightened for you, as I am.” His nostrils widened, taking in the scent of amber oil on her neck. “But I’m certain she would look at you today and say, ‘You are the woman I could never be. And I love you for it.’”

Kethuda closed her eyes to dam the tears. “Did you remember to bring it?” He held out a silken cloth, azure blue, the color that river water used to be before the climate turned it brown. Her mother’s hijab, worn with the pride of a devoted Sufi. Kethuda touched it, fluid as a magic stream from some forgotten dream. But who believed in magic these days? “Papa, our water is beige at best. I can’t promise to restore this color to our water.”

“What can you promise? Let’s hear it.”

She heard a knife’s point in his voice. They had spent hours rehearsing her speech. To go through it one more time, she would become even more his monkey.

He moved closer, his breath hot as desert wind on her neck. She swirled suddenly, squawking and hopping like a baboon. “Monkey see, monkey do!”

He laughed, hollow and aggressive. His grip was tight on her wrist.

She hated the quiver in her voice, the fear he could evoke with one stroke, “You would have me show up on the podium with a black eye? The world already suspects I am your creature.”

His eyes narrowed. She could smell it on him now: the *fear*. She had smelled it in him since she was a child. She had talked about it with her mother. They both knew who he really was: the shivering bush rabbit pretending to be a hawk. Ayse never called him on it. She was too coiled in her own fear to

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step into the power of her own self. *I will do otherwise. I will play along as his monkey, conquering my own fear until I become a true woman of power.*

Slowly, begrudgingly, Hamza released her, as if he could read her thoughts and wanted to distance himself.

She draped her mother's hijab around her shoulders, a billowing blue shawl, turning away from her father, running down the metal stairs, her silver boots clanging like steel drums.

She marched onto the platform, blinking in the brilliance of the floodlights, her ears burning with the roar of the crowd. She stepped to the podium, touching her sternum to activate the microphone temporarily implanted to carry her voice to the world, a voice that must echo with authority and feeling, "I welcome you, those around the globe, and people of Turkiye. I am proud to address you for the first time as your President."

She paused for the ovation, paid for, in part, by her father. It was impressive, necessary. She inhaled, raising her voice, "On this Inaugural Day, I want to share with you a sacred icon from our National Museum—" She retrieved a clay statue from inside the podium, lifting it above her head. "Discovered in an ancient village in Anatolia, where the Turkish Empire was born, I give you the Seated Woman of Catalhoyuk."

Female voices of devotion rose from the crowd. This was not orchestrated. The Seated Woman was sacred to all women of Turkiye.

"She is our Earth Goddess," Kethuda said, caressing the base of the statue. "Behold Her pendulous lactating breasts, her hands on a throne flanked by leopards, each bare foot resting on a skull. Life and death in one magnificent image." She held the statue to her breast, her eyes closed in prayer, "Goddess of our Blessed Earth, I ask for your wisdom, your protection, your love." She placed the statue on the podium, one hand on the goddess's head, the other reaching out to the crowd. "In the twentieth century, President Ataturk promoted

a secular Turkiye. It was needed at the time, and we honor him for his leadership. Today, we are in a different time, with different needs.”

She glanced sideways at her father.

His eyes were stone. Behind him, the crashing waters of the dam poured over the spillway. The wind carried mist onto her face. “Today I will no longer be known as Kethuda, daughter of Ayse and Hamza the Great. I have a new name: *Ataturka*.”

The crowd gasped. Some murmured approval. Some whispered with weary suspicion.

She placed Seated Woman on the podium, bowing to the statue as she lifted her mother’s hijab to the crowd. “I have never married. Never known love. I have devoted my life to serving the common good for you, the people of Turkiye.”

She wrapped her mother’s hijab around her own head. “Today I embrace the divine wisdom of Mother Earth and Allah. We need them both as we watch our snow-capped mountains recede, our countryside become desert. I promise you, I will be the divine steward of our water. You, my people, will never know thirst!”

The crowd exploded with relief and adoration, shouting down the low growl of skepticism.

Kethuda smiled at the crowd, the muscles in her arms burning as she held aloft the Seated Woman of Catalhoyuk. *Papa thinks I am his. He does not know the quiet rebellion burning in my heart that could destroy him—that could destroy myself.*