

“MY NAME IS SARA’ A BIOMYTHOGRAPHY EXPLORING THE LIFE OF SAKINE  
CANSIZ”

A Thesis

by

CAROLINA AVSAR

BS, The University of Tampa, 2010

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi  
Corpus Christi, Texas

December 2020

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December 2020

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

Robin Carstensen, PhD  
Chair

Sarah Salter, PhD  
Committee Member

Yndalecio I. Hinojosa, PhD  
Committee Member

December 2020

## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis explores the story of Sakine Cansiz, one of the first women activists and a central figure of the Kurdish liberation movement. By taking into account different sources of Sakine Cansiz's life and role in paving the way for women's equality in the Kurdish freedom struggle, and using Gloria Anzaldua's autohistoria teoría, the final product, a biomythography, will attempt to make her life and legacy more attainable to the mainstream population. This project seeks to increase the representation of Kurdish history and the role women play in it, as well as de-fantasize the Western narratives surrounding Kurdish women and open a space and a public interest for future narratives on and from Kurdish women and their contributions to the struggles of freedom and women's equality.

## DEDICATION

To Veysel for his support and respect of my love for the Kurdish struggle.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, a huge thank you to my amazing committee. To Dr. Robin Carstensen, for believing in my project from the beginning, pushing me in the right direction, and not giving up on me. Dr. Salter for opening my eyes to different perspectives and helping me navigate the intricacies of developing a project like this. Dr. Hinojosa, thank you for your guidance and your time, and for going over the different aspects of this project with me. This project is the result of all of your feedback and help.

To my husband, Dr. Veysel Avşar, for his undying love, encouragement, and support through these more than 10 years together. Thank you for being my companion in all the crazy adventures life has brought our way, and for being open to challenging your beliefs and changing your mind when a new perspective makes more sense. Seni çok seviyorum. Te amo, always.

To my beautiful children, my YMA team, who have always believed in me and in my work. For you, I'll build a better world.

Gracias a Oyiyo y a Tosi (papá y mamá?) por estar siempre a mi lado de una u otra manera. Por enseñarme la importancia de trabajar duro por alcanzar mis metas. Los amo con todo mi corazón.

To my sisters, thank you for always being my biggest cheerleaders. Las amo muchísimo.

To my best friend, María Alejandra, my #1 peer reviewer for more than half my life.

Thank you for always being there for me.

Gelek gelek spas to my mamosteyen Kurdî Aladdin, Mukka, and Firat B. Specially Firat for taking his time to meet with me one-on-one not only to talk about the Kurdish movement, but also teach me the basics of conversational Kurdish. Kurmancîya min ne pir başe, but the day will come, don't worry. Cay heye, dixwazî?

And last, but certainly not least, a special thanks to Firat Dicle. What started as some sort of cultural/language exchange ended up becoming a friendship that I'll treasure forever. Sadece bir kelime öğrettin bana Kûrtçe'de, ama nerden bilecektim o en önemli ve en güzel olan kelime olacakti. Herşey için teşekkür ederim, HEVAL. btk.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### I. Introduction

In the late 2010s, the world watched with horror as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) took control of various territories in Iraq and Syria, leaving destruction in its wake. It was then that the world bore witness to an unlikely hero, the Kurds<sup>1</sup>. In spite of being the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle-East, the Kurds do not have a country of their own and instead reside across Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, where they have systematically been oppressed and discriminated against.

One of the most interesting characteristics of the Kurdish military movement that resulted in playing a major role in the territorial defeat of ISIS, was the existence of all-women units<sup>2</sup>. These units, composed exclusively of women from different backgrounds, not only represented a strategic advantage, but reflected a challenge to traditional Middle-Eastern social norms and gender roles<sup>3</sup>. The West quickly became fascinated with the role these women played in the frontlines in a way that reveals of orientalism and the desire to impose Western cultural values on these women. While privileging articles and pictures of women who fit Western beauty standards, the West was also neglecting the fact that these women were preceded by others that have sown the seeds of women's role in the Kurdish revolution, such as Zarife Khatun, Sakine

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<sup>1</sup>Taddonio, Patrice. "Flashback: How US-Backed Kurds Defeated ISIS in Kobani, Syria." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 9 Oct. 2019, [www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/flashback-how-us-backed-kurds-defeated-isis-in-kobani-syria/](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/flashback-how-us-backed-kurds-defeated-isis-in-kobani-syria/).

<sup>2</sup>Ferreira, Bruna, and Vinícius Santiago. "The Core of Resistance: Recognising Intersectional Struggle in the Kurdish Women's Movement." *Contexto Internacional*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2018, pp. 479–500., doi:10.1590/s0102-8529.2018400300004.

<sup>3</sup>Dirik, Dilar. "Western Fascination with 'Badass' Kurdish Women." *Al Jazeera*, Al Jazeera, 29 Oct. 2014, [www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/29/western-fascination-with-badass-kurdish-women/](http://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/29/western-fascination-with-badass-kurdish-women/).

Cansiz, and Layla Qasim, and who saw women's involvement in freedom struggles as a cornerstone to their success<sup>4</sup>.

Although the existence and bravery of Kurdish women has recently given way to different works of investigative journalism, such as documentaries, newspaper articles, and a handful of non-fiction books<sup>5</sup>, Kurdish women and the struggle they represent have largely been excluded from fiction works. With a growing need for diversity and intersectionality in the feminist movement and in literary works in general, it seems pertinent to include more stories of women that have played important roles in advancing the feminist movement in other parts of the world. In a movement where there is an overwhelming celebration of the achievements of White-Western European women, stories about women from different background who have also contributed to the advancement of women's rights can help mitigate the ethnocentrism that still surrounds feminism. It is also important to re-write the roles that women have had within nationalism and post-colonial revolutions, to give them a space from which they are oftentimes erased to make way for male narratives that dismisses their contributions (33)<sup>6</sup>. This project seeks to use creative fiction and creative non-fiction in the form of a biomythography to fill the gap in the narrative of revolutionary women in the Kurdish fight for freedom.

Documentaries and works of non-fiction are all great ways to tell stories of Kurdish women. However, these type of works tend to reach a limited audience—people who already

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<sup>4</sup> Rédaction KAF. "Zarife Khatun: La Première Femme Combattante Kurde Et La Héroïne Des Révoltes De Dersim - Koçgiri." *Kurdistan Au Féminin*, 2 June 2020, [kurdistan-au-feminin.fr/2020/06/02/zarife-khatun-la-premiere-femme-combattante-kurde-et-la-heroine-des-revoltes-de-dersim-kocgiri/?fbclid=IwAR25voCq1QljDBXgxKVf0vRL8Rhh4V8d9Ge77BrFGYbGo4bJr7-3tqz9M1A](http://kurdistan-au-feminin.fr/2020/06/02/zarife-khatun-la-premiere-femme-combattante-kurde-et-la-heroine-des-revoltes-de-dersim-kocgiri/?fbclid=IwAR25voCq1QljDBXgxKVf0vRL8Rhh4V8d9Ge77BrFGYbGo4bJr7-3tqz9M1A).

<sup>5</sup> Sauloy, Mylène, director. *Kurdistan, La Guerre Des Filles*. ARTE, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIlY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIlY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK). Accessed 2020. *The Brave Female Fighters Winning the War against ISIS*, 60 Minutes Australia, 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg).

<sup>6</sup> Pérez, Emma. "Feminism-in-Nationalism: Third Space Feminism in Yucatán's Socialist Revolution." *The Decolonial Imaginary Writings Chicanas into History*, by Pérez Emma, Indiana Univ. Press, 1999, pp. 31–54.

have a certain knowledge on the Kurdish struggle, or who are particularly interested in the fight against ISIS, geopolitical strategy, and similar topics. Using fiction will open the possibility for different types of readers to learn about the lives of Kurdish women; it will allow the stories to reach a broader audience, and hopefully draw more interest to non-fiction works.

For that, I will be focusing on the story of Sakine Cansiz, one of the two women that in the late 1970s founded the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). This militant organization would be designated as a terrorist group ten years later by the Turkish government and many other countries, including the United States<sup>7</sup>. Murdered in Paris in 2013 in a crime that, although officially unsolved, was linked to the Turkish secret services<sup>8</sup>, Cansiz remains relatively unknown to the Western world in spite of the fact that her contributions to the women's movement paved the way for the women that fought and defeated ISIS.

Knowledge of historical figures that played key roles in women's revolution is critical to help move forward women's narratives, and in this case, that of Kurdish women. By approaching the experiences of Kurdish women, in particular that of revolutionary icons, we can illustrate the lives and stories that brought these women to rebellion and amplify their voices. Using fiction becomes a way to introduce these characters into popular culture. A biomythography, in particular, can prove to be a suitable genre to transition from non-fiction to fiction. We can also help more people become familiar with how gender struggles take place in different countries and cultural contexts, and how different social categorizations can hinder women in said contexts. For this purpose, I will use the term 'intersectionality' that refers to the importance of

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<sup>7</sup> Bureau of Counterterrorism. *Foreign Terrorist Organizations - United States Department of State*. 4 Nov. 2020, [www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/](http://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/).

<sup>8</sup> Mîro Mîro. *Spécial Investigation, Trois Femmes à Abattre (Canal+)*. 5 Apr. 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxZEE-egOWA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxZEE-egOWA).

looking at the different dimensions that contribute to someone's marginalization (2)<sup>9</sup>. In Cansiz's case, the fact that she was a woman, that she was Kurdish in a predominantly Turkish population, and that she was Alevi Muslim in a predominantly Sunni Muslim population, were all elements that contributed to her marginalization. This multidimensionality of Cansiz's marginalization can inform intersectionality in other contexts.

## II. Who is Sakine Cansiz?

Sakine Cansiz was born to a family of survivors. Her parents had both witnessed one of the largest massacres perpetrated by the Turkish army on Kurdish soil, the massacre of Dersim in 1937-38. Following an uprising in the Kurdish-populated city of Dersim, the Turkish army repressed the rebellion, which resulted in 13,160 deaths and more than 10,000 displaced people. The repression techniques seemed to be particularly brutal, and this episode remained heavily engrained in the family and in the town where Cansiz would be born and raised. This connection to the past would not be the only thing to play an important role in her journey to become a revolutionary; her affront to gender roles and the position of women in her society will also fuel her quest for freedom. Aysel Dogan, Cansiz's childhood friend and PKK comrade explains:

“we were our mothers' daughters, not our fathers'—they were the first ones to work with the Turkish State. [...] Our mothers would speak Kurdish to us when our fathers weren't home, but as soon as they'd come back, it was over. This situation pushed certain men and women to question themselves, they opposed and refused this oppression. I'm Kurdish. I'm Alevi. Sakine was one of them.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Nash, Jennifer C. “Re-Thinking Intersectionality.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 89, no. 1, 2008, pp. 1–15., doi:10.1057/fr.2008.4.

<sup>10</sup> Sauloy, Mylène, director. *Kurdistan, La Guerre Des Filles*. ARTE, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK). Accessed 2020.

Cansiz survived prison and torture at the hands of the Turkish state, and through it all, the way she envisaged women's liberation to go hand in hand with the liberation of Kurdistan was of great importance. Gültan Kışanak, who was a comrade and cellmate of Cansiz in Diyarbakir tells of their time in jail:

“In Diyarbakir's prison, they dishonored humanity. The torture they practiced on us, men and women, sought to humiliate us. They did everything they could for us to abandon our cause, to deny our identity, for us not to have any friendship bonds anymore and make sure that we argue all the time. [...] Sakine was brave, she wasn't scared. In our cell, she organized a true network of friendship and solidarity. For all of us, she became a symbol of resistance.”<sup>11</sup>

Cansiz, in fact, conceived women's freedom to be at the center of the success of any liberation or revolutionary struggle. For this reason, she thought that it was of utmost importance that women stood in solidarity with one another, in spite of the hardships that incarceration could present<sup>12</sup>. This project attempts to depict the different aspects of Sakine Cansiz's evolution from a girl in rural Kurdistan to the founder of a political movement.

I learned about Sakine Cansiz by coincidence, when I was living in Bozeman, Montana. I had previously spent five years living in Turkey and, in spite of my deep interest in the Kurdish cause, I had not heard of Sakine Cansiz until I tuned into a French documentary about the role of Kurdish women in the fight against ISIS that briefly mentioned Cansiz's contributions to the

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*The Brave Female Fighters Winning the War against ISIS*, 60 Minutes Australia, 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg).

<sup>11</sup> Sauloy, Mylène, director. *Kurdistan, La Guerre Des Filles*. ARTE, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWdnAW83KTA&list=PL87xgIWDVn8jFWIIY0o3gahUDZBpSiQK). Accessed 2020. *The Brave Female Fighters Winning the War against ISIS*, 60 Minutes Australia, 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uy003c6EWg).

<sup>12</sup> Cansiz, Sakine. *Sara: Prison Memoir of a Kurdish Revolutionary*. Translated by Janet Biehl, Pluto Press, 2019.

Kurdish struggle and her tragic death. I could not believe that I had lived in Turkey for five years and not heard a word about her from women in the mainstream feminist movement or from those who were closer to the Kurdish cause, not even from the detractors of the Kurdish movement and the PKK who seemed to always mention men as those primarily involved in the fight.

I started then learning more about her and her importance in the women's movement and within the Kurdish struggle. I was impressed by her achievements and disappointed that so little was known about her. Even when I asked some of my Kurdish friends who were not that involved politically, they were able to name a great number of male fighters, but they would not know what to answer when I asked them if they knew who Sakine Cansiz was. This project presented a great opportunity to ensure that more people learned about Sakine Cansiz and her contributions to the Kurdish and Women's movements.

### III. Methods

Carla Rice, Andrea LaMarre, Nadine Changfoot, and Patty Douglas<sup>13</sup> define biomythography as “an artful approach to self-invention/narration that weaves together history, biography, and imagination in the re/telling of lives” (228). This thesis will be a combination of literary research, biographical research, and creative work. For my preliminary work, I researched Sakine Cansiz, her life, and the influence she had in the Kurdish struggle and the women's liberation movement in general. Not only did I read different newspaper articles and watch documentaries pertaining to her life, but I also read the autobiographies written by Cansiz herself<sup>14</sup>. It was critically important for me that my work remained respectful of the culture and

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<sup>13</sup> Rice, Carla, et al. “Making Spaces: Multimedia Storytelling as Reflexive, Creative Praxis.” *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2018, pp. 222–239., doi:10.1080/14780887.2018.1442694.

<sup>14</sup> Cansiz, Sakine. *Sara: My Whole Life Was a Struggle*. Translated by Janet Biehl, Pluto Press, 2018.

Cansiz, Sakine. *Sara: Prison Memoir of a Kurdish Revolutionary*. Translated by Janet Biehl, Pluto Press, 2019.

struggle that the Kurdish people have led during the past decades. For that reason, I contacted people within different Kurdish organizations and interviewed people involved in the Kurdish movement, who provided me with valuable information and guidance in the form of reading and articles, but also some of them shared their experiences within the movement. To name a few, Cevat Dargin, a Ph.D. student at Princeton University, provided me with information about Dersim, the town where Cansiz was born and where she grew up, and explained to me the influence that both Kurdish and Alevi culture had in her development as a revolutionary. Firat Baran, member of the CDK-F in Paris, helped me understand Cansiz's role in the Kurdish struggle and shared with me anecdotes about her. These conversations allowed me to get a better idea of the legacy of Sakine Cansiz.

When constructing the narrative for this project, I wanted to go use Anzaldúa's autohistoria teoria for the framework. AnaLouise Keating, Anzaldúa's co-writer and co-editor, gives the following definition for autohistoria:

Autohistoria-teoria describes a relational form of autobiographical writing that includes both life story and self-reflection on the storytelling process. Writers of autohistoria-teoria blend their cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and/or other forms of theorizing. By so doing, they create interwoven individual and collective identities. (241-242).

This theory parallels the concept of biomythography, by blending actual life events with reflection done in the time when it is written, giving room to the creation of a narrative that contains fiction and non-fiction. The approach to Sakine Casiz's story used Autohistoria teoría to

explore and reconstruct her life in a way that allowed for reflection and growth. It is the Autohistoria teoría that guides the narrative used to build the biomythography.

In her essay “Now let us shift...conocimiento...inner work, public acts,” Anzaldua (2015) talks about seven steps needed to reach self-knowledge: (1)*el arretrato*/the rupture; (2)*Neplanta*/torn between ways; (3) *Coatlícue Desconocimiento*/The cost of knowing; (4) The call for transformation *El compromiso*/The commitment; (5) Putting *Coyolxauhqui* together/creating new personal collective stories; (6) The blow up/A clash of realities; and (7) Shifting realities/Spiritual activism. These seven steps, although not inherent to the autohistoria teoría, allow an understanding as to how one can reach knowledge and insight. Once I was able to map out Cansiz’s life, I identified the events that corresponded to each stage and grouped them into different chapters. Approaching Cansiz’s life through the lens of these seven steps gave me a better idea of different episodes in her life that could have been important for her to reach consciousness and how this consciousness helped shape her life as a revolutionary.

Although for the full biomythography all seven stages will be represented, for this creative thesis, I propose four stages, represented in the four chapters delivered. The chapters here delivered are not in chronological order. Chapters 2 and 3 present, in fact, multiple vignettes that correspond to different episodes of Cansiz’s life. These episodes are from different time periods but still belong to the same step, showing how the path to *conocimiento* is not a linear one. There are multiple events in her life that could have contributed to reaching that step, and then later on different events that could have represented a setback. The way the chapters are organized represents a way of conveying the narrative to the reader more than an attempt to project a linearity in Anzaldua’s steps. This absence of linearity between chapters also gives the

opportunity to the reader to unmake the narrative proposed, read it in a different order, and make different connections throughout the reading experience. The ability to have different approaches to the text speaks to the healing put forward as one of the key elements of Anzaldúa's autohistoria teoría.

- Chapter 1 represents the third stage, *Coatlicue Desconocimiento*/the cost of knowing. This stage is about confronting the evils that have taken control over one's mind and body; the knowledge that exposes those evils becomes the thing that removes them<sup>15</sup>. In this chapter Sakine is able to escape from prison, only to be caught shortly after because the male comrades in her party did not help her with her plan. This chapter depicts the struggles that being a woman brings for her, despite the fact that the party she belongs to seems to favor the involvement of women in the struggle. This chapter is presented in 3<sup>rd</sup> person, from Sakine Cansiz's point of view.
- Chapter 2 represents the first stage, *el arrebato*/the rupture. This stage represents the moments that shatter knowledge otherwise taken for granted and that takes us out of our comfort zone and into reflection. In this chapter, we have different episodes of Sakine's life that had an impact in her desire to become a revolutionary. We are able to see what exactly shaped her mind and the importance it had in her decisions. This chapter is told as short vignettes that Sakine would have written from her cell while in prison. They are in 1<sup>st</sup> person, from Sakine's point of view.
- Chapter 3 represents the fifth stage, Putting *Coyolxauhqui* together/creating new personal collective stories. This stage calls for a re-writing of the story, this time with more

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<sup>15</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. "Now Let Us Shift...conocimiento...inner Work, Public Acts." *Light in the Dark Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, edited by AnaLouise Keating, by Anzaldúa Gloria, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 117–159.

awareness of the different elements that constitute cultures and viewpoints; there is a mestizaje that allows one to choose the views, taking control of the transformation process. One of the most interesting elements of Sakine's life is her friendship with Abdullah Ocalan, Apo, another founder and the chairman of the PKK. Their friendship reflects the efforts and difficulties when trying to reach gender equality within the party. This parity of genders reflects the attempt of Kurdish women, with Sakine at the forefront, to move forward with a new narrative where women are given a place that defies previous cultural assumptions. For that reason, I decided to make of their friendship the center of this chapter. It is written in 3rd person, from Sakine's point of view.

- Chapter 4 represent the second stage, *Neplanta*/torn between ways. This stage is one of transformation, a zone between changes that allows to question the different ideas, prescriptions, and identities of family and culture. In this chapter, written in the form of the draft of a letter that Sakine would send to her lawyer, Sakine looks back and reflects on her marriage, which was necessary for her to be able to leave her home and dedicate herself to the revolution. This letter shows her difficulties overcoming beliefs about marriage and womanhood that are pervasive in her culture.

To decide what type of approach to biomythography would better fit my objectives, I read several different literary works of this nature. In *Alias Olympia*, a novel by Eunice Lipton (1992), the author mixes her own narrative about her search of Victorine Meurent, a painter also known as the favorite model of Édouard Manet, along with the narrative from Meurent's imagined perspective. This was an interesting approach, and I integrated some of her techniques. For instance, in the Preface of my biomythography, I adopt the point of view of a third person,

Zozan, a woman who would have met Cansiz when she lived in Germany as a girl and that became interested in her work. Zozan would be the one compiling the work and writing the novel. Although my intention was not to have the narrator constantly intervening in the story, I felt like it would give me the freedom to comment on some aspects of Cansiz's life.

In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* by Maxine Hong Kingston (1979), coinciding with Anzaldúa's autohistoria teoria, the narrator fills in the blanks of her childhood and of her parents' life in China with fiction, sometimes imaginative elements. Cansiz's autobiography, as it is to be expected for someone with such a long commitment to the Kurdish cause, is very heavy in information and events. We gain perspective of her life and the events that shaped her and influenced her. There are, however, many scenes and moments that could be explored more in depth, and brought forward to provide a deeper illustration of her experiences. This biomythographical project is using Kingston's biomythography approach and its closeness to autohistoria teoría in blending fiction and non-fiction in the form of dialogue, details, and scenes in the way that Kingston did in her novel, to provide different elements about Cansiz's life. Kingston's use of imaginative elements gives her the freedom to choose not only how she tells what she knows, but also how she approaches the parts that she ignores.

Two other works that were important in the way I decided to approach this project were *In The Time of The Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez (1994) and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Diaz (2007). *In The Time of The Butterflies* is the fictional account of the life of the four Mirabal sisters, three of which were important female revolutionaries in the Trujillo Era in Dominican Republic, and its important role in my writing process will be detailed a little further in this framework. Both works, however, were incredibly important in terms of language and inclusion of different linguistic elements in my project. These novels were written

by Latin-American authors and depicted characters that existed in a multicultural and multilingual reality. The authors' incorporation of Spanish language adds authenticity to the narratives. For that reason, I decided to recognize some places where I could include some words in both Turkish and Kurdish as I saw it would add to this notion of multilingualism which was, after all, a big part of the Kurdish struggle.

When writing this project, it was important to also refer to scholarly works on transculturalism and feminism. Saidiya Hartman<sup>16</sup> provides a better understanding on how not to approach certain scenes and elements when writing about traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups—such as scenes of sexual violence or torture. When trying to depict such scenes, those outside the group can unrightfully claim ownership of the experience of that particular group (52). In this project, it was important to illustrate the challenges that come with being a Kurd in Turkey, and how Sakine Cansiz lived through these challenges, all while avoiding ownership of her experiences. Hartman's work also gave me a different perspective as far as how to depict the instances of torture that Cansiz was subjected to. As I started narrowing down my writing plan, I decided to exclude altogether the mentions of torture at this moment. Although this does not necessarily mean that I would not add it in further chapters, I feel that writing this episodes requires a closer look to the way these events have impacted the Kurdish people, especially Kurdish women. In the future, to better construct the narrative surrounding torture, I hope to work with Kurdish women to find a way to depict these events in a way that will not cause further harm to those directly impacted.

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<sup>16</sup> Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

Edward Said<sup>17</sup> equally helped me raise questions about the power dynamic between populations and the differences between dominant and dominated cultures. Many of the elements in his work were eye opening as to how the depiction of other cultures, more so Middle-Eastern cultures, were mostly decided by Western European men. Orientalism comes from the need to approach the “Orient” from a position of power and to achieve this, a reductive approach to the region is put in place, where all the nuances and dimensions of what occurs is categorized using generalizations such as “the Semites,” “the Muslim mind,” among others (239). The implications that this could have in the way we perceive the region, and thus Turkey, were important to consider. When writing the biomythography, I paid special attention to the nuances of the Kurdish struggle in Turkey, and wanted to make sure that the characters were well-rounded and represented the complexities of an individual. To write this project, I extensively researched the historical time period during which Sakine lived with the objective of being as accurate and neutral as possible. For that purpose, I consulted different sources and made sure that I had the necessary information to write the story in the appropriate historical frame.

The work of Tong and Fernandes Botts<sup>18</sup> was particularly important in making me aware of how feminism, although having common components around the world, also has different elements that respond to each cultural and racialized context in terms of their approach to non-Western feminist views within their movement. Post-colonial feminism, which was the most influential in my work, focuses on feminist issues around the world and tries to explicitly include ideas and texts from women in non-Western countries (238). This approach to feminism helped me focus on the way that Cansiz’s culture could have influenced her journey both as the

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<sup>17</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Penguin Books, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Tong, Rosemarie, and Tina Fernandes Botts. “Women of Color Feminisms.” *Feminist Thought: a More Comprehensive Introduction*, by Rosemarie Tong, Westview Press, 2014, pp. 211–253.

historical figure and as the main character of my biomythography. Post-colonial feminism also seemed like the most pertinent approach since colonization is a notion that emerges frequently when discussing the Kurdish issue—even Cansiz herself referred to Kurdistan as a colony. It is then important to approach her life through a post-colonial lens and the role it would have played in her way of seeing her place as a Kurdish woman in her society and in her struggle.

#### IV. Challenges

There were different areas that presented me with the need of more in depth exploration or revision on my approaches to the subject. One very important element that I had to remember throughout the writing process was that I am not Kurdish. I do believe that Cansiz’s message and struggle can resonate with women from different backgrounds all over the world<sup>19</sup>, but I also believe that it is important to keep in mind her ethnic and cultural background, since her background would shape her struggle and without any doubt contributed extensively to her development as a revolutionary. Telling Cansiz’s story contributes to diversify approaches to feminism, helping build a Third World Feminism as opposed to a feminism defined and controlled by a white majority (165)<sup>20</sup>.

To keep the utmost respect for her culture of origin, I did the following. First, I got in touch with Kurdish people from Turkey, by reaching out to Kurdish organizations in France, and through friends of my Kurdish friends. When talking to them, I was able to learn more about their experiences as Kurds in Turkey, but also their perspective on Sakine Cansiz and her legacy.

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<sup>19</sup> Polat, Erol. “Argentina: Homenaje a Las Luchadoras Kurdas Sakine Cansız, Fidan Doğan y Leyla Şaylemez.” *Kurdistan America Latina*, 7 Jan. 2019, [kurdistanamericalatina.org/argentina-homenaje-a-las-luchadoras-kurdas-sakine-cansiz-fidan-dogan-y-leyla-saylemez/](http://kurdistanamericalatina.org/argentina-homenaje-a-las-luchadoras-kurdas-sakine-cansiz-fidan-dogan-y-leyla-saylemez/).

<sup>20</sup> Anzaldúa, Gloria. “Speaking in Tongues: The Third World Woman Writer.” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, by Cherrie Moraga and Anzaldúa Gloria, 4th ed., SUNY Press, 2015, pp. 163–172.

Second, I decided to learn Kurmanci Kurdish. This was an important part of the research process and of the construction of the narrative, not only because the Kurdish language is central to the identity of many Kurdish people, and is at the core of their struggle, but also because learning the language signified a demonstration of respect toward this historical figure.

It is important to clarify that Sakine's dialect of Kurdish was not Kurmanci but Zazaki. However, Kurmanci is the most spoken dialect in Turkish Kurdistan, so it seemed appropriate to learn it. By learning the language, I got a better idea of Kurdish culture as well, the things that they prioritize and the way they construct their culture around their language. Knowing Turkish as well, I was able to see in which aspects these languages are similar—for instance in the grammar and the construction of idioms—which was interesting to better approach the relationship between Kurds and Turks.

Another element that was hard was the idea of fictionalizing history. With there being autobiographical documentation of Cansiz's life, writing a novel became more challenging. The fact that an account of her life already existed made the stakes higher in terms of finding a different way to tell an already well-known story. Reading *In The Time of The Butterflies* was particularly helpful to me. In that book, Alvarez tackles a fictional account of the Mirabal sisters, important revolutionary figures in the Dominican Republic during the times of Trujillo. To be able to read that work and see how it was possible to fictionalize the lives of historical characters, even when there was already extensive information about them, was very important. She writes,

So what you will find here are the Mirabals of my creation, made up but, I hope, true to the spirit of the real Mirabals. In addition, though I had researched the facts of the regime, and events pertaining to Trujillo's thirty-one-year despotism, I sometimes took

liberties—by changing dates, by reconstructing events, and by collapsing characters or incidents. (324)

Reading the note that Alvarez wrote about her experience with her novel allowed me to understand that, all while trying to maintain historical accuracy, it was permissible to take certain licenses when writing my novel. This allowed me to look at it less as a historical text and to turn Cansiz into Sakine, or even Sara, refocusing my writing and work on developing the characters, the dialogue and other elements without being in permanent fear of it not being historically accurate.

It was, of course, important to keep the greater historical and cultural context. Even if the specific dates of when something occurred were not always relevant for the bigger picture, the historic developments that were taking place in Turkey at a time were crucial to better understand her story. That is the reason why I engaged in investigating and properly portraying the context of the country at the time. I was lucky enough to where I could get in touch with people with vast knowledge in the history of the Kurdish struggle. I was also able to discover and learn more about the culture to make sure that the main premise is well respected and portrayed correctly. There was of course the necessity of respecting the cultural values and emotions at the time. Even though I lived in Turkey and I am familiar with Turkish culture, it was important to study better Kurdish culture and more importantly the culture of Dersim, where Cansiz is from. To maintain accuracy, I made sure I was constantly revisiting my assumptions and that I was going to people that I knew were knowledgeable about the topic.

## V. Future Work

Even though this thesis concludes my time as a Master's student in the program, I want to continue working on this book. As I move forward, the feedback I have received will guide me through revising and continuing my creative work. I plan on writing the remaining chapters and this is something I would like to achieve within the next year.

I'm planning on writing 5 more chapters, 3 of which would correspond to the seven stages of *conocimiento*:

- Break: Zozan arrives in the Kurdish Center in Paris, and she talks with some of the distraught people she finds. We get a close idea of the commotion.
- Chapter 5: *El compromiso*. This chapter recounts the sacrifices that Sakine had to make to follow her revolutionary ideals. It includes elements such as her marriage and subsequent divorce, and things she would have gone through in jail.
- Chapter 6: *Blow up*. Sakine travels to Europe and starts a life there. This chapter will deal with the difficulties of adapting to a new country, while remaining involved in the Kurdish movement.
- Chapter 7: *Spiritual activism*. This chapter narrates the last days of Sakine, as she reflects on how the different events she has lived through have facilitated her knowledge and consciousness and how these events have shaped the way she intends to live by. This chapter ends the day when she is shot.
- Epilogue: Zozan closes the book by reflecting on the importance that Sakine had in the movement. She talks about the investigation into her death and the connections that the Turkish government is said to have with it.

Once the biomythography is finished, I would strive to put together a reading group composed by Kurdish people in order to get feedback on the narrative. There are two important

areas that I would like to concentrate on. The first one is making sure that the way in which I represent the culture is accurate. For that, it will not be enough to find Kurdish readers, but they have to be from Dersim. Since the majority of population in Dersim is both Kurdish and Alevi, this intersection plays an important role in the identity of the inhabitants. The second area to consider for feedback would be that of the Kurdish struggle and the origins of the PKK. I want to make sure that this biomythography correctly describes the role that Cansiz played in the PKK's founding and in the women's involvement in the movement.

After polishing the work, I would like to submit it to literary agents in the United States and attempt to have it published. For that purpose, the best course of action would be to find an agent who would be willing to work with me. This book could fall under the category of "Women's Fiction," so this would be a good way to narrow down the literary agents who could be interested in the work.

## VI. Conclusion

Fiction can be a great tool to reach larger masses. Women have, throughout the years, struggled to be acknowledged in different realms, and as a result many women stories remain unheard. This work was an attempt to fill in a gap in that area. What was here proposed was a biomythography that would allow me to blend fiction and non-fiction to provide an account of Sakine Cansiz's life. In spite of the challenges it was interesting to explore this type of writing and I look forward to working more on it.

While working on this project, I was able to get a better sense of the amount of research that it takes to write about a historical character. Before writing this biomythography, I had

mostly worked on fiction. Writing this biomythography allowed me to expand my experience in terms of writing and craft, and allowed me to learn more about different genres.

Another positive take away was being able to learn more about Sakine Cansiz and about the Kurdish struggle. During my research, I was able to get in touch with different people involved in the Kurdish struggle in the US, the UK, and France. It was very enlightening to get to learn about multiple perspectives and the influence Cansiz has had in so many people across contexts and generations.

I believe it would be of great importance to have a narrative that talks about the life of Sakine Cansiz, in hopes that more people in the US, who otherwise do not know about her story, learn about her. As an intersectional feminist myself, I believe in the importance of learning about women around the world who have contributed to the women's cause. Stories of women's resistance in other cultural contexts can provide us with tools to improve women's condition in our own. Western-centered approaches to feminism would have feminists in the West believe that they have always been pioneers in terms of change and challenge to patriarchal structures. Learning about the journeys of women such as Cansiz can help re-shape this approach to include contributions from women in different parts of the world and contribute to greater intersectionality.

## GLOSSARY

**Abla/Abi:** Turkish. Means “big sister” and “big brother” and is used after the name of a person who is slightly older than the speaker.

**Babî/Maye:** Zazaki dialect. Kurdish. Means “dad” and “mom.”

**Bakur:** Kurdish. Means “north.” Used to refer to the northern part of Kurdistan, also known as Turkish Kurdistan.

**Bashur:** Kurdish. Means “south.” Used to refer to the southern part of Kurdistan, also known as Iraqi Kurdistan.

**Başkanım:** Turkish. Means “my president” and in this case it’s used to refer to the chairman of the party.

**Bey/Hanım:** Turkish. Means “Mr.”/ “Ms.” And it is used after the name of the person.

**CDK-F:** *Centre Democratique Kurde en France (fr)*. Kurdish Democratic Center in France.

**Cemevi:** Alevi house of worship.

**Dapîr:** Kurdish. Means “grandmother.”

**Dede:** Turkish. Means “grandfather” and in Alevism refers to the religious leader.

**Nazar:** Turkish. Means “evil eye.” Refers to the belief that envy or bad energy can spoil something.

**PDKI:** *Parti Democratique du Kurdistan Iranian (fr)*. Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iran).

**PKK:** *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (kr)*. Kurdistan’s Workers Party

**Öğretmen:** Turkish. Means “teacher.” Used after the teacher’s name as one you use Mr. X in English.

**Şehîd namirin:** Kurdish. Means “martyrs are immortal.” Refers to the idea that those who sacrifice their lives for the struggle don’t die but instead live in the memory of those they leave behind.

## PREFACE

They found Sakine's body one morning, in 147 Rue Lafayette. She had been shot, along with two other Kurdish activists, Fidan and Rojbin, in the center of Paris. I will never forget that day. January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013. It was a Thursday, and I'd been tossing and turning all night with a burning in my gut. The headline that popped up on my phone that morning confirmed that horrible premonition, and I wondered if that bullet had been the sharp pain I had felt in my head the night before. News were traveling fast between France and Germany, but by the time Behar called to tell me, I had already left the Berlin Hauptbahnhof and was on a train headed to Paris.

*Isn't that the sister of that guy you dated once, mom?* She told me on the phone, then, as if not very sure. *Haydar, was it?* God! Open up to your daughter once and she'll use it against you forever. But I didn't really care, and neither did most of the Kurds in Berlin. Nearly forty years had passed since then—some of them were not in Germany at the time, most of them weren't even born. Maybe one or two people have mentioned it, never in front of Shivan, of course. But Shivan knew it, too. He knew that Sakine was the little sister of that one guy I had dated for a couple of months back in my twenties.

I didn't *really* think about Haydar until later on, sitting with my head against the window, trying to make sense of all that was happening. We had already left the city, and we were surrounded by leafless trees and empty fields covered by snow. Snow. I remembered then how the three of us, Haydar, Sakine, and I, had gone out to see the first snowfall of the season back in '73. It had actually been a thing I liked to do on my own, wander around Berlin as the tiny snowflakes accumulated on my wavy brown hair flowing out of a red beanie. But that year we were together, Haydar and I, so, in my naïveté, I believed that maybe he would like to go wander

around with me. What a surprise it had been, when he had showed up with his little sister. All these years later, there I was, wondering if, maybe, I should call him to tell him that I was sorry. We hadn't talked ever since he left back to Turkey in 1974. By that time, I was more than glad to let him go and lose track of him. The day they left I thought it was all said and done, but, as fate would have it, I would be captivated by the accomplishments of Sakine with a passion that I was unable to name. That's why I followed her trail during all these years.

Ten rounds were shot, nine of which would lodge in the skulls of the three women, three in each. As I was making my way over there, Kurds from all over Germany must have added me to at least ten different WhatsApp groups where I didn't know more than half of the participants; most of them had Sakine, Fidan, Rojbin one way or another on their profile picture. I kept trying to follow the conversations, but the reception wasn't that good and there wasn't any wi-fi I could connect to. It seemed to me, however, that all that was going on was speculation. Some were saying it had been an inside job from the PKK, a rivalry turned deadly, some that it had been the Turkish government. The latter made more sense to me; this had Turkey written all over it.

The PKK and the Turkish government had been in a ceasefire for a couple of months back then, as part of peace negotiations to see if they could finally reach an agreement and basically not kill each other anymore. I would always say they were foolish and naive, whenever asked about it—not that a lot of people did. Some people at the Kurdish center still cared about the fact that I was my father's eldest daughter—my dad still enjoyed great respect, nearly fifteen years after his death, for being committed to building a strong Kurdish community in Germany. The elders, those who missed him the most, would sometimes ask me questions on current

affairs, almost hoping that his wisdom had somehow transferred to me. When they asked me about the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish government, I was clear as could be.

“It’s never going to work out,” I told them. “You just wait and see. It’s all a facade.”

“Zozi, love of God!” Pir Ibo had told me, rolling his eyes. “No need to be so cynical.”

“Shame on you for asking her,” Hedayat had retorted. “She’s just going to do *nazar* to the whole thing.”

After I’d heard him say that, I’d just walked away. Silly old men! As if, for some reason, my words could be so powerful that they would make the whole thing fall through. It just didn’t make any sense. But for some people it did, and that was probably the reason why Behar wanted me to be the first one to know what had happened that morning .

“Did you hear about the sister of that guy you dated, mom? What was his name—Haydar?” She said as soon as I picked up, then quickly added, “Anyway, she was shot, it’s all over the news. Grandpa’s friends were right, mom, you jinxed it.”

Ugh, Behar, don’t be stupid. I wanted to shout, but I held back. What jinx? Ridiculous. It was bound to happen; anyone could’ve predicted that. But there was no need to lash out at the poor kid—well, not so much of a kid anymore, but still, she was just trying to help.

“I know,” I said, playing with the fingers of the gloves I had rested over my leg. “But I didn’t jinx anything, ah? More like I told them so.” I could feel her roll her eyes on the other end. It wouldn’t be the Behar I knew if she didn’t. “Anyway, listen up, I’m on my way to Paris—don’t ask. I need you to keep an eye on your dad while I’m away.”

“You’re really going?”

“Oh, bup bup bup—”

“Yeah, sure, don’t ask. Anyway. Karl is out of town, so I’ll call dad to see if he wants to spend the night here in our place since he doesn’t have to see his face.”

“Ugh, not again Behar, please. Your dad is fine with Karl, believe me.”

“One would think, right? After six years and two kids, but I know he’s still mad because I didn’t marry a Kurdish man.”

“Oh, please, he’s not. That’s just you being dramatic. Now just go and call him. Take good care of him, and let me know if you learn something else about Sakine.”

“Will do.”

I’m a bad liar, that much I know, and my daughter knows it, too. But what was I supposed to say? *Yes, your father still thinks you betrayed us by marrying a German guy?* German, of all things! She probably thought she was doing right by us by coming back to Germany. Oh, my Behar, sweet Behar who, had she been born a couple of years later would have for sure been named Sakine. Or Sara. But when she was born, in late 1982, PKK wasn’t still much of a thing, well at least not in Houston, where we lived at the time. We had moved there because of Shivan’s job in a petroleum company and most of the Kurdish people we met were from Bashur, so we didn’t get a whole lot of news about what was going on in Turkey. We were still somewhat involved with the PDKE back in Germany, but the information we got from other groups was really minimal, at least before 1984. Only then, when the armed resistance broke out, did we start believing that they were the real deal. And among the names, one of a woman started to make rounds. Sara, that was her nom de guerre, and her bravery and resistance was constantly being praised. Sara? It didn’t particularly ring a bell, but the more I heard about her, the more I felt like I had met her before. It would take an old newspaper article for me to understand who she was, and that I knew her. It was Sakine. Once I realized that, I wondered if maybe, just

maybe, the time we had shared and what we had talked about almost a decade ago had influenced her in some way.

For the first time in a long time, I got dizzy on the train. Once I closed my eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, I realized I hadn't asked for a seat facing front like I always did. I just took the first seat that they offered. There was this overwhelming feeling of confusion that was overtaking me. I wasn't sure any more about what I was doing, where I was going to go once I got to Paris, or who I was going to see... My mind was blank, and I didn't remember a single name of the people I knew there. I wasn't even sure I could find my way around on my own. But at that moment it didn't matter. Sakine was dead. That was the only thing I knew, and she had died before I had built the courage to go up to her and tell her how much she meant to me, to my revolutionary life and how, even if I couldn't do nearly as much as she did, she helped me keep the hope alive that one day there could be a free Kurdistan.

I had been following her for close to 30 years now, ever since she was in jail in Turkey in the early 80s. But I now understand I had admired her for longer than that. I still remember some of the conversations we had while she lived here in Germany, back when Haydar used to leave somewhere in a hurry, or when he wouldn't show up to something I had invited him to and Sakine and I were left alone to talk. Like that one time she showed up instead of him, when I had invited him to eat an ice cream close to their apartment.

"Your brother," I couldn't start the conversation any other way. "He seems distracted lately, is everything okay?"

I guess that had been the hope I was clinging to; the possibility that, somehow, his utter disregard for me was not really about me, but maybe just the result of him going through

something. Sakine had looked at me without saying a word. That was sometime in May, and she had let go of that blonde wig that she used to wear. I always found it strange, but I figured it was something she needed in order to find herself, so I never really asked her about it.

“Haydar is like that,” she’d told me. “One minute here, gone the next. He’s going back to Turkey with Babî and me.”

“Oh,” I’d let out, not knowing what else to say. I wasn’t expecting that. He had talked about staying in Germany, maybe finding a job of sorts, starting a life here. He had never mentioned anything about me, but that was a given, or so I thought. I had been wrong all along.

“I wasn’t sure about how to tell you,” she’d said, and she seemed genuinely sorry. “I don’t know a lot about your relationship with him. I didn’t want to intrude. But I think you deserve to know.”

I knew of the implications this had for our relationship, and Sakine had to know it too, or else she wouldn’t be telling me.

“Before, in my town, girls used to get married really young,” Sakine had started. “I think we’re lucky now it’s not like that anymore.”

I wasn’t really sure what she meant by that. Was that her way of saying that I shouldn’t marry Haydar? I wasn’t even sure I wanted to.

“Women usually have the worst part when they get married,” she’d continued. “They have to stay at home and take care of the children. Many aren’t allowed back to school and cannot have jobs. Look at you. You get to go to uni, and learn new things, exchange ideas with different people. You have a lot going on in your life. You shouldn’t be after my brother, believe me.”

I didn't say anything, at first, because I wasn't about to get life lessons from a fifteen-year-old, but then I grew interested in what she was saying.

"We're not usually welcome in Turkey," she'd said. "As Kurds, and then also as Alevis. Even some Kurds will look at us weird because we're Alevis and not Sunnis."

I was familiar with Alevism, a branch of Shia Islam. Even if we didn't practice at home, we knew the basics, since dad's family in Rojhilat was Shia. But it was true that I hadn't met a lot of Kurds who were Shia.

"But one think is really irritating, you know?" Sakine had continued. "Some talk about the hardships of being a Kurd in Turkey, or about the hardships of being an Alevi around Sunnis, but no one ever talks of the hardships of being a woman in a world of men."

We talked about that for a while, or better yet, she talked about that for a while. She wanted to let me know how much she envied my situation, the fact that I got to be both a Kurd and a woman, and be free to go to school, and say that I was Kurdish out loud. She told me about the things that had happened to Kurds in Bakur, many of which my dad had already told us about, because they were so similar to the things that he had lived in Rojhilat.

"We can keep in touch, once I'm back in Turkey," she had told me, as she was getting ready to leave the ice cream parlor. "Let me give you my address. Just write to me and I'll reply, I promise."

Sakine had scribbled her address on a piece of paper that I had put in my wallet. That was the last time we'd talked alone, her and me. The next time I saw her was the last, when she stayed on the sidewalk across from the park where Haydar had summoned me to tell me it was over. I had known it was coming. I was glad it happened, but my eyes were still welled with tears, so I couldn't wave good-bye at her when she started walking away.

I didn't think a lot about her after she left, and in late 1979 I got married to Shivan and moved to America. But then my sister married a Kurd from Bakur, and it brought memories back, memories of Haydar—but I ended up wondering more about Sakine than about him. I would gather information, here and there. After the coup of 1980 in Turkey, the PKK sent some of their cadres abroad, and a few of them ended up in Germany. Sakine and her resistance in jail was common talk amongst the Kurdish movement in Europe—mostly due to the oddity that she was a woman. As soon as I heard her name, I remembered her, and I told myself it wasn't a coincidence. Ever since that day I knew I had to get as much information on her as I possibly could; I had to follow her from the distance. It wasn't hard for me to win the trust of the Kurds from the PKK; most of them knew my father and a few knew Shivan, and now my sister was married to one of them. They had no problem updating me and sharing information, articles, and even writings, that Sakine would send to them sometimes.

“You're such a stalker,” Behar had told me once when she saw me, my face buried between printed copies of Sakine's letters and writings, as she came back from a block party in our Houston home.

Her tone was between joking and concerned—god this girl was hard to read! I had just looked up and shrugged, then looked back at the papers and kept reading. It was the early 2000s, and I had a good ten years' worth of letters and information laying on that table.

“Are you gonna write a book on her or something?” She had tried again. “That would be the only thing that would make it less creepy, to be honest.”

Women in the movement weren't really that visible until Sakine came along, and that in of itself was a win that we couldn't really claim anywhere else, not even in the diaspora. As a result, I just started reading about her, asking about her, getting to know more about her.

"Well, you know?" I'd said, looking at her. "Maybe I will."

Behar rolled her eyes and left. She never really understood where all my fascination came from. Or at least not until that one night that she got to meet Sakine in person, back in 2008, when she came to Germany for a talk on the Kurdish movement at the Democratic Center for Kurdistan. She was older, of course, a grown woman, but I could only see the girl I had met in '73, when I was hanging out with Haydar at a cafe and he had brought her with him. Back in 2008, I debated for a long time whether I should go to her and reintroduce myself, see if she remembered me, but I decided against it. Behar, who had tagged along that day, didn't seem to understand.

"Just go and tell her," she said. "Hey, remember me? I used to date your brother."

She said it between serious and joking, and I just hit her softly with my elbow before letting out a short laugh. I still can't understand her sense of humor at times, but I laugh not to make her feel bad. I knew it wasn't a good idea. I just wasn't sure how to explain it to Behar. I didn't want to go through the awkward moment of Sakine recalling in her mind amongst the girls who her brother had dated—I knew well enough who Haydar had been—until she remembered me—if she remembered me. Or even worse, maybe she'd remember and remember that she asked me to write to her, address and all, and I didn't. Maybe she would think that I'd done it to get back for the fact that Haydar had left me, as if I were petty like that. From every possible angle, it was a bad idea. So, I just listened to her, and when she was done, I got ready to leave.

Behar, on the other hand, wanted to stay, insisting on going and talking to her—not about me, she swore.

“Come and translate for me,” she told me.

“You’re crazy or what?” I immediately shut her down. “I’ve been doing nothing but that the whole night. My brain is going to explode.”

From Sakine’s Kurmanci—sometime Turkish—to the translator’s German, then from their German to my English so that Behar could understand. I was as good as dead, but Behar insisted and ended up staying in there for at least half an hour more, after which we walked in silence all the way to the station.

“She’s impressive, you know?” She finally told me, as we sat down.

“I know, yes,” I said, not really surprised. “How did you manage?”

“Oh, the translator spoke English.”

There was a bit of an awkward silence. Something had changed. I couldn’t tell what exactly, but I could tell that she felt it, too.

“Do you still have those books you told me about some time ago?” She said, and I felt my heart light up. “I think I might want to read them.”

“I’ll bring them tomorrow when we go for breakfast.”

She didn’t say anything else, but that for me was enough. I was happy the rest of the night, and Shivan was, too, when I went into the library that night to fetch the books.

“So,” he’d said, resting against the door frame. “I take it the talk went well?”

“That’s exactly what she needed,” I’d said, putting the books down. “A little boost.”

“What it took us to get these books,” he’d said, looking at them as if for the first time, trying to familiarize himself with them.

“I told you it was a waste of money,” I’d confessed. “It was obvious she wasn’t gonna read them.”

“Well, she’s going to read them now,” he’d said. “Almost ten years too late, but, hey, isn’t that something?”

I knew where he was going with the conversation, and I wasn’t going to give him that satisfaction. Ever since Behar had started dating Karl we’d had these discussions. I never told Behar, but for some reason Shivan was counting on Karl to encourage her to learn more about her Kurdish heritage, and it was more the fact that he didn’t than the mere fact that he wasn’t Kurdish that made Karl unacceptable to Shivan’s eyes. Well, to a certain degree Karl did connect her to her heritage. He took her back to Germany, where Shivan and I had been born and raised, but for Shivan it wasn’t enough. We ended up moving back a year and a half after they did. By then, Shivan had retired and it seemed only logical to be close to our only daughter. Once in Berlin, I kept trying to convince her to come with me to a few meetings and events of the Kurdish community. It was mostly in the community from Rojhilat, but also the community from Bakur. However, Behar wasn’t interested. First she was busy working, then she started grad school, then kids, and this and that... I gave up.

Then came that night in 2008, the night that Sakine was visiting the Kurdish center. Shivan was supposed to come with me, but he wasn’t feeling well. I was ready to go alone, but before I knew it, Shivan had told Behar, who showed up right as I was leaving. I knew well enough that she was not coming because she was interested in the talk, but rather because her father had probably guilt-tripped her into not letting her poor mom go by herself. I wouldn’t have thought in a million years that because of that night my daughter would become interested in something so important for me if only for a moment—her enthusiasm didn’t last long, much to

my chagrin. However, to me, that brief period of time, those couple of days, maybe of weeks, was proof of how important Sakine was, and how her story had brought many of us closer to the Kurdish struggle. Women, specially, who were so scarce back when I was a girl, and even in my adulthood, were starting to get more involved. There was no people's liberation without women's liberation, and Sakine was the one who taught us that. That was why it was so hard to believe that she was gone.

I checked my watch, less than an hour left to arrive in Paris. That gave me enough time for a short nap, and maybe that was what I needed to get my ideas straight. Maybe once I woke up I would be able to remember the names of the people I knew in Paris, the people who would be there when I made it, so that at least I wouldn't feel like such an outsider. Only then, as I was starting to zone out, did I ask myself whether Haydar would be there. I had heard from some people that he was somewhere in Germany, some others said he was in the Netherlands, and others in France. I didn't really look to corroborate any of that. I didn't care much. But now, I was kind of wondering if he would be there. It wouldn't really make any difference; I probably wouldn't even be able to tell him apart from the other men who would be there. What did he look like now? For all I knew, he could've been there, among the public, that time we went to see her with Behar.

In the beginning, I did befriend Sakine just to get closer to Haydar. Silly strategy, I know, nothing Behar hasn't told me before. But I was nearing twenty, and I was young and in love, or so I thought; the whole dating thing was a novelty for me, a novelty that I could afford because he was Kurdish, and my dad was okay with the relationship thinking it would end in marriage. And then, Haydar happened to have a young and impressionable little sister, so, why not? If she

could get in a good word for me, that would be enough. At first I'd talk to her out of politeness, almost as if wanting to show Haydar how much I cared. But then, once Haydar started losing interest in me, and frankly, me in him, talking with Sakine was still one of my favorite things. I guess, to a certain extent, she did open my mind to things I had taken for granted. At that moment, in that train, I realized that nothing of that mattered, really, at least not anymore. The only thing that mattered was that I had to tell her story. I had to write that book Behar once teased me about. Sakine's memory couldn't fade with her last breath; others needed to know. But not my Kurdish friends, or my Kurdish family, or those who already knew one way or another. My neighbor from Houston, the lady at the little bakery where I'd buy my bread every morning, the parents of my granddaughters' friends...they all needed to know. As the daughter of an activist, I had grown up aware of what it meant to be Kurdish, which Sakine hadn't necessarily, but it was through our conversations that I understood what being Kurdish really meant. She taught me more than she probably thought—and now I wanted to share it.

When I left for America with Shivan in the late 70s, my sisters stayed here, and they would update me from time to time about what was going on, what dad was up to, the comings and goings of the Kurdish movement in Germany. My middle sister, the one who married a Kurd from Bakur, became particularly involved in their side of the movement. It was her who one day mailed me an old newspaper article in Turkish with a translation to German pinned in the back. She sent it around March of '83, when Behar was four months old, but the article dated back to August '80. Inside the folded newspaper was a little note from my sister saying: "Isn't this the little sister of that guy you once dated... Haydar?"

## CHAPTER I

August 1980, Meletî (Malatya)

*Sakine Cansiz, kod adı 'Sara', Escapes Prison in Malatya...*

Ismail Cansiz read the headline that morning in his house in Germany, and he let out a sigh of relief knowing that his daughter had made it out. But that relief was short-lived, because in smaller print, right under that hopeful headline was the outcome of the story.

*...is recaptured a few miles away.*

It was made on purpose, or at least that was how many people felt. Otherwise, why the big headline if she had been caught? Couldn't they have worded it differently? If they wanted, they would have, but it was all part of the plan, just another thing they could do to break them. It was fairly easy, too. When you're in jail, or in exile, any little glimmer of hope gives you something to hang on to, a reason like a rope that you can start climbing. And then, once you realize it was nothing but a mirage, you sink even lower than you were before you begun to climb. Of course, pir Ismail wasn't the only one tricked by the headline. Many of Sakine's friends in that Malatya prison had barely gotten their hands on the paper when they saw her walking down the hallway on her way back to her cell. They were surprised, and it took

them a minute to look back at the paper and read the part they had missed. It was unbelievably hard for Sakine, too, after being so close, having savored freedom if only for a little time, to now be back, head down, humiliated.

“Oh my God, what happened?” Ceyda asked her, as soon as she got back in the cell.

Sakine looked at her but didn't reply, just went back to her bed and lay down in silence. The ward had been like that all morning, silent, gloomy, ever since the soldiers had found the empty bed and, after looking everywhere for her, were finally able to admit that she had just vanished. It was a matter of time; everyone knew it. There was no way Sakine would resign herself to being in prison, her sentence growing longer with every impertinence. When she had first been arrested in 1979, Hüseyin bey, her lawyer, had promised it would be an open and shut case. There was nothing really that the prosecution had to go on, other than a few pamphlets and hearsay. But, of course, back then he didn't really know Sakine well.

“It'd all be better if you just kept your mouth shut,” Hüseyin bey had told her a couple of months later, frustrated, one of those times he had come to let her know, yet again, that her sentence had been extended. “I don't understand what the problem is. You don't need to mean it; you just need to say it.”

“That's exactly the problem. I don't know if you noticed,” she had said, turning around and looking him in the eye. “They don't want me to mean it. They know already that I don't mean it. They just want me to say it so that they can parade me around like another revolutionary who broke. But that's not me.”

“Oh, so that's not you?” He said, almost mockingly. “Then by all means tell me, dear, who are you? No, wait. I'll tell you—someone who's gonna rot in jail!”

She had tried to reach quickly for something to throw at him, but that time all Ferhat bey, the director of the prison, had on his desk was an old notebook and some pens. Instead, she took a deep breath.

“I’m not expecting you to understand the importance of our struggle. I can’t just go to the court and say in front of all my comrades that I regret what I did, and that I respect the Turkish Republic, and that Kurdistan doesn’t exist, and all those things that are expected from me.”

“Words are just words, Sakine,” he said, in a calmer tone. “Just go and say them and get this over with.”

“I’m going to escape, Hüseyin bey, and then there will be no stopping me.”

“C’mon now, Sakine,” he had said, with a look and a tone in his voice that made her feel like a child once again, admonished by her father. “That’s what you say but look around you. This prison is full of men who are, at the very least, stronger if not more capable than you. They haven’t escaped, and you think you could?”

Now, after coming back to her cell, lying in her bed, wrapped in the damp, mold-smelling blanket, those words by Hüseyin bey were echoing in her head. Was it that she wasn’t capable? Was she weak? She couldn’t let him get to her, so she vowed that she would try again, if not one then maybe a thousand times, until she could free herself.

Staring at the wall, she was replaying the whole thing in her mind over and over again, trying to pinpoint where exactly she had gone wrong. Out of all the plans she had come up with—or frankly, out of all the plans anyone had come up with—this one had seemed like the most feasible one. If only the male comrades had listened to her, and had been there, outside, like she had asked them to be... Why was it so hard for them to take her seriously? It was frustrating and enraging at the same time.

Plans will fall through one after another, but she had been the only one to have made it out of the Malatya prison, and still they were not there. Had they thought this plan would fall through, like the others? Or had something else come up, something unavoidable that they had to tend to? The second seemed, in all honesty, a bit less realistic, but it was, all and all, the one that seemed the most comforting. Yes, it wasn't that they didn't believe that she could get the job done. Rather, they had ended up caught in something else and were unable to come. That was it, that was all it was.

It had taken Sakine no more than a couple of days to come up with the plan, shortly after a group escape plan with some male comrades fell through. Where it took them at least a couple of weeks to recover and start looking for other ways to escape, it took Sakine only a couple of hours to start plotting again. This time, however, she had a bigger reason to get out of there as quickly as she could. According to Hüseyin bey, by late August she was to be transferred to the prison in Diyarbakir, a prison that had been just opened yet was already starting to make rounds because of the torture. Sakine knew she had to escape before that day came; otherwise, there was no telling what could happen to her. It was now or never.

And then, a few days after the announcement of her transfer, there had been something. For the past couple of weeks, she had been writing some slogans on the walls. In the beginning, it didn't seem to bother the guards or even the prison director, but then comrades in other cells started writing on the walls as well. Probably seeing the word 'Kurdistan' so many times during cell inspections was the breaking point.

So, that day, Ferhat bey walked down the hallway, to her cell, making as much noise as he possibly could, followed by two soldiers that were holding cans of paint.

“I want these walls pristine by the end of the day,” he told Sakine.

“Why?” she quickly retorted. “Are you afraid of what they have to say? What have these walls witnessed that scares you so much, Ferhat bey?”

“Leave the cans in her cell,” he looked at the soldiers. “I’ll be back to check her work in the morning.”

Nothing else was said, and Sakine grinned a little as he walked away. She would paint the cell alright, but she would also write the slogans again. *Berxwedan Jiyane. Biji Kurdistan.*

As she was painting her cell, she found a set of keys. As crazy as it sounded, they were there, on the floor by her bed. She looked around, certainly it couldn’t be the keys to her own cell. Trying them out one by one would prove the contrary; the third one she tried unlocked the door. They weren’t hidden or anything, but they didn’t seem to have randomly fallen there either. Her bed was against the wall, opposite to the corridor, so it couldn’t have been a careless guard or soldier making their rounds. Could it be a trap? Did someone put them there on purpose to see what she would do? She hesitated for a moment, but quickly reassured herself. It was worth a shot. After all, she had nothing to lose, and what would happen if they caught her wouldn’t be much different to what awaited for her in Diyarbakir.

The first thing she did, after hiding the keys, of course, was rip a piece of paper from the notebook she used as a journal and write a letter to be sent to the comrades who were operating in the city. In Turkish, she detailed the new developments, that she had found the set of keys, and that she would need for someone to wait for her on the other side. At that point, she wasn’t naive, at least not as much as she had once been, and she knew that the male comrades didn’t necessarily take her seriously. It wasn’t always, but there were certain instances when she felt they were dismissive, and it made her angry more than anything. She told them her plan

succinctly because she hadn't finalized all the details yet, but also because she wanted to make sure that if the letter were to fall on the wrong hands it wouldn't ruin the whole thing. It was the last paragraph of the letter.

*I'll wait for the guards in our ward to fall asleep at night. Then, all I'll have to do will be to find a way to walk past the soldiers in the yard, and I'll be outside. I'll use the front door, since it's the one we know best, and I'm less likely to run into any surprises. All I need is for one or two of you to be waiting for me so that we can leave right away. Believe me, if I could do it myself I would, but I'm not familiar with the area, and I'll probably get lost.*

Sakine figured she would need to give a date, so she picked Wednesday 20th a bit at random, and she had made sure that she didn't make it too obvious, so on the bottom left side, above her name, she had written in Kurmanci *bîsttebax! Twentyaugust!* Almost as if wanting to make it look like a farewell or something like that. If only she could write the whole letter in Kurmanci, that would certainly make things easier. But even if she did, there was no telling if the comrades on the other side would be able to understand her—those chances were even slimmer if she were to write in Zazaki—so she had to write in Turkish to make sure she had higher chances of making it out.

Sakine sent the letter without much hope, and told herself that the best she could do was plan things on her own, just in case their answer didn't make it on time or that they plain and simple decided not to take her seriously—again. At the same time, she knew that the less people knew, the better. It would make it harder for her to be discovered. Still, she would need some help. Ceyda seemed like a good bet. She didn't belong to any party, and was actually in jail for

completely different reasons. Still, Sakine knew that she could trust her. That same night, after dinner, as the other women in the cell were crammed in front of the only TV they had been allowed, and where poorly translated American movies would play, Sakine approached Ceyda in their cell and told her without much preamble that she wanted to escape.

“Escape?” Ceyda had immediately repeated, lowering her voice. “How? When?”

“I know this is going to sound crazy, but I found the keys to our cell. I can just open the door and walk out. Of course, I’ll have to be more careful than that if I want to get to the door of the prison safely.”

The male comrades would have probably been harsh on her if they knew that she had told her plan to someone outside the party. But she knew Ceyda, and she knew she was harmless. Sakine had always prided herself on being able to read people well, to be able to tell whether someone was trustworthy or not. So far it had worked, so there was no reason why she couldn’t let Ceyda know what her plan was.

“I’ll give you my ID,” Ceyda said, almost immediately and without hesitation. “I also have an old friend in Malatya, just in case you need a place to stay the night. I’ll give you her address. I’m not exactly sure about how to get there, though, but once outside you’ll probably find someone to help you out.”

Sakine was surprised about how easy it had been for her to get Ceyda to help her. Ceyda was just staring, her eyes almost fixated on her, as if in awe, and for a second it made Sakine a bit sad.

“What is it?” Sakine asked, softly patting Ceyda’s hair and face, wanting to know what she was thinking about.

“Nothing,” Ceyda said, and lowered her gaze, a touch of shame drawing in her face. “It’s just—wow—I don’t think I’ve ever met someone like you. Actually, I don’t think anyone here ever has.”

“Like me how?” Sakine asked, curious.

“Someone who looks at death in the eye and is not afraid.”

Sakine wasn’t sure why, but the tone in which Ceyda uttered those words froze the blood in her veins, and a chill traveled down her spine. Did Ceyda know something she didn’t? Sakine looked at her, as if trying to decipher what she meant, but it seemed to be a comment that she had made just like that, without underlying intention. It wasn’t the first time she had heard that expression, nor would it be the last. For her, every Kurd had to be like that, looking at death in the eye with pride and honor.

“When you’re out of here,” Ceyda said, “say hello to the outside world for me.”

Sakine smiled. Ceyda was one of those women who had given up on freedom, and who believed that she deserved to be there. Ceyda was a Turkish name that meant beautiful, and Ceyda was beautiful indeed, with black hair falling in copious waves down her shoulders and big brown eyes that smiled for her more than her lips did - maybe even too beautiful for her own good, or at least that was what she would always say. When she was young, around fourteen or fifteen, her parents had married her to an older cousin who had recently become widowed. She had been thrown from childhood into motherhood, experiencing two miscarriages in the process. Her husband was a drunk, and kindness wasn’t exactly his strongest quality.

One day, Ceyda got tired of his beatings and his bad mood, and killed him. Just like that. Plunging the knife was quick. It was simple—what was harder was to dispose of the body of a drunken old man who was probably twice her size. So, she didn’t. Instead, she waited there, in a

pool of blood, until someone came in, in this case his daughter, slightly older than Ceyda, and called the police. A man who beats his wife can expect forgiveness, but there's no mercy for a woman who dares to take justice in her own hands.

When Sakine had heard Ceyda's story, along with so many others the night that she first arrived in the Malatya prison, she had understood the importance of the work she had been doing. Those stories were not the first ones she had heard. She had spent the two years before her imprisonment traveling around Bakur, doing work for the Kurdistan Revolutionaries, and trying to get more women involved in the revolution. It was then that she had witnessed first-hand the realities of women and had understood that the oppression of women didn't only happen in her village or her town; a whole system had been put in place against women. The hardest part was how, whenever she tried to explain to them that they needed to change this, many of them just dismissed her. There was a certain comfort, Sakine had noticed, that came from convincing oneself that lack of opportunities, mistreatment, and control from almost every male figure in one's life were just inherent to being a woman. Accepting this way of life was always safer than attempting to change it. In prison, almost all of the women, even those who were there for political causes, would find it impressive to see that the women in the Kurdish Revolutionaries were making their way to fighting alongside men, not just behind them.

"I'll probably get transferred again anyway," Ceyda let out, and Sakine could tell it was troubling her. "My sister moved here so that she could come and visit me more frequently, so I think his family is now petitioning for me to be moved even further so that she can't see me."

Sakine hugged Ceyda because she really didn't know what else to do. She had already noticed that Ceyda would stay in the cell most of the visitation days. It seemed logical. After all,

most of Ceyda's family had turned their back on her. It's far more honorable when a woman is killed by her husband than when the opposite happens.

It was hard for Sakine to think about a life wasted in that hellhole. The only thing that kept her alive, and moving forward, was thinking that one day she would make it out. Seeing Ceyda like that, resigned to her fate, made her blood boil. What other reason would there be for it but the fact that she had been raised like so many women, with that idea that their lives had no value unless they were there to serve the feudal system in the shape of their father, brothers, or husband? For Ceyda and for many others, Sakine needed to get out. She needed to make sure that the struggle would continue. Because in many cases, that struggle was the only way to prevent more women from ending up like Ceyda.

Everything was ready that night, and Sakine knew what to do. One of the guards, Feyza abla, was an elderly woman that used to spend the night in the ward, and would change into her pajamas right after all the prisoners had been put in their cells. All Sakine had to do was to take her clothes, and then walk outside, pretending to be her. It wouldn't be all that easy because she would have to pass next to the guards and trick them into believing it was her. Sakine knew their routine well, and the reason she had picked that time of the day was not a coincidence; usually the soldiers were distracted looking at the women exiting the tobacco factory next door, so it would be easier to fool them. For once that their disgusting habits would benefit her somehow.

As expected, at 21:45 on the dot, Feyza abla hung her clothes in the little room, where the guards used to eat and watch some TV during their breaks.

Before leaving, Sakine gave another look to Ceyda, who was already sleeping, and fluffed some of her old clothes under her blanket to make sure that she would at least have a

head start. Feyza abla's clothes were way too big for her: a flower-patterned shirt and a pair of baggy pants, paired with a black headscarf that would make it easier for her to conceal her face. Somewhat prepared for the possibility that the pants would be too big, Sakine had brought a scarf to tie them around her waist and guarantee that they would hold at least until she was out of that place. Only two more details were in order: Feyza abla's limpy walk and the way she used to play with the keys on her left hand.

Sakine knew she didn't have all the time in the world, so she would have to play it by ear. The main thing she needed to remember was to keep walking, try her best to seem natural, and prevent people from looking at her face. Fortunately for her, Feyza abla had fought with a couple of the soldiers that same morning, and they were not on speaking terms. Why it had happened, Sakine didn't remember exactly, but it was clear that she was about to reap the benefits. After all, the less they cared about her, the better. After a deep breath, she started to walk towards the exit.

The three soldiers on guard were crammed in the yard, peaking at the factory next door through the cracks of the old wall that separated it from the prison. What disgusting creatures, Sakine thought, but for now it was a good thing that they were acting that way. Maybe once they learned how she had managed to walk right past them they would quit doing that of their own will. As she was making her way through the yard, Kemal, one of the guards, called her name. Or, well, Feyza abla's name.

"Hey, Feyza abla," he repeated somewhat kindly. "I said good evening."

For a short second, panic set in Sakine. What to say? What would happen if he just decided to walk towards her? She kept walking and let out a sort of acknowledging groan, something Feyza abla would do at times when she was too tired to talk, or simply didn't care.

“She’s still mad at you, I guess,” Sakine heard another one of the guards say, and kept walking with a smile on her face.

As soon as she passed them, she wanted to run the little distance left to the gate, but she couldn’t risk her legs betraying her. Never before had she noticed how far that wall actually was from the exit—of course it didn’t seem that way whenever she was just walking around during yard time. Mindful of every single step, she kept walking in a straight line until she made it to the gate. The two soldiers who usually guarded the gate were not there, which seemed a little suspicious to her, but then she saw them in the distance, and the soldiers acknowledged her with a quick nod as she used her hand to put the headscarf over her nose and mouth, something that they would probably disregard as a simple sign of modesty. She didn’t even need to reach out for the keys, because the gate was unlocked already—later, she wouldn’t remember the exact moment when she crossed it.

Once outside the prison, she couldn’t believe her luck. That was it. Finally, she was free. But, what now? She looked around, and there was nobody. The male comrades hadn’t come, even if a week had already passed, and by then they should’ve gotten the letter. There wasn’t anyone there who could help her. It wasn’t time to be angry or disappointed, although that time would certainly come, but for now, she had to find a way to get far away from there quickly. There weren’t really a lot of options. She still had the address that Ceyda had given her, written on a piece of paper in her pocket, and that seemed like the only viable option at the moment. The only problem was that Ceyda herself hadn’t been able to explain how she could get there. She would have to ask someone around her to take her. Not necessarily the best idea, but staying there just waiting to be caught wasn’t brilliant either. So, she started walking.

It was dark already, and the only light was coming from a couple of poles surrounding the entrance of the factory. The people who were leaving were almost all gone, but Sakine tried her best to blend into the few that were just ready to go home. She approached a first person, an old, bald gentleman and with a thick, dark mustache, but she couldn't even utter a word, not because she wasn't able to, but because the man just kept walking as if she wasn't even there. Again, she tried, this time with a woman old enough to be her mother, but the woman also didn't give her a chance to say anything. Sakine didn't want to keep trying. She knew very well what it was like to get off a long shift in a factory; she had been in that same spot many times. Instead, she walked a couple more feet, until there was nobody around her who could get suspicious, and then started running as fast as she could, to see how far that would take her.

Sakine stopped when she hit the main street, the blood pumping in her feet. The prison could still be seen, but it was now behind her. She looked at the few cars on the street at that time. It would be risky to try to stop one of them; there was no way of telling who it could be, and she didn't want to be riding a car with a complete stranger. She turned to the houses. It wasn't uncommon for people who worked at the factories to live in little houses close by because the rent was usually cheaper, and they saved money from the commute. The houses were close to one another and fairly similar, all painted in pale tones, white, grey, or light yellowish-white.

The heat was starting to asphyxiate her. From time to time a warm summer breeze would slip through the bottom of her oversized pants, but that was the closest thing she had to a break. Calmly, she walked to the first house she saw with a light on. This house was not entirely painted on the outside, but had a couple of flowers by the porch. There was a beaten-up car outside, so maybe if she could convince them that she needed to get to that address soon they

might drive her there. She couldn't be sure, but it was worth a try. Granted, it could go the other way as well. She could end up in the house of a military family, or the family of a prison guard, and then there was no telling on what would happen to her, or what they would do.

She knocked on the door.

Silence. Then a car whooshing down the street.

She knocked again.

A brown-eyed woman with long black hair tied in a careful bun and dressed in a long, pink nightgown opened the door. Immediately as she saw Sakine, a puzzled look drew on the woman's face, and she started looking at Sakine from head to toe, as if trying to figure out who she was. Only then, Sakine remembered that she was dressed as an old lady but that the woman would probably see in her face that they were no more than a year or two apart. There was no clue as to what exactly the woman could've been thinking, but whatever it was, in the end, she just seemed to let it go.

"İyi akşamlar," the woman said, "how can I help you?"

"My name is Sekine," she said, saying it the way it was pronounced in Turkish. "I just came back from visiting a family member in the hospital, but I couldn't stay the night because he is a man and it wouldn't be appropriate. I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to this address?"

She put out the piece of paper, trying her best to straighten it so that the woman could read it, but the woman didn't even make an effort.

"I don't really know much about the area," she said. "My brother is the one who usually comes and goes. He just came back from his job at the factory and is resting a bit. If you're patient enough, when he wakes up I can tell him to take you."

“Sure,” Sakine said, feeling relieved at the possibility of being able to get help but also worried at the imminent wait that was ahead.

She took her shoes off and walked in. The house was small but cozy, the hot air of the summer nights uselessly trying to be pushed away by a lonely fan in the corner of the living room. The woman offered her some tea, which she gladly accepted—she had forgotten that she hadn’t eaten much in the past few hours, so it was well received. The woman brought a cup of her own, and they drank as they stared at each other in silence.

In the loneliness of her thoughts, Sakine admonished herself. What was she thinking by giving her real name? It wasn’t a risk worth taking. Plus, she had Ceyda’s ID already. She could’ve used that name. Also, what about the hospital? Was there even a hospital close enough that could justify her just walking there? She was annoyed at the thought of her mistakes. It was the first thing that had crossed her mind, though, which was nothing but a clear proof that she hadn’t planned the whole thing as thoroughly as she wanted to think. Maybe the male comrades were right after all.

The way the woman was staring at her, bluntly, without blinking, was starting to make Sakine uncomfortable. It was almost as if she was trying to dig into her thoughts and decipher what was keeping her so distracted.

“Do you work in the factory, too?” Sakine asked.

“I used to,” she said, “but I got laid off.”

“I remember my days working at a factory,” Sakine said, reminiscing. “I worked for a couple of factories in Izmir some time ago.”

“It’s really tiring,” the woman added. “The conditions are deplorable, and they won’t let you unionize.”

To Sakine those words were like music to her ears. Now all of her memories from her days in Izmir started flooding back. The factories were, after all, the first grounds of her revolutionary work. Getting people to organize, turning discontent into action. They had selected her as the union representative, back in the day, and she remembered that time she had been dragged out of the factory by the police because she had organized a strike to demand better work conditions.

“They fired you because you wanted to unionize?” Sakine asked.

“Yes,” the woman replied, “and I was lucky they spared my brother. Otherwise, I don’t know what we would do. Our parents are poor, from a village a couple of hours away, and we are the only children. There’s not much we can do for them unless we have a job.”

“I understand,” she said.

For a moment, Sakine hesitated as to whether she should talk to her more in depth about class struggle, about the unfair social structure and how people like them would always come in last. Maybe she could draw that triangle with a line dividing the small ruling class at the top from the working class at the bottom. Then, she would talk to her about the party and the work they were doing to fight oppression not only in Kurdistan, but in Turkey, too. The woman seemed smart, someone who had come to realize what was wrong with the system and had tried to do something about it.

But Sakine’s thoughts were interrupted by a sequence of sounds. First, alarms going off, then, commotion in the streets. Finally, inaudible words over a rusty speaker. It took her a couple of minutes to put them all together and realize that she was the cause. They were looking for her; they knew she had escaped. The closeness of the noise made her realize she hadn’t made it as far as she had thought.

As worried as she was, she was also happy. For a moment, sitting there in the living room of that woman's house, she had been completely free. It was as if she was back in Xarpet or Çewlig, going from house to house, talking to women, but most importantly, listening to them. Those few minutes of true freedom, where she was not only free in body, but where she was completely free in her mind, would be enough to help her through what was to come.

The woman, who only then Sakine realized had not told her her name, didn't budge.

"It's probably some sort of training or something. It happens at times. Ever since they started bringing political prisoners, we have these every once in a while. But it's nothing."

Those words were met with pounding on the door. The woman stood up quietly, while Sakine ran through all the possibilities in her head. Where to go? Even more than that, could she go? It seemed a little bit late to try, but still she was looking around for a way out. Sakine could hear the woman turning the doorknob and opening the door gently, but what followed was a loud noise, and out of nowhere three men in uniform rushed into the living room.

With all the commotion, the brother woke up and walked out of his room to find three soldiers and a fugitive by the entrance door. He seemed scared, looking at his sister as if trying to understand what was her role in all of that. The woman was speechless, bewildered maybe, that moments ago she had been sitting down drinking tea with an escaped prisoner.

Sakine, on the other hand, was quickly dragged outside, where four more soldiers were waiting. God, had they put in a little welcome party. She looked at them and let out something close to a smile, almost as if telling them, "You took long enough!" But in reality she was deeply disappointed. The world wasn't made of what-ifs, that much she knew, but she couldn't help but wonder what would've happened if the male comrades had actually followed through and been waiting for her outside. By now she'd be long gone.

“You’re really brave,” one of the soldiers whispered in her ear.

It was Munir, a Kurdish soldier from Kars with whom she would talk sometimes. He wasn’t as vile as the others—maybe even not vile at all—and had always shown her great respect, and a bit of interest in the cause of the PKK and the freedom of Kurdish people.

“I want to help you, I really do,” he said. “But right now, it’s the two of us against six of them. If I try anything, they’ll kill us both. What you did tonight was impressive. To have the courage to walk by the guards just like that, with nothing but old clothes and a set of keys...and on your own...I was expecting by now you’d be far away from here, or at least I wish those people wouldn’t have kept the living room light on.”

What he said took Sakine by surprise. He seemed to know quite a bit of details. How? But she didn’t have time to think about it more than that because two soldiers grabbed her, each by one arm, and they tightened their grip until she felt that her blood had stopped running through them, and then dragged her back to the prison.

Feyza abla was waiting in the office of Ferhat bey, her face red and grim from all the crying. When she saw Sakine come in, a sigh of relief left her body; something visceral, as if her own life had been spared. Sakine looked at her not without guilt. It was clear that, had she managed to leave for good, this woman would have probably paid hard consequences.

“What exactly is this, Sakine hanim?” Ferhat bey said, trying his best to sound in control but clearly relieved as well by the fact that she had been found. “Is this how things work in this prison, you think?”

“I’m a revolutionary, Ferhat bey, you knew I would try to escape.”

“Did she?” He pointed at a broken Feyza abla, still sobbing with her face between her hands. “Did she help you pull this off? Did she give you her clothes?”

“What?” Sakine said. “No, she didn’t. I took everything I needed on my own. She always leaves her clothes in the little resting room; I just went there and took them.”

“Oh, you did?” He said, irritated. “Well, tell me, then, how did you get there, Sakine hanım? Did Feyza abla open the door of your cell?”

“I found a set of keys some time ago, when I was going about my day in my cell. I used those keys.”

“I still have my set of keys, Ferhat bey,” Feyza abla was quick to point out, showing him the keys. “So, they aren’t mine. See? I knew nothing about this!”

“Have them check all the guards,” Ferhat bey told one of the soldiers. “We need to find out who’s missing their set of keys.”

“I’m telling you I did it on my own,” Sakine said, frustrated. “I planned it myself, executed it myself. Nobody helped me. Had someone helped me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Yeah, right, we’ll see about that.”

Ferhat bey started looking around, visibly distraught. It was easy to see by his disarray that he had been called in all urgency, and he had barely had the time to put on some clothes and run to the prison. He seemed tired and irritable.

“Look, Sakine hanım,” he said, almost in a surrendering tone. “Charges will be brought against you for this. I know it, and you know it. So now, let’s just call it a day, should we? All you have to do is promise me now that you won’t try to escape again.”

“I won’t promise that,” she said. “I’m a revolutionary and you know just as well as I do that I’ll try again.”

“Get her out of my sight.”

She liked that, to be able to get under his skin. Even though she knew that had been a solid exit statement, she couldn’t avoid but to feel showered with misery as she walked back to her cell. She had made it out, though, which meant that it was possible to escape, after all. When other male political prisoners started hearing about how she had been caught because she didn’t have anywhere to go, they started showing their support, regardless of their party affiliation.

“You should’ve let me know,” said Hakar, a member of TIKKO, a Turkish leftist party. “I would’ve given you names of people that you could’ve contacted outside.”

“We could’ve told our comrades to wait for you,” said Tuncer, from TKP.

“I would’ve defended comrade Sakine, even if it meant getting killed, but she wouldn’t have been brought back here.”

That last one was uttered by someone in HK, yet another Turkish leftist party. And while it was all in good faith, Sakine could notice that these comments bothered some of the PKK comrades. As they should, she thought, because, after all, they should’ve been the first ones on the line to make sure that her plan came into fruition.

These episodes, though, were important to her. At times, it was easy to get wrapped up in the idea that within the party, due to their ideology and how strongly they emphasized the rejection of feudal models of society, women enjoyed the same importance as men. This might have been true at times, but it was nowhere near the way it should be. These discussions were an opportunity to improve upon this, and demand higher accountability from the male comrades.

She would seize that opportunity and make sure that, next time, they would think twice before overlooking her plans and her ideas.

As hard as it was for her to pick herself up after such a failure, she curled herself under the small window and grabbed her journal. Two pages would have to do, she thought as she ripped them from the notebook and started to write.

## CHAPTER II

Early years 1967-1973, Dersim (Tunceli)

Dersim was a city born between the mountains, in the valley of the Munzur river. The mountains protected us, like a cocoon of sorts, cut us from the outside world. Our lives were intertwined with the trees, the water, the wind.

Alevism made us one with nature. This form of Islam was different from the majority's, or at least that's what I'd hear from visitors, with our dedes and our cemevis and our ceremonies. They called us Alevis because we follow Ali, the nephew of the prophet. Men and women used to worship together. There wasn't a distinction for us, at least not in the religious place. That was one thing that had always shocked outsiders. What did we mean by allowing men and women to jointly attend religious ceremonies? By allowing women to attend at all?

Pilgrimage to Düzgün Baba was particularly important for Babî. Year after year, he would climb up the mountain, barefoot, under the summer heat, hoping to drink from the Haskar spring. The believers would say that the spring trickling down would dry whenever sinners stood in front of it, so once pilgrims arrived at the peak of the mountain they could tell who was a sinner and who wasn't. Curiously enough, the ones who made it first were the ones who got to drink from the holy water. Babî had taken us a couple of times when we lived in the village, but travelling with kids wasn't easy, so we were always among the last ones, the sinners. Babî would try to comfort us, try to find a little bit of water, but we would still keep thinking about what we could've possibly done that had taken away our privilege.

As I grew older, however, I got to understand that the reason it was so. There was never a lot of water in the spring, to begin with, so whenever the first ones made it, thirsty as they should've been after climbing up that high, they would certainly drink as much water as they possible could, leaving nothing for those behind. It was easier back then, however, to believe that it was our sins, not our actions or others', what was causing this situation.

Growing up, few things soothed me more than Spring nights in Dersim. The softness of the breeze tangling in the trees, blowing its way to the window, knocking it gently. Sometimes, I would leave my window ajar, and I could feel a thin thread of fresh air making its way to my face, brushing against my skin. In the middle of one of those spring nights, I woke up to the voices of women whispering in my ear. What was first almost a soft song, quickly turned into cries. It was unbearable, and nothing I did was making it better.

They were the women of Dersim, and their stories I knew them all too well. That night I knew, I just knew I had to do something for them, for their memories. All those deaths were still very vivid in our minds, even for those who, like me, had been born years after the massacre. When we were little, what had happened in Dersim in 1938 was part of my father's stories. There were no princesses for us, no magic fish, no songs of quiet nights spent sleeping in the bosom of our mothers. Our pained stories listed out names of the missing, and we weaved in our songs the drops of blood and tears; everything in Dersim was somewhat connected to all those people without fault, who fell as unwilling martyrs to the barbarism of the state.

I was five, maybe six, the first time Babî told us the story of Sara. I remember how he would sit me on his lap. "Seko," he would say. "You're the eldest daughter, so you deserve the best seat." And as I listened to him, resting my head against his heart, I would feel that the story

was mostly for me. Sara was a young girl in Babî's little neighborhood in Tahti Halil, who used to play with her older sisters in front of their house. In 1938, soldiers had taken Sara's sister, and had tried to take Sara as well, but she got away and started running. At the time, nobody was really sure about what would happen to the girls—certainly they were going to be raped or killed, or both. Only years later would they learn about the shaving of their heads, the locks of hair that fell to the ground and that hair, many times, became the only concrete evidence that they had ever existed. The girls of Dersim, packed in trains and sent off to Turkish families in Turkish regions to be re-educated, to be taught to forget. Sara, young as she was, understood that whatever happened, she couldn't let them catch her. So, she ran, and ran, and ran for hours—maybe, she couldn't really tell—until she got to the Munzur river; she was trapped. There were soldiers everywhere, and she knew it wouldn't take long for them to catch up. And then, little Sara had the bravery to do what many couldn't; she ran with all her forces off the cliff and into the river, where she drowned. And she was not the last; Babî would always say that the Munzur river had turned red with the blood of all the girls that had jumped in, running from the Turkish military.

Hate is not a normal feeling for a child to have, but it's something that was almost unavoidable for me to grow up without. Even though my parents were both from small villages, Babî's job as a civil servant relocated us to Dersim's city center. There, the differences became more accentuated. Yes, most people were like us, Kurds and Alevi, but it was still expected from us to be those things only inside our house, while once we stepped outside we were supposed to be Turkish and Sunni. Early in my childhood, I resented the fact that my mother couldn't speak Turkish properly; her accent bothered me for the longest time. I still remember that one time my

third-grade teacher came to visit, the way Maye was struggling to get her words in Turkish right, and I was mortified.

“I’m one of the students with the best Turkish,” I told Maye as soon as Edibe öğretmen left, “and you’re making me look bad with your clumsy language.”

Maye didn’t say anything. She didn’t look down or seemed ashamed—I knew her well enough to know she was hurt. She would rather burst than show it. After that, she would be even more intentional about it. She would interject Zazaki words into Turkish sentences on purpose and would go out of her way to make her accent thicker. I didn’t want it to bother me because I knew that was her goal, but sometimes it got the best of me. Now I realize that I became her, in a certain way; the more people tell me to stop, the more likely I’ll keep at it.

Of course, being ashamed of my Kurdish roots didn’t last for long. Thanks to Babî’s job as a civil servant I got to go to Germany at fourteen—eleven months, only, but those eleven months would change my life forever. I was able to discover who we really were, and who I wanted to be. I met people who would impact my life and would define who I was to become as a revolutionary.

Once I came back, I only had the word revolution on my lips, and my idea was very clear: I had to let everyone know, and recruit as many people as possible.

I started trying to hang out with students that I knew had revolutionary ideas and were involved in different leftist groups, but it wasn’t quite what I expected. Recruiting women would soon become my obsession. I was tired of seeing revolutionary spaces being mostly occupied by men. Of those men, many would dismiss me just because I was a woman. Those who let me talk for long enough would end up convinced that my ideas were good, but why did I need to justify

my presence there, when there were so many men who had nothing in their heads and were allowed to just exist in that space?

“Sakine is brave,” one of them once said, behind my back, of course. “But, let’s face it, once she gets married, she’ll have other things to worry about, and she’ll forget about the revolution.”

My first reaction was infinite rage—followed quickly by a resignation. Sadly, they weren’t totally wrong. There was, after all, that expectation that women would go on to marry, and only if it pleased her husband would she be allowed to do anything other than be a wife or mother. In the end, far from distancing me from the revolution, it just made me more aware of the challenges that I would have to overcome if I wanted to succeed. For my job not to be twice as hard, I’d have to get enough women in the movement—it had to become natural for us to exist in the revolution. I promised myself I wouldn’t let anyone step all over me, the way the army had stepped all over us, in ’38.

There were already some of the girls from my school who seemed interested in being revolutionaries. Although some came from more traditional families, we were all familiar with the concepts of change and revolution. We were, after all, daughters of Dersim, and rebellion was a part of us. Yes, we had paid for it in the past—it was, after all, rebellion that had started the ’38 massacre—but we would make sure that we didn’t have to in the future. In the end, no matter how hard the government had tried to drown our Kurdish Alevi identity, we were proud of who we were, and we needed to be because nobody would be for us. I knew that was my mission. I had always seen myself going on to a teachers’ school to become a teacher, but now, revolution was the only thing in my mind. Things were coming along naturally, and the more I became involved, the more I knew I was making the right choice.

Things in Dersim were more dynamic than ever. People were coming and going, friends were bringing new ideas from Ankara, and things were starting to take a better shape. At first, however, the question of our Kurdishness and Kurdistan was not that paramount. We were leftists, fighting for a change in the feudal system that was oppressing us. It would take a couple of years, though, for some of us to start noticing that that same system had been targeting us specifically for decades, ever since the foundation of the Turkish Republic. It was then that things changed and that some of us decided to make the freedom of Kurdistan the main objective of our revolution.

It wasn't only about breaking a class system, it was about justice for everyone, justice for those girls who had drowned themselves in the river. Maybe then they would stop coming to my dreams, waking me up in the middle of the night, crying for help. That story that Babî would tell over and over again, the story of Sara, would stay with me forever. Sometimes I close my eyes and it is as if I can see her, jumping off that cliff, the weight of her body hitting the water, disrupting its surface. She's one of us. She preceded us and, without knowing, paved the way to our revolution.

Now as I sit in my cell, under the window, trying my best to catch at least a little ray of moonlight seeping through the metal bars, I understand her message even more. It is best to die than to surrender to the enemy. Her bravery will live on in all of us. Şehîd namirin. My name is Sara.

Written in Meletî (Malatya) Prison on July 1982.

March 1970, Dersim (Tunceli).

Yusuf öğretmen was different. From the first moment he had come into the classroom, it was easy to tell that he was not like the others. He was tall and thin, a little too thin maybe, with dirty blonde hair and dark brown eyes. We were in seventh grade, and he had been appointed to Dersim as a literature teacher. He would say many times that he was happy when they sent him here. “This is a city of leftists and revolution,” he would say.

He not only taught us literature. If anything, that’s what we would remember him the least for. Instead, we would love whenever he would go off on a tangent, and try to explain to us the way the world worked. There were times when a passage of a text, or a detail in the life of an author would propel him into unending expository scenes on how and why we needed to change the way things were. But even as school kids we already knew that—we just struggled with finding the right words and way of action.

It was refreshing to have someone like him, someone who wouldn’t be too strict with all those stupid rules that they imposed on us. Someone who would look the other way when some amongst us would speak in Zazaki, instead of threatening to beat us if we didn’t speak in Turkish. Even the oath in the morning, he seemed to be a little bit more flexible and wouldn’t report those of us who would keep silent.

I’m Turkish, I’m honest, I’m hard working.

Long live Atatürk!

And I have by principle to love my country and my land more than myself.

Happy the one who calls themselves a Turk.

Those were only a few of the things that we were expected to say out loud, every morning, in the schoolyard, neatly arranged in rows by grade, under the piercing gaze of the Father of the Turks on one side, and the white crescent emerging from the blood on the other. Many would just say the oath mechanically, without giving it much thought; at some point we all had. Never mind that we weren't Turks, but Kurds, and that the man we were asked to praise was actually responsible for '38. It was not hard to see why, for many of us, that might be a bit problematic—not a lot of teachers allowed it to be though, and Yusuf öğretmen was one of the few.

Yusuf öğretmen was always telling us stories about people that he had met when teaching in other towns, and one day he started talking about a family struggling regularly due to the poor wages the father was earning. Kerem, a quiet kid who would always sit in the back of the room and who would barely talk, even during recess, raised his hand. He said that this was exactly the situation of his family, and that many times they had to make incredible effort to put food on the table. Yusuf öğretmen's eyes lit up like never before, and, as if overcome by an invisible force, he erased everything that he had written down on the board, and started drawing a triangle that he split horizontally into two; the upper part being smaller.

“This that you see here,” he said, pointing at the upper, smaller triangle with the chalk, “is the ruling class, the class of the exploiters. They are a small part, but they take up a whole lot of money and resources. Here—” he colored in the lower, bigger part of the triangle “—is the working class. The ruling class not only keeps everything, or most of it, but they also oppress those of us who are in the working class.”

“But how?” Kerem said, in what was probably the most I had heard him speak during the whole school year. “If that part is bigger than that one, how come they can oppress us like this?”

“Well, see?” Yusuf öğretmen said, “That’s the whole point of oppression. In the end, it’s always a small part that takes what belongs to the greater public. Not only do they use us to amass their wealth, they then keep it and leave us at the bottom, having to scarp for money and making huge efforts just to survive.”

He went on for a little while, then made a long pause, as if wanting us to let it all sink in. We looked at one another, trying to see how much of it the person next to us had grasped. The concept wasn’t all that foreign. In Dersim, it was impossible to escape politics, and many of us had bathed in revolutionary ideas from a young age. Whether it was from the conversations that we heard many men have in the cafes as we were playing our childish games, or from our older siblings who would bring their friends home and talk about Marxism and revolution, willingly or just randomly, we had all heard some of that.

Still, all of us smiled in gratitude at Yusuf öğretmen for the conveying of these ideas, and the fact that he had shared them with us. When he saw that we were all on the same page, he kept going.

“But there is a way we can help improve things. I wouldn’t tell you the problem if I didn’t know the solution. We, as the oppressed, need to organize. The more disperse we are, the easier it is for them to remain in power.”

We looked at each other, nodding in agreement. He smiled and continued, “Good news is the revolution has already started, and its name is Dev-Genç. Under its leadership, we will free ourselves and build a fairer society we can all live in without being under the governance of anyone.”

“Dev Genç!” Kerem shouted, and right then the bell rang for recess.

Spirits were boiling, and all that bell did was exacerbate our already over-excited hearts. We all went shouting to the playground, balling our hands into fists and raising them up high. Dev Genç! Dev Genç!

“Hey, Sakine,” Fatma said between chants, coming next to me. “That Dev Genç, is it a person or an organization? Do you know?”

Her question was legitimate, and it was then that I realized that I had no idea, and that probably nobody there did. Still, it felt like a very powerful thing to say and shout all together. That was all we did during recess that day. There was no eating, no talking, just shouting as if our lives depended on it. Some of the kids from higher grades, many of which were already engaged politically, joined us.

“For the freedom of all people!” One shouted.

“Down with fascism!” shouted another.

It was beautiful. Almost as if, for a second, they weren't seeing us as little kids anymore, but rather as comrades.

When we came back to the classroom, Yusuf öğretmen was waiting for us for our second hour of class. He was beaming with pride, a radiant smile on his face, but it also seemed like our little demonstration had caused him some sort of distress.

“Kids, there’s something that you need to understand,” he said. “You can’t just storm out of class like that shouting Dev Genç around the school. Not everyone would understand. I really, really appreciate your passion--it makes me really proud. But not everything should be discussed everywhere.”

Without knowing it, Yusuf öğretmen was giving us a very important lesson, one that I would remember for years to come. Discretion and secrecy were, whether we wanted it or not, essential qualities of a good revolutionary. No matter how ingrained and important your revolutionary values were to you, knowing when and where to show them was essential to success.

Our literature classes changed from that day on, and Yusuf öğretmen became our favorite teacher. He would make sure that all his lessons contained some revolutionary element, and he would talk to us about European revolutionaries and their lives, and how the movements they had helped create or had participated in had brought substantial change to society. But, even if I really liked his stories, and the inspiring people he would talk about, the more he taught us, the more I started noticing something. One day, almost a month, maybe two, after our first conversation, I raised my hand.

“Öğretmenim,” I said. “I like all your stories, but I have noticed that all the people you talk about are always men. You never tell us about women. I’m sure there has to have been some revolutionary women, too, or not?”

Everyone looked at me, boys and girls alike, and I could tell that some were surprised that I had spoken just to ask that question. Some others, mostly girls, were nodding. I could tell that my question had caught Yusuf öğretmen off-guard.

“Of course there are women revolutionaries, Sakine!” he replied.

“Why haven’t you told us about them, then?” I said, trying my best not to sound rude.

“I don’t know if you can tell, but I always save my best stories for when the time is right.”

“I think it’s time then,” I told him, with a smile.

“You’re right, Sakine.”

It was then that he taught us about Rosa Luxemburg. I was in awe. He was right; her story was, by far, one of the best he had told us. Not only had Rosa Luxemburg been active on different political parties, but she had also organized strikes, and gone as far as to flee to Switzerland to avoid being thrown in jail. I couldn’t help but feel inspired, and I could see in the eyes of many girls in the classroom that they were, too.

“We should be revolutionaries,” I whispered to Fatma, and she nodded in approval.

Each piece of information that he told us about Rosa Luxembourg made me dream even more, admire her even more. A woman in the frontlines of revolution, a woman in a world of men.

“What do you mean they shot her?” Fatma said, when Yusuf öğretmen got to the last part of his tale.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “That’s exactly what they did. You know, the life of a revolutionary is not easy.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” I said. “It’s dignifying to die for something you believe in.”

“I mean, yes, maybe,” Fatma said. “But being shot, just like that... it’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair, Fatma,” I told her, slightly annoyed. “If it were we wouldn’t be in this predicament and we wouldn’t need people like Rose Luxembourg or Karl Marx. But she’s very brave to have given her life for what she believed in.”

“Wait, so what you’re telling me is that you would have no problem getting shot?”

There was no time for me to answer, because Yusuf öğretmen immediately took control of the conversation. He talked about Dev Genç, which by then we knew was a leftist organization, the Devrimli Gençlik, Revolutionary Youth. He explained how many of the

members of the Dev Genç risked their lives every day, persecuted by the state. Far from being dissuading, the whole idea of it was exciting to me and represented something to look forward to.

That day after school, Fatma was not ready to let go.

“So, you wouldn’t mind getting shot?” she asked, as we were walking home.

“Look, that’s not what I said. All I said was that if you have to die for something you believe in, it’s not the worst possible scenario.”

“You’re very brave, Seko,” she told me. “I don’t know if I could do something like that.”

“You don’t do it, Fatma,” I said, kind of irritated by the whole conversation. “It just happens—it’s part of what can happen if you are a revolutionary. Didn’t you hear Yusuf öğretmen? The government is after revolutionaries, and things can happen anytime. That’s a risk you have to take if you want to be free.”

“If you don’t love life just say it. Maybe that’s what it is. Maybe you just don’t like your life, so you think it’s easy to die.”

“What kind of life is that you can’t live freely?” I knew that I needed to shut down the conversation, or there was no telling the next thing I would say to her. “I want to live my life, Fatma, but I want to live it on my terms. I want freedom for myself and for other people, too. That’s what being a revolutionary is about, and what better way to die than having at least briefly savored the sweetness of freedom.”

She shrugged and never talked about it again, but it was too late for me. That idea had struck a chord inside me. That night, alone in the dark as I lay in bed, I thought about it over and over. Young as I was, I knew that I wanted to be a revolutionary. But to think about dying was a whole different thing, and what scared me the most was how little it scared me, actually. Did that mean that I wasn’t ready? Was not fearing death a sign that I wasn’t taking being a revolutionary

seriously? Because, you should be afraid of dying, right? I wasn't sure, but the more I thought about it, the more I understood that death was everywhere. Death had been there in 1938; death was there for women who were married off to the wrong person, or whose families considered they did the wrong thing. So, then, why would I be scared of death, if, as a woman, all roads would lead me to it?

I don't remember exactly what I was thinking about when I started feeling sleep take me away. I knew, however, that I had made peace with myself and that I was ready. Ready for what? I wasn't sure yet. In the end, I was barely starting my teenage years. But the determination that had ignited in me that day and the days to come would never subside. If anything, the older I grew, the more that desire of revolution would extend to every corner of myself. That was my future, it was what I wanted, and I was ready to give my life for it if need be. I was proud to think like that, and proud to feel like nothing could dissuade me. I was ready for it. I still am.

Written in Amed (Diyarbakir) Prison on December 1984.

April 1973, Berlin, Germany,

Without even walking into the venue, I was already feeling out of place. Wherever I looked there were women in long colorful outfits, solid-color dresses under patterned mesh robes. Some women wore scarfs loosely around their hair, some would let their hair flow down to their shoulders and wear strings of beads or golden coins around their heads. The colors were vivid, red, orange, green, some yellow even. Never had I seen so many people in traditional

Kurdish outfits in a same place. Not even Newroz or Kurdish weddings in the villages of Dersim looked that way.

For a moment, I hesitated, self-conscious and thinking that maybe it would be better if I took off the blonde wig that I was wearing—something I had started doing in Germany as a way to blend in. It now felt as if I had tried too hard to be someone I was not, when everyone there just seemed so carefree and enthusiastic to be who they were, who I was, but was too afraid to show. I held tighter to my father's arm, as if hoping he would reassure me, but almost certain that he had no idea of the turmoil going on inside me.

The place was packed, ready to burst. It was a little house in the outskirts of Berlin. Apparently the PDKE had gotten it for close to nothing but it was in shambles. It had taken them around six or seven months to get it up and running, which still surprised some. Babî was there when they opened it for the first time, and a lot of the people there still remembered him.

They kept coming to welcome him, and the more he introduced me to them, the more uncomfortable I was feeling. I could almost hear them think, Sakine, the daughter of pir Ismail; look at her in her blonde wig and plain skirt, pretending she's not Kurdish. They were very distant, too. With my dad, they would kiss on the cheeks, three, four times, men and some women. With me, they would mostly nod at a distance, with some of them placing their open hand over their heart and slightly bowing forward. Was it because I was a woman? Or was it simply because they didn't know me? I took a look at my clothes; I certainly wasn't helping my case.

"Why didn't you tell me that they were going to wear Kurdish outfits?" I told Babî, somewhat disappointed.

"I didn't think it was important," he replied, as he shook the hand of yet another guest.

But it was important, and I wanted to be mad at him—but how could I? Until minutes ago, I didn't know how important it was either. So, this was what it felt like, to be Kurdish, to be surrounded by your people, those like you. There was a feeling that I couldn't necessarily comprehend, a feeling that I hadn't experienced before. That idea, new as could be, that I just existed, that I could just be. Not even at home had I ever felt that way, especially at home.

Little triangular pennons, red, yellow, green, the colors of Kurdistan, were hanging all over the place. I noticed there wasn't really a flag that I could look at, a flag that would represent me. I was so used to seeing the Turkish flag everywhere, that I wouldn't know if there was a flag for Kurdish people.

Even if everything around me was new, I knew I probably had more in common with them than with anyone I'd ever met. People here had the same sorrows in their heart that we had; they all had their own 1938. A part of me just wanted to go and talk to them, introduce myself, let them know I was here. There was unrest in my heart, a visceral need to be understood and to understand others. Even if I couldn't necessarily understand their language, in their hearts things were the same. I would learn later on in my life how sometimes people are bonded stronger by pain than they are by love.

I started looking around, trying to find familiar faces. Zozan, Haydar's girlfriend, was supposed to come, and I was desperately trying to find her so that I could feel a little less lonely. It was a weird loneliness, though. Even though I didn't know anyone, and that was uncomfortable, I had also never felt better. That must be what happened when you had a chance to reconnect with who you are inside.

The meeting started in German intercut with Sorani and, as I looked around and realized that pretty much everyone understood, I felt like an outsider again. It was then that I regretted,

deeply, all the times I had told Maye to speak in Turkish, all the times I had refused to speak Zazaki at home, thinking that it was better if I spoke like they were teaching us at school. And it was then that I heard the word for the first time, that word that would change my whole life: Kurdistan. Kurdistan? What did it mean? Was there really a land that belonged to us at all?

I finally found Zozan, motioning for me to come sit next to her. She was wearing a long, red silky dress with golden flowers embroidered, and a solid-red robe with golden flowers in the cuff as well. She had a white scarf resting over her head, with a red scarf around her head to keep it in place. I don't think I had ever before realized how beautiful she was, how her eyes had a particular glow to them, and how her smile was a combination of strength and hope. It took me almost no time to realize that the reason why I had not recognized Zozan at first was because she had never looked like that before. It's the clothes, I told myself, it has to be. What was making her glow was, without any doubt, the ability to exist without any opposition; freedom, that's what made a woman flourish like no other.

At that very moment I understood that I wanted that, too. I wanted the freedom to be myself without having to compromise any part of my identity. The freedom to be Kurdish, to be Alevi, but also the freedom to make my own decisions. Freedoms, I wanted them all, for I was beginning to understand that one freedom didn't work without another. It was all or nothing—or at least that was what I wanted to think.

As I sat next to her, it became obvious by the look in Zozan's face that she was expecting Haydar to come with me, and I was just praying from the bottom of my heart that she would not ask me about him because I had no idea as to where he was. Zozan just smiled at me and turned her head around briefly, and I understood that she knew, she knew that probably Haydar was

fooling around somewhere, and that he would not be coming. I was grateful about the fact that she still wanted me there.

“I love your dress,” I started, smiling. “It’s really colorful.”

“That’s traditional from my hometown. It was my grandmother’s, and I keep it with great care. And you—nice clothes, too.”

I knew her well enough to tell she did not mean it in a bad way, even if it sounded like that. But her comment did make me realize something. I did not have any dress or gown or something that was traditionally ours. We had our clothes that we would wear for celebrations, but we did not really take care of them, they did not mean much, even. I wasn’t sure I had ever met someone who cared that much about their stuff, their clothes, and things like that. My Dapîr, maybe, who was set in not letting the fire go out, according to old Zoroastrian beliefs that required ember to be always burning in a household. Other than that, however, it was really hard to tell.

“It’s the first time you come to an event like this, right?” Zozan asked, and I nodded, wondering what had given me away, even if it was the most evident thing. “Well, welcome, then. You know, I kinda hoped Haydar would be here. He knows how important all this is for me.”

I smiled briefly and looked away, not really knowing what to say. For a moment, I wish I could just have told her that this was who Haydar was. Not only he was not serious about her, but he was also not likely to become involved in anything that pertained to Kurdish identity. It was then that I understood how two people in a relationship could have completely different perspectives. In theory, they were together, but what being together meant for each of them was so different, that it seemed that they were each in their own relationship.

“He was busy tonight,” I lied, maybe not so much to protect him as to protect her feelings. “Night shift, I think.”

“Oh, yeah, of course, the night shift,” she gave me a vague smile, and I was not sure if she was doing it because she believed me, because she wanted to believe me, or because she wanted me to know that she knew I was covering for him.

“How long have you been involved, you know, in the Kurdish movement?” I asked her.

“Not too long, but my dad has been involved with the KDPI for a long time now. It’s my turn now, I guess.”

“What made you want to become involved, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“The same as you,” she said, and I felt confused. I was having a hard time making sense of my feelings at the moment, yet she seemed to know the exact reason.

She continued, “I was tired of my mere existence being a reason of fear. Even if I was born here and my mom is not Kurdish, and of course there’s a whole lot that I don’t know about, I’d still hear things, see things, that made me understand how hard it was for my dad to be a Kurd in Rojhilat and how hard it is for many people even now.” She said all that in just one breath, so after a brief pause, she just added, “You, tell me, what is it like in Bakur?”

“Bakur?” I said, a little bit confused.

“Bakur, you know? The northern part of Kurdistan, the one occupied by Turkey. That’s where you’re from, right?”

“Oh, Bakur, yes,” I said, feeling dumb that I had not made the connection before, and fearing that maybe that would make Zozan question my involvement. “We’re from a small town in Dersim. The Turks call it Tunceli, but it’s Dersim for us.”

“Yeah, Dersim,” she repeated. “Haydar did tell me things here and there about your hometown.”

That comment made me wonder in which context Haydar could have told her things about us, if only a brief mention. He was not particularly talkative, not about his personal life, and I didn't think it would be with Zozan that he would open up to.

Dad came by to make sure that I was doing fine, and he greeted Zozan with a lot of respect. He liked her for my brother, a lot even, but he knew, just as I did, that Haydar was not serious about her.

“I just saw pir Cevat over there,” he said. “Do you want to stay here, or do you want to come sit with us?”

“I'll stay here with Zozan,” I said.

At first, I had felt that Zozan just got close to me so that she could make her way to Haydar, and maybe it was so. However, as they started going out, I started spending more time with her, too. Zozan was very smart, and very committed to the Kurdish cause. Her dad's family, from Iranian Kurdistan, had the reputation of being very involved. And her mom, although not Kurdish, was still very committed to the Kurdish cause—that was how they had met. Listening to her talk fascinated me, and sometimes I actually felt she was too much for my brother.

“Hey, Haydar,” she had told him once, “did you hear that there is a Kurdish music group coming from London? They're gonna play in the center this afternoon. We should go see them.”

That had been at a cafe close to his work, and he'd insisted that I come with him. At times I wondered if that was his way of not having to interact much with her.

“Hum,” he'd said, taking a sip of his tea. “I'm busy lately.”

“Oh, oh,” she’d said, visibly trying not to sound upset, then turning to me, “what about you?”

“Babî’s going to Munich and he wants me to come with him,” I’d said, legitimately sorry.

“Oh, well,” she’d said. “I wish you could’ve come. I bet you’d have loved it, Seko. Music is the language of the misunderstood, of the marginalized. You don’t need to know Kurdish to understand Kurdish music, and that’s what’s magical about it.”

Haydar had already lit a cigarette and was looking at the door, as if gearing up to leave. In the beginning, she’d tried to talk to him, engage with him in things that he should’ve cared about, but that he’d not. But then, she’d given up. Then I’d be the one paying attention, asking questions, and talking with her about Kurdistan and revolution. I owed her a lot.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Zozan said. “Look around, there are Kurds from all regions of Kurdistan. This is truly inspiring.”

“It’s amazing, yes,” I said.

And it was. Wherever I looked, there was such an energy, that I was unable to describe it. It was then that I realized how lucky I had been that dad had taken me with him to Germany. Never in Dersim had I experienced so much freedom, so much room to breathe and be myself. Not only the fact that I could finally discover what it meant to be Kurdish, but also the fact that I was away from Maye. I felt like I was able to breathe, that I could just exist without having her right there, always after me, scrutinizing my every move.

Written in Amed (Diyarbakir) prison, on May 1985

April 1974, Dersim (Tunceli)

It all started with some students who thought that the school wasn't in good condition. Ali Yeşil, Hasan, and Metin were seniors in high schools and would be described by many adults as professional agitators. But they weren't agitators, and we students knew better than that. They just cared too much, as one should. They had started distributing pamphlets calling out the conditions of the classrooms—the growing mold, the lack of proper heating during the winter. And they were right; from November to February we had to sit on the desk with our bulky jackets who made it hard to write and even harder to think.

Once the pamphlets were distributed, it was a matter of days before teachers, students, even parents became more aware of what was going on. They started noticing how the walls in most buildings were all cracked—we did wonder at times if that would be the day that a wall would give in. Some felt that we were forgotten by the state, while some others knew that we were. All the conversations had become about the school, about the government, the inconformity of people. Two weeks after the pamphlets, things were starting to get serious.

“It's always the same,” I heard one of the seniors say that one morning, on my way to class. “They want to make us little soldiers of the state all while not putting any money in our education.”

“Why would they want to educate us?” his friend replied. “They don't want another rebellion, even if they are ready to give us another '38.”

I wanted to comment, to tell them that we could have another rebellion and at the same time prepare ourselves so that it wouldn't be crushed like in '38—but I was already late to class. At least that's what I'd told myself. I was actually worried they would think I was being silly.

Not long after I came into the classroom, closing the door after me, we started hearing commotion in the hallways. People were shouting, but we didn't know exactly what. Gülden, sitting close to the window, started shouting and pointing.

“Oh my god, look at that! They're going to the schoolyard!”

And yes, they were, they were pouring to the schoolyard like a flood. Mostly the seniors, but students from younger grades were starting to join them to. Later on, we would learn that one of the seniors had tripped on a pool of water that had resulted of a leak—the last drop. The seniors were shouting slogans such as “dignity and education” and “better conditions for a better future.”

Under the approving gaze of the teachers, who were carefully observing the magnificence of what was going on, others started joining. I looked around my classroom to see the reactions of my classmates; they were there, shocked, just staring at everything that was unfolding. I waited for a couple of minutes and when I saw that no one moved, I decided to be the first want to walk to the yard, left fist up in the air, joining the chants of those outside.

Fatma, my partner in crime, joined me instantly, along with some other classmates. It was unbelievable. There was a feeling of force surrounding us; we were invincible. The teachers, although staying in the margins, were still looking at us with supportive smiles in their faces. For many of those coming from other cities, it was their first encounter with the politics of Dersim, this place so legendary with resistance movements, a town full of people that didn't give up, and that used their multiple sufferings as one more reason to keep fighting.

The chants kept coming, and more and more students were joining in. Next thing we knew, police officers flooded the yard. Their cars were loud with their sirens, and they were going around waving their batons. The yard didn't quiet down and the new added noise didn't

scare us away, far from that. The students kept shouting, and some teachers started joining in; it was chaos wherever we looked.

It wasn't the first time I had to deal with the police; it wasn't really the first time any of us had to, but the way things were being handled seemed pretty new. Instead of going around beating people, the officers were just looking, staring even, as if trying to find their bearings. Three names started to emerge from the chaos. Ali Yeşil, Hasan, and Metin, the professional agitators who were now being regarded as an inspiration by everyone there. At that point people were just looking around and, for some, the new behavior of the police seemed to add an air of unpredictability—their eyes moving frantically, waiting for the moment something or someone would come out of nowhere.

That day, the director was not there, so it was up to Sinasi öğretmen, a third-year teacher who had just been promoted to assistant principal, to sort everything out. He was fearless, that much I had learned, and he was going around making sure that everyone knew that he was there and that we had no reason to be afraid.

Once he had us all feeling better, he approached one of the police officers, a black-haired guy with a mustache who, although relatively short, seemed to be in charge, and looking at him straight into the eye, said, “Where’s Ali? Where’s Hasan? And Metin?”

The officer didn't respond, but that only increased his anger. “Where are my students? I want my students! You have no right whatsoever to take them! They’ve done nothing wrong! What are you afraid of? Give me my students back and get the hell out of here, do you hear me?”

The officer didn't reply. It all seemed weirdly different from other times. It was almost as if, this time, the police were scared. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who noticed. Many officers were just there, looking around, distant from what was going on. But one thing was certain--the

officer that Sinasi öğretmen was talking to wasn't having any of it. It just seemed like he didn't really know what to do.

“Then take me, too!” Sinasi öğretmen said, flaunting his wrists in the face of the officer. “Do it! Take me! What are you waiting for?”

The police officer didn't say a word, but his face showed complete disdain. They weren't going to budge, at least not now, but not because they didn't want to. They were just waiting for the right time, like a predator who observes each one of the prey's moves before making their own. The students and teachers were running everywhere. The police were just observing, waiting, and soon enough their opportunity would come.

The order came through a distorted voice in one of the police radios.

“We're good!” Said the little officer Sinasi öğretmen had been talking to. “Take this one and do it quick. He's getting on my nerves.”

Two cops came and, one from each side, grabbed Sinasi öğretmen and started walking away with him. Far from taking this as a defeat, he held his head high, and didn't allow the officers to push him, instead he was the one guiding the walk. He looked at us and smiled, then told us everything was going to be okay. It was reassuring, yes, but we still knew that we had to do something. As the cruiser was taking him away, more students and teachers started pouring into the schoolyard. Sabri Cengiz, high school student, stood at the top of the staircase of the school entrance.

“Today, friends, comrades, our school is under attack.”

Students and teachers, as if a single group, were holding their left fists up. Sabri had always had something in his voice, a way of talking, maybe, that made him engaging, and this time was not the exception. The crowd would almost move to the sound of his voice. To finish,

he asked for a moment of silence, and he got it. I looked around, just then realizing how surreal it all was, yet how good it felt. All those people in the loudest silence ever, and the atmosphere charged with defiance, were enough to feel the fire of revolution burning inside.

Once we were done with the moment of silence, we started marching down the street. No one had told us to; an impromptu choreography of furious students, throwing their balled fists up in the air at the rhythm of a single heartbeat. But we didn't get that far before the police broke us up and sent us back to our own neighborhoods—they probably didn't want to have to deal with all of us at the same time. It ended in an instant, almost in the same way it had started. Since it had all been improvised, we didn't have a clear plan of what to do if these things were to happen.

I headed back to my house with a big smile on my face. Yes, they had ultimately broken up the march, but even then, it had been an amazing experience. That feeling of unity, of being one voice and one soul, of having the same goal. For the first time I felt I had a purpose, and I felt that there were people who had the same purpose, and that I could work with. I wasn't the only voice—we were empowering each other.

Elif and Perihan, two of my classmates, came by my house a little bit later. We used to hangout quite a lot after school, but recently we had started to drift apart. Apparently I was becoming too self-absorbed, or that's what they had told me when I had asked them at school a couple of days before why they weren't coming around that often anymore. Too self-absorbed? I wondered, and that word stayed with me for the days to come.

“Elif's parents don't think she should hang out with you,” Fatma had told me once I caught her up, “and, well, you know Perihan is a sheep.”

It was true, though, and it made sense. Elif was from a Turkish family. Her father was a civil servant sent to Dersim for some administrative business. Perihan, on the other hand, was the daughter to a Turkish father and a Kurdish mother, a Kurdish mother that everyone in the neighborhood knew was more Turkish than her own husband. So, to a certain extent, it was to be expected that they wouldn't want their daughters hanging out with someone like me, the Kurdish girl who asked too many questions. There had been rumors here and there that Babî was "involved with the Kurds abroad," although no one never knew what they meant by that or who had started the rumors.

Anyway, that day Elif and Perihan had stayed back in the schoolyard and wanted to know if I had any new information. I guess the fact that they had immediately come to me was one more indication of what they thought of me—they knew I was down for all things protest. As we sat in my bed, neatly arranged as it was expected from me, I told them that I didn't know anything, but that I was still amazed by all that had happened.

"Did you see the crowd?" I let out. "It was amazing!"

"I thought the police would open fire," Perihan confessed. "Can you imagine if they had? It would've been horrible!"

"They didn't and wouldn't have," I told them. "It was too much chaos already. If they had started shooting, things would have been even worse."

"Oh, yeah, that's for sure," Elif said. "But now they have Sinasi öğretmen."

"They'll let him go, don't worry," I said. "We need to be more organized for these things. When these things happen, we need to be ready for everything, only that way will we succeed."

"What are you talking about?" Perihan came closer.

“We need to organize, as a group. We need to know what to do and how, so that next time they can’t disperse us just like that.”

I wasn’t helping my case, but I didn’t want to either. They already knew who I was, and apparently that was the reason they had drifted apart. Anyway, they were back, weren’t they? So, there was that. They did seem legitimately curious about what I had to say, but what they didn’t know was that I was just letting out the thousand ideas that the agitation had planted in my mind. I wanted to organize, I wanted to make sure that we knew how to face these things.

Perihan and Elif smiled as I talked; some of the things I said made a lot of sense to them, others not that much, but it didn’t matter. Putting my ideas out there was helping me give them more sense—hearing them out loud made them sound like a reality.

“Girls,” Maye called from the kitchen, “tea is ready, come!”

“When you think about it,” I kept saying as I walked, “it’s all about understanding that we have the power. We shouldn’t fear them, we should make them fear us. Do I make sense?”

The girls were just nodding, and I could feel Maye’s eyes fixated on me from the other side of the kitchen. After a little while, the girls started noticing, too, and they would look back and forth between me and her. It must’ve made them uncomfortable, because they didn’t even eat the cake and left as soon as they were done with their first cup of tea. I knew what was coming, so I tried to leave for my room, but Maye, always a step ahead, was already blocking the way.

“So, what’s all that you’re talking about?” She asked.

“Nothing Maye,” I said, annoyed. “School stuff.”

“School stuff alright,” she replied. “I heard what happened in your school today, everyone heard. People are still outside.”

“Yes, Maye, I was there.”

“You shouldn’t have been there, it’s dangerous. You’re too young, Sakine.”

“It’s fine, Maye, nothing happened, see? I’m right here.”

She sighed, and I wasn’t sure what to make of that. It wasn’t a secret to me that I wore her out; she just had run out of ways to let me know. Was it possible that she was actually worried for me? That when they told her what was happening she worried that I would be hurt? I looked at her, trying to detect an indication, any indication, of worry in her eyes. Instead, her stare was blank, emotionless.

“I don’t want to hear the neighbors talk about you,” she finally said.

And there it was. That was what she cared about, what the neighbors would think.

“You’re already pretty unmarriageable, if you ask me. I for one know I wouldn’t take you as a daughter-in-law. Don’t make things worse for yourself, Sakine, for us all. I don’t want to have to deal with you in my house forever.”

Far from hurting me, her words made me feel better—well, except the part that I would be in her house forever. She usually knew how to get to me, but that wasn’t it. Threatening me with staying unmarried didn’t mean anything to me. It was, if anything, a relief. Had she missed the mark—for the first time—or was she implying something else? Was this the kind of comment that I would take some time to grasp and that when I did would shatter my self-confidence? There was a silence between us, and I took it as my cue to leave, but as soon as I took a step she stopped me again.

“There’s a lot of stuff to do around here,” she said. “If you have free time to go around shouting and stuff, come here and give your mother a hand. That’d be a better use of your time.”

I left without telling her a word. Maye had always been a mystery to me, it was hard to know what was going through her head, and every conversation I had with her would leave me even more confused. Sometimes it was as if she told me something, but her eyes told me a completely different thing. There was a hidden tenderness in her eyes that would surface at times, making me feel as if she was on my side, as if she knew and approved of what I was doing. Then she would say something, and it would all go downhill.

But that day, nothing she said could ruin my mood. I went back to my room and started daydreaming again. I relived every single thing that had happened that day. I closed my eyes and there I was, running to the schoolyard, chanting, fist up in the air. I imagined hundreds of scenarios, my own happy ending where we won and the police lost—whatever that meant—, where our friends and teacher weren't arrested.

I started planning how to make that fantasy a reality. There would be a next time, that was certain, it was just the way things worked in Dersim. We had to make sure that next time we had all our ducks in a row. I thought about going to the seniors in high school and telling them some of my ideas, but I wasn't sure that they would listen, since I was only a middle school student and they didn't have any girl in their groups who could open the door for me. But, if I started organizing those around me, then they would have to see and recognize that my ideas were worth listening to. I wouldn't leave them any other option but to acknowledge me.

Written in Amed (Diyarbakir) prison, July 1986.

November 1978, Fis

The atmosphere that day was different. In that little house in the middle of nowhere, made of ground and stone, we were ready to make history. It is unusual for people to know they are making history while it happens, but this time it was different. We all met there knowing that this would be something for the books and that years, decades later, people would still remember this day. One thing upset me, though, and it was that out of ten people, Kesire and I were the only women in a world of men, but we would have to deal with it. I guess two was better than none, not that it made it less disappointing.

Abdullah Ocalan, Apo, the chairman, was there, standing in front of us, and I could see he was happy to see both me and Kesire.

“Thank you to both of you,” he said, coming near us. “Who could I want here more than my beloved wife and my beloved sister?”

I smiled and he smiled back, then I concentrated on the interaction between him and Kesire. The tender looks, the bright smiles aimed at each other. I hadn't really paid much attention to that before, but now that I did, I was glad to see that what he felt for her was reciprocal. But, even as I kept telling myself that Kesire loved him and that all was okay, nothing could shake that idea that there was something off about her. By looking at her it was hard to tell that she was a revolutionary—she seemed more like your average house girl, almost uninterested by the cause. I'd heard differently, both from the chairman and from other comrades who would say she was quite committed to fighting for a free Kurdistan, and I believed them. Plus, the chairman and her did seem very much in love, so I wasn't really in a position to say anything whatsoever.

In the big living room, arranged with rows of wooden benches and carpets, we each took our places. Some friends sat on the benches by the walls, some preferred to sit on the floor. Kesire and I sat on a bench in the wall across from where the chairman was sitting, close to a window. It was cold already outside, so it wasn't probably the best decision, but Kesire seemed very comfortable and I wanted to stay next to her, since she was the only other woman. People were talking about insignificant stuff, some of them even making dumb jokes and laughing, when the chairman walked to the center of the room and cleared his throat. It didn't even take a second for the whole room to drown the noise to where you could actually hear a pin drop.

"Dear friends, comrades," the chairman started. "First and foremost, welcome. I don't think I need to say it, because I'm sure you're all well aware, but what we're about to do here will be talked about for years to come. We're setting in motion a party. More than a party, a movement. This movement seeks, of course, the freedom of our people, our nation, the Kurdish nation. But by freedom, I don't want you to think only about independence--I want you to think about the freedom of the mind. As human beings we want, and we need to be free in our minds before we attempt any other type of freedom. The only way we can set our minds free is by breaking free from the walls of a feudal system, an oppressive system that has been ingrained in us."

His voice was lively, full of energy. All the eyes in the room were set on him. After he was done with his introductory speech, he asked Hayri, who was sitting next to him, to lead the debates. I sat there, next to Kesire, and listened to the men talk. It didn't take long for me to notice that there was a sort of understated rule by which women were not supposed to say a word.

“You can talk anytime you want,” Kesire had said, “but I don’t recommend it. I think it’s better we let them figure it out.”

She’s right, I thought at first. These are experienced comrades; they know a lot more than I do—there’s nothing I can really contribute. I didn’t want to feel that way, but it was unavoidable. Many of these comrades had been involved in the Kurdistan Revolutionaries for far longer than I was. They had travelled more, read more, and had multilayered approaches to issues that I was just starting to grasp. At least for a little while, that was how I felt, until I understood what was the much-needed perspective that I could bring to the revolution.

“Women have to be part of our movement,” Resul said, looking at me and Kesire, and I wondered if he had even noticed how we hadn’t been even once asked to give our opinion for as long as the meeting had been going.

“Women are crucial,” I heard another voice, Kemal, say on the other side of the room. “We will not get far without women in our ranks.”

By listening to them, you would say that they were all much in favor of women’s participation in the struggle. It aggravated me, and the more they talked the more I was feeling the need to just stand up and tell them the truth to their faces. I could tell Kesire was sensing my discomfort, too, because of the way she had placed her arm around mine, almost as if wanting to prevent me from saying something I would regret. It worked in the beginning, but the more I heard them talk the more her restraint became another reason for me to be upset. The fact that they seemed so sure that they were doing things right, blissfully unaware of the hypocrisy of their statements bothered me greatly.

“The participation of women is key,” Resul said again. “For that, we thank comrades Kesire and Sakine, who have done a tremendous job in that field. We’re expecting this will improve in the coming months.”

“What are you talking about?” I stood up and pointed at him with my finger. “You stand up here and tell us about how important women’s role is, but where are the women you’re talking about? Where are your wives, your sisters? You say we need women then you turn to us like it’s our job! It’s all of our jobs! If you don’t start with the women in your own lives then what good can we do!”

Nobody said anything, all eyes are on me, which aggravated me even more. Then, Rasul just looked at me, in disbelief, and let out a shy laugh. Was he laughing at me? I turned to the chairman, who, to my surprise, had somewhat of a smile on his face. Almost as if he was proud of me. But he might as well be the only one in the room, as I felt animosity growing amongst the others.

“Her question is simple,” the chairman said, standing up, “and I think all of us here should be asking ourselves that, starting by me. Heval Sara’s concerns are legitimate. The liberation of women should be everyone’s concern, and we need to work so that we can improve in that aspect. And it’s certainly not by laughing at our female comrades that we’re gonna get there.”

Rasul sat down, lowering his head. I smiled at the chairman, then sat down as well.

“You’re brave,” Kesire threw my way, “I’m not sure I would’ve been able to put myself in the spotlight like that.”

She said that in a weird way, almost as if she was trying hard—but failing—to make it sound like a compliment. Something passive aggressive of sorts. As much as I wanted to dismiss

that feeling, it stayed with me for a while. What was I supposed to do, exactly? Sit there and say nothing? It was she who should have at least supported my argument. But she sat there instead, daggers in her eyes like in everyone else's. I realized that maybe she felt that I was taking too much attention to myself, and that was bothering her. Maybe she felt I was a bit of an attention seeker. Nothing further from the truth. She had sat there as I had tried to get other comrades to make the same remarks. If anything, I would've welcomed whoever would've wanted to talk to support our agenda, but nobody stepped up.

I had sensed from the beginning that things between Kesire and I weren't going to be smooth. The only reason why I kept trying to make it work was because I knew how dear she was to the chairman's heart. That and because I didn't want to turn this into the quintessential confrontation between women. We heard it all the time, in our families growing up but also in the revolutionary sphere, how women weren't supposed to really get along and work together.

Women tended to be jealous of one another, some would say, and that was the reason they wouldn't see eye to eye. But I was convinced that it was the result of the feudal system, seeking to divide us so that it could forever keep its grip upon us. After all, if rivalry was what was always taught to us, almost imposed, then that was the only thing that we would know, and the only thing that could be expected from us. I was set in proving them wrong, and I would succeed, regardless of how hard Kesire was making it at the moment.

Written in Amed (Diyarbakir) prison, February 1987.

## CHAPTER III

December 1977, Çewlig (Bingöl)

Ali and Sakine had decided to prank Ali's wife Fethiye by telling her that they were going to rob a bank. Moments earlier, Sakine had found him sitting in the kitchen table with three pistols in front of him.

"What's going on?" She'd ask him, her heart racing with excitement. "Are we planning something?"

"We're gonna rob a bank," he said, but he didn't sound that convinced. He was quick to clarify, "I'm kidding. But let's make Fethiye believe that that's what we're gonna do. I wonder what she's going to say."

Sakine shrugged and thought why not? It sounds like it could be fun, an innocent joke.

"Let me do the talking," Sakine told him. "You're a terrible liar."

"I know," he replied. "Why do you think I asked you to join me?"

She laughed and right that instant the door opened and closed. Fethiye's eyes opened wide when she walked in the kitchen and saw them with the guns.

"What is all of this?" She asked, looking around.

"We're gonna rob a bank," Sakine told her, then looked at Ali.

"Sakine planed everything out," he said. "Hüseyin from Karakocan is driving the car. We've got everything ready. It should go smoothly."

Sakine had no idea of who Hüseyin from Karakocan was, but she nodded with conviction when Ali said his name.

“Oh my god, this is fantastic!” Fethiye said, jumping as if she had suddenly received a shot of adrenaline.

Ali and Sakine looked at one another, somewhat surprised, but they weren't really able to let go just yet.

“Yeah,” Sakine said, “everything is ready. After dinner we will go meet Mehmet and Ali Haydar. They are already waiting for us.”

“Who cares about food?” Fethiye said. “If you two want to eat, go ahead, but this is far more important.”

Fethiye started looking at the pistols in detail, taking one with her hand and pointing at the wall. Sakine wasn't sure if she had ever fired a gun, but she was almost certain that at some point Ali must've at least showed her how to grab it—as a revolutionary husband that would be the bare minimum.

“If we go to jail,” Ali started, taking the pan full of sarma to the table, “you have to take Roza with you.”

“Of course, I will,” Fethiye said, unshakable. “Where else is she gonna be but with her mother?”

Sakine knew Ali was trying to test Fethiye, but she wasn't sure if this was the answer he was expecting. They started eating, but Fethiye didn't take more than two bites. She was overflowed with excitement, and Sakine started feeling bad for keeping the lie going.

“Tell her,” she told Ali. “I think this has lasted for too long.”

“I will, I will, but let's have fun for a little longer.”

Sakine disagreed with him, but since Fethiye was his wife, she thought Fethiye might be less mad if he was the one telling her about it. Ali's notion of what “a little longer” meant,

however, proved to be far beyond what would be reasonable. They ate and left for the meeting in Mehmet's house. All the way there they kept talking about the bank robbery. To be something that he had come up with at the top of his head he seemed to have planned it to the letter. Sakine was enjoying it, too, all the planning and the talking, even if she was conscious that they were tricking her friend.

Once at Mehmet's house, Mehmet took them to the back room so that they could give him the weapons. As they were passing through the living room, Sakine noticed two men. She recognized Dursun, but it was the first time she was seeing the other one, almost as tall as Dursun but with darker hair and glasses, so she just brushed past. Mediha, one of the women, was paying close attention to what Sakine, Ali, and Fethiye were saying, and when she understood it was a bank robbery, she insisted that she wanted to take part. Ali had let Mehmet in the joke, and Mehmet was helping them by reinforcing the idea that it was real.

"Guys, please," Sakine told them in a low voice, "please let's cut this out. It was fun and all, but now it's just getting old."

"Sorry, girls," Ali said, turning to Fethiye and Mediha. "Your friend Sakine here doesn't think you'll be able to pull it off. You know? Women's stuff."

Sakine wanted to take the cup of tea and throw it to his face. What kind of comment was that? She was ready to respond but at that moment, Dursun and his friend came into the room. Only then did Sakine notice that the man with the glasses, the man that she had walked by without even saying hello, was none other than the chairman. Abdullah Öcalan. Apo. She blushed in shame. He looked at her right away.

"What's all this?" he asked. His voice was calm, but at the same time, he was able to make everyone in the room turn to him in silence.

“We were just joking, başkanım,” Sakine said immediately. “But now Ali is falsely accusing me of thinking that women can’t pull a bank robbery off.”

“A bank robbery?” the chairman asked, confused.

“It’s a long story,” Sakine replied. “It was a joke that we were playing on Fethiye and Mediha. It got out of control—”

“A joke?” Fethiye and Mediha shouted in unison. Then, turning to Ali, Fethiye continued, “Is that what I am to you? Your Guinea pig? You test your ideas on me to see if they’re realistic enough?”

“That’s not—” Ali started, but Mediha didn’t let him finish.

“Of course!” She said. “You don’t trust us! That’s what this is all about. You don’t trust us because we’re women.”

Both Fethiye and Mediha stormed out, and the room was silent for a little bit. The chairman looked at Sakine and the others in disapproval.

“What kind of joke is this?” He said. “Is that how the group operates here?”

“No, baska—” Ali couldn’t finish his sentence.

“Why did you do that to them?” He interrupted. “Of course, women should be trusted. If I tell you, they should be trusted more than men. I’m sure whatever it was that you were planning, women alone could’ve pulled it off.”

They didn’t say anything. Sakine still wasn’t over the fact that she hadn’t recognized him at first, and this was the worst possible way for them to be meeting in person for the first time. People were starting to arrive, so they all marched to the living room to start the meeting. Sakine had heard him before, at the back of some cafeteria in Ankara, but it was the first time he was

aware that she was in the room, and as much as she had wanted to see him face-to-face she wished it had been a different time.

The chairman talked for about an hour or so, but Sakine wasn't able to concentrate; the whole episode of the fake bank robbery was still lingering in her mind. Fethiye and Mediha had come back for the meeting, and were sitting on the other side of the room, ignoring her. As soon as the chairman was done and people started breaking into smaller circles of conversation, Sakine approached her two friends, ready to apologize. They turned around but didn't move, almost as if they were expecting for her to talk first.

"I'm so sorry," Sakine said, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. "I let myself go along with all this stuff of the bank robbery. It was meant to be a silly prank; I didn't mean to hurt you or make you feel like I don't trust you."

"You sided with the men," Mediha replied. "You should've been on our side."

"That's right," Fethiye concluded. "You betrayed us."

"Hey," Sakine told her, somewhat disappointed. "It was your husband's idea."

"My husband is my husband," Fethiye said, in a matter-of-fact way. "But you, you are my sister. Our bond as women should always be stronger. I should expect it from him, but never from you."

Sakine was at a loss for words. She didn't expect such a statement from Fethiye, but she was right. It was bad enough that she had decided to prank her; she had also been unable to put a stop to it and kept expecting Ali to do it.

"My friend wants to see you," Ali Haydar said, walking by Sakine. "He's waiting for you in the kitchen."

Sakine nodded, still lost in her thoughts. There were lessons to be taken from this situation and she had to formulate them right and then make sure to bring them to others.

“Heval Sakine,” Ali Haydar approached her once more. “My friend is waiting for you. He needs to talk to you.”

Just then did Sakine realize what Ali Haydar meant. It was, in fact, the chairman who was waiting for her. People were starting to leave, and she was wondering what could the chairman want to talk about with her. It wasn’t hard to guess, though. He was probably going to admonish her for the whole bank robbery deal. Not that she didn’t deserve it, but she was disappointed to see that there was no one else in the kitchen. If anything, Ali and Mehmet should also be there. But in the end, it didn’t matter--she would stand her ground, apologize if she had to, but not take more blame than she actually deserved.

The chairman turned around and saw her staring at him, but even if she could feel her cheeks burn, Sakine didn’t look away. Instead, she smiled faintly, and so did he, before starting to walk towards her.

“Sara,” he said, extending his hand, and she didn’t hesitate to shake it. It was the first time that someone had addressed her by her nom de guerre without her having to ask them. How did he know her name was Sara?

“Başkanım,” she smiled. “I’m so pleased that we can finally meet. I just wish that the circumstances—”

“It’s forgotten,” he reassured her. “I’ll have an extensive talk with Ali and Mehmet when the time is right. Actually, I think all our male comrades in general would benefit from a little talk on women in our movement. Maybe you could help me with that.”

“Me?” She asked in disbelief, “I’d love to.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” he continued. “Only good things, of course. Well, and some that I think we need to talk about. Maybe not here, though.”

If he didn’t want to talk about the bank robbery, then what was it about? A minute or two later, she just understood. He probably wanted to talk to her about her divorce. Not a lot of people dared ask her questions or talk about it near her, but she knew that the news had made the rounds of the organization. Everybody knew, at least to an extent, that she had only gotten married with the hopes of leaving Dersim and becoming a revolutionary. Everybody knew how hard she had tried to get her ex-husband, Baki, to join in the Kurdistan Revolutionaries. Most people also knew that she had never loved him, and that it was a burden for her to be married to him. What exactly did the chairman want to tell her, though? It was all behind her already. Would he tell her how wrong she was for marrying someone just to flee? Would he tell her the hundred things she could’ve done differently? All those questions were just coming at her all at once.

“Hey, don’t worry,” he said, and only then Sakine realized that her facial expression was probably giving her away.

“Huh?” She retorted, confused by his remark.

“Divorce happens, okay? We will talk about it, okay?” She nodded and he kept going, “but first, I want to congratulate you on your achievements. I’ve heard a lot about you, Sara. All the comrades talk about your incredible work with women.”

“Yes, başkanım, we have been very successful. More and more women are becoming interested in our cause, and are ready to work for the freedom of Kurdistan.”

“That’s very good,” he said. “Like I said today, women are just as capable as men to enact change and make our group grow. If we concentrate on recruiting only men, we’ll lag

behind. Only by including women will we move forward. So far you're doing a great job. I heard from a couple of friends in Elazig and Ankara that you know how to get women to understand better the reasons for the struggle. It helps when they see someone who is successful in the revolution."

He smiled at her again, but this time his smile was different. It was coming from a place of such warmth and closeness, that it was almost as if a bond had been created. It was strange, and authentic, and different to anything she had experienced before. She had special connections to all the comrades, but there was something special about him. Was it because he was the chairman? Maybe, but she didn't really think so. It seemed more like a matter of compatibility; she knew he would become an important part of her life.

"Can I ask you, if you don't mind, to tell me a little bit where your interest started? I'm just curious. For a woman in our society I guess it must have been even harder."

"It was a decision that came naturally, başkanım," she said, hoping he wouldn't be upset that she was contradicting him. She just didn't feel like she had ever doubted her desire to become a revolutionary. "When I met the comrades, I understood that this was what I wanted to do. There was really no other option for me in my village. I wanted to be a revolutionary since I was very young, and here I am."

"Good," he said. "I admire you, you know. Even before meeting you, just by hearing what they had to say about you, I was impressed."

"Thank you, başkanım, it truly means a lot to me."

"It means a lot to me, too, don't worry. I can tell we will be good friends. You have a different spirit, heval Sara. The revolution lives in you. Your family must be proud."

“I hope so,” she said, knowing that it was a little more complicated than that. “But, you know? It’s—”

“Complicated, I know,” he finished her sentence, and she smiled. “Yes, it’s not always easy for the families. And much less for the families of women. It’s this feudal system that we live in, women are not seen the same way men are. But, believe me, just by being here you’re starting to change that.”

“There’s nothing I wish more than that,” she said.

“It might be a long road, but you’re ready. You’re prepared and you’ve proven yourself time and time again. You were born for this.”

It felt good to hear such things coming from him, and only then she realized that not a lot of people had complimented her work before. Maybe they had said good things about her work, yes, but never to her. What could be better than a friendship based on mutual admiration?

“I’ve always regretted that I didn’t meet you that day, at the university,” the chairman said, pulling out a chair for her to sit. “They told me a bit later that you had been there that day, looking for Ali Haydar. If only he had been there, he’d have brought you to see me and we would’ve found a better way.”

She looked around; everyone had left, and it was only the two of them in that small house in Çewlîg. There was still tea left, and he had poured two cups and left them over the table. Sakine was nervous, as she knew the conversation she dreaded could not be postponed anymore. But anyway, it was better to get it over with.

“It’s fine, başkanım,” she said. “It’s over, and I’m here.”

“You shouldn’t have had to get married just to live your life as a revolutionary. That was an extra burden that you didn’t have to bear. If we had met that day, I would’ve told you to stay with us. We would’ve figured something out. You didn’t have to go through that, heval.”

“What difference does it make now, başkanım? It’s behind me. I’m looking at the future, and all the things we will accomplish.”

“I like your spirit, heval. Always ready, always looking at what’s next. You don’t dwell on the past, and that’s better.”

“Did Kesire leave already?”

Actually, Sakine had seen Kesire leave a couple minutes after she went into the kitchen, but she did not find any better way to bring her to the conversation. Even if Kesire was the chairman’s partner, and she seemed by all means committed to the cause, there was something about her that didn’t quite sit well with Sakine. Everyone knew that her father worked for the Turkish Intelligence, or MIT, as they were known, but for some reason that wasn’t exactly what bothered Sakine. She just didn’t know what it was.

“She did, yes,” he said.

“Her father works for the MIT, I’ve heard, is that right?”

She cursed herself in her head. Didn’t she have any other way to bring that up? A wide smile drew on his face.

“You’re straightforward, heval, I like that. One quality that will serve you well.”

First time she had heard someone tell her that. Usually, whenever someone talked about how hot-headed she was it was to reprimand her for something, like that one time she had dared to call off her mother’s friend when she had asked her about prospective suitors.

“Shouldn’t you be worried about more important things?” Sakine had told her. “Like the fact that your son is always shouting at his wife and being rude to his children? Isn’t that more of your business than whether I get married or not?”

The woman left right away, pretending to be offended but she knew what Sakine had told her was true.

“Seko, for the love of god!” Maye had told her. “You don’t go around talking to people like that.”

“Did I tell the truth or no?”

“It doesn’t matter, Seko,” Maye had said. “Even the truth needs to be told at the right time and in the right way.”

And maybe Maye was right, but there she was, sitting in front of the chairman, who seemed to be the first person to appreciate that trait of her character. This only made her appreciate him more in return.

“So?” She asked.

“Yes, that’s right. Her father works for the MIT. But she’s a strong-willed woman, and she governs the household with an iron fist even harsher than her mother’s. So, don’t worry, her dad’s job won’t be any problem for us. Plus, there’s no better way to get back at a fascist father than to make his daughter into a revolutionary.”

“If you say so,” she let out, trying to smile reassuringly.

But as much as she wanted to believe him, her gut feeling was getting the best of her. There was something, something that she was not able to put her finger on, that just didn’t seem right.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. “No need to worry, I promise. The organization will be fine, and I’ll be fine, too, if that’s what worries you.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, başkanım, and I’m sure our organization will be fine, too. There’s just something, but it’s hard to explain. I don’t know how to put it into words.”

“You worry, that’s normal. I appreciate you bringing it up. To me it is important to know if any of you have any reservations—especially you. There’s something about you, heval Sara, that tells me you’ll take our movement very, very far. Your concern just shows your commitment to this movement but also to our friendship. You want to protect me, just as I wish I could’ve protected you from that unnecessary marriage.”

And just like that, she understood. He needed to talk about her marriage not because he wanted to give her a lecture on how she could’ve done things differently. All he wanted was for her to know that he cared, and that if he could have helped her, he would have.

“Marriage is hard, heval. It’s not compatible with a revolutionary life. You have a power dynamic that exemplifies the very thing we fight against. A power dynamic that is unfair at its best, mostly for women. There is no real interest in engaging in such an enterprise, because it’s very unlikely that the parties will reach a fair balance. And without a fair balance, no system can work.”

Talks with the chairman could last for hours. Sitting around a cup of tea, sometimes of coffee, he could construct and deconstruct all the problems of contemporary society. Out of all the comrades, most of which she enjoyed listening to, the chairman was by far her favorite, and it was the same for the majority of people in their group. There was just something about him, about the way he saw life that was so different to what they had been used to. He had a way to captivate his audience, to make them interested in whatever he was talking about.

“My ex-husband and I could never agree, başkanım,” Sakine finally admitted. “Our views on revolution were just too different. I believe in the importance of naming the Kurdish struggle, of talking about it and making it central to our fight. But he...I don’t know, it just took him too long to decide. It was so different in the beginning. He seemed more likely to compromise.”

“He wanted to get to you, heval. He used your love for our cause to make you agree to marrying him.”

She knew that, but she never thought other people would notice, and for a moment she felt foolish. So other people were well aware that he was playing her, using her passion for the Kurdish struggle to keep her next to him. There was a heavy silence in the room, and Sakine did not know what to say. Sure, she trusted the chairman a lot, even if they had not known each other in person for too long. She cared about what he thought about her, and definitely didn’t want him thinking that she was some sort of naive idealist that took everyone at face value and that had let someone retain her using those cheap tactics.

“Hey, heval,” he said, looking straight into her eyes. “It’s fine. It happens. And there’s nothing to be ashamed of. These type of things can happen to anyone. Take it this way: now you have the knowledge you need so that it doesn’t happen to anyone else. In our feudal society, women are still at a loss. Your proof of bravery will be an example for many.”

“Yes, başkanım.”

“And, please, know that if anything ever comes up again, I’m here for you. All you have to say is, ‘take me to the chairman’, and I’ll be there.”

She believed him, blindly. He extended his hand and shook hers firmly, followed by a hug. There was something about his words, the way he said things, that made him authentic in

her eyes. For her, someone who talked about Kurdistan, class struggle, changing the system, and such other topics with the passion that he did, meant every word he said. That was the day she understood that they were going to be friends, and that regardless of what happened their friendship would prevail.

March 1992, PKK Academy, Somewhere in Syria.

It had been already a couple of months since Sakine had arrived in the camp, and she had made it a point to wake up early every morning to go walk around. It was relaxing for her to be there, alone, in the middle of nature. Being cramped in a cell with so many people had made her appreciate the moments of silence.

That one morning, after her walk, she went back and sat down in a chair that was set up close to an extinguished fire pit. She hadn't even properly sat on the chair when heval Berfin came and sat next to her, handing her a cup of hot tea. How much had she missed the soft steam of a freshly brewed cup, the way it kindly burns one's hands as it waits.

"You have no idea how much I had dreamt of this," Sakine let out, taking the first sip.  
"Kurdistan, this air, the breeze, the smell of fresh hot tea... all of you, of course"

Sakine laughed quietly and Berfin smiled, taking her own cup to her lips.

"Heval Sara, we missed you so much, too," Berfin started. "We followed your resistance and achievements in jail, and we cheered at every small victory. For us women, you're a role model of resistance and strength. You're the revolutionary we all want to become. We want to be able to look at death in the eye and smile."

Berfin paused briefly, then added, smiling, “But, you know? I think no one missed you as much as başkanımız.”

Sakine was not surprised. She had missed him, too, and one of the things that kept her strong in that cell was to know that one day she would escape, and she would go meet him wherever he was.

“It was the same for me,” Sakine said, finishing the remainder of her tea in just one sip. “I think all of the comrades inside missed him, and he missed all of us as well.”

“Well, he did, ama özellikle seni özledi,” Berfin said. “You know? Everybody knows about the letter that you sent him, and how mad he was when he read it.”

“Which letter?” Sakine said, without recollection.

“One that you sent him when you escaped Meletî prison, and they caught you because the male comrades weren’t there.”

She remembered now. That letter that she had written, furious, sitting against the wall, trying to get some moonlight through the window. That letter where she had poured her sorrows and her frustrations. That letter that she expected will make it to him but that she knew probably wouldn’t. Turned out it had. Maybe the comrades didn’t read it before, or maybe the chairman had asked that their correspondence wasn’t opened—for some reason, that occurred to her.

“What did he say?” Sakine asked, curious.

“I wasn’t there, but everyone has heard about it. He got so mad that he started shouting at the men, had them line up and, one after the other, made them promise that they will help their female comrades. He called it a shame and a betrayal. He didn’t talk to any of the male comrades for days.”

How much had she missed the chairman and his support! Not that it made her happy that other comrades had to pay the consequences of those in jail, but it was a relief to know that she had his support. After all, who else could she count on but him? Throughout her time in jail she had borne witness to betrayals and disappointments from the male comrades, but what kept her going was knowing that the chairman had her back. That night when she had written that letter she had done it carefully, picking the words that she knew would upset him the most—conveying word by word how she had felt dismissed and ignored for the sole fact that she was a woman. It wasn't a surprise that the chairman had been so upset—she had made sure that he would be.

“And you know what else?” Berfin said. “Once he took us to one of the flats of the party, the 10th Floor it was called, and he had your photo in his nightstand, framed.”

Sakine was surprised to hear that, because she knew that having a framed picture of any comrade who was not martyred was not allowed. Yet, at the same time, there was an overwhelming emotion. The feeling of knowing that he cared about her just as much as she cared about him. Not that she would have doubted it, but there was a certain sense of gratification in knowing it like that.

“You're very good friends, aren't you?” Berfin asked. “It's easy to see, whenever you are together. Well, even when you're not.”

“I guess so, yes. We've been friends for more than twenty years now. Lots of things happen in that amount of time.”

Berfin stood up to go grab more tea, and Sakine sat there, her eyes fixated on the mountains, their majestic beauty. Those who had been in the struggle for enough time knew that Kurds have no friends but the mountains. But, then again, there is no better friend than a Kurd could wish for. Most of Kurdistan is surrounded by mountains. Those were the mountains that

provided them with a place to live, and a place to hide; the mountains that were not only a home but also a refuge. It was to those mountains that Sakine had been wanting to return all those years, those mountains that she had missed so much.

In twenty years, a lot of things had happened. But, for some reason, the chairman's friendship had always remained a constant. In spite of the distance, of the years in jail, of the lack of communication, there had always been that certainty in her that he was there and would be there, regardless. There were some cadres that boasted of their proximity with the chairman. It was not uncommon to hear from a few, maybe two or three of them, who always seemed to thrive on that idea that they were closer to him than anyone else.

"The chairman and I were talking the other day," Ali Haydar would say, for instance, in a way that made it clear that there was no one else with them.

"I suggested this and that and the chairman thought it was a good idea," Murat would retort.

"Well, the chairman said he would trust me to lead an operation against the Turkish military," Cemil would conclude.

In the beginning, and much to her chagrin, she would let herself go and would feel sad and unimportant, to an extent, with all that boasting from others. But, as time started passing, and she was able to spend more time around the chairman, something inside started telling her that she had nothing to envy to any of those male comrades. Because maybe they did not know it, but she was just as close to the chairman as any of them, maybe even more; she had just decided to keep it to herself.

There was no point in showing off, that was not how anything worked anymore, they were not children. On the contrary, it was their secret. That friendship, as important as it was,

was theirs and no one else's. There was no need for people to know, she kept telling herself, and she didn't need others to validate something that she already knew existed. But learning from Berfin that the chairman had her picture and knowing that, just like Berfin, probably many other comrades had seen it and had understood, gave her a small sense of satisfaction that she wanted to enjoy.

April 4th, 1992, PKK Academy, Somewhere in Syria

Night had fallen already in the mountains, but Sakine did not go out until the noise from the music had dissipated. When she walked past the fire pit, she saw the ember still glowing, but the fire was out already. There was no one around, and if she were a different person she might have thought that she was late. But if she knew something about the chairman, it was that she would find him there. And she was right; sitting there, in the middle of what was now an empty place, was the chairman himself, thinking.

“Başkanım,” she said, sitting next to him. “How was the party?”

“It wasn't really a party,” he replied. “We just danced some around the fire, sang some songs, nothing more. You know I don't make a big deal out of my birthday.”

“Yes, I know,” she concluded, smiling.

“I didn't see you around, though. I was expecting you. What happened?”

“I don't know,” she lied. “I just thought I might try to catch you later.”

But she had decided not to come on purpose. Usually, she loved being surrounded by people, all the dancing and singing, all the forgetting for a moment that those mountains were their refuge from an endless war. Not today, though.

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

“Başkanım,” she let out a quick laugh. “Please don’t misunderstand me. I just thought it wouldn’t make much of a difference, with all those people around.”

“Don’t ever think that, heval Sara,” he said. “I could be surrounded by a million people, and I would still miss you.”

Sakine knew he was telling her the truth because that was the exact way she felt, too. She took out a scarf from her pocket and opened it in front of him, revealing a small nan.

“What is this?” He asked, with a certain curiosity in his voice. “Is that nan?”

“It is, yes,” she said. “I thought I’d bring you, you know? For your birthday. Like a cake of sorts.”

“Oh, wow, well, thank you.” he said, and she could tell he was touched, but did not know exactly what to do next.

“Rojbuna te piroz be,” she said. “Should we sing?”

He didn’t say anything, and she started singing. He had a smile on his face that gave him an air of innocence like that of a little kid. Sakine wondered what it would’ve been like to have met the chairman in the playground, playing marbles or jumping rope, making teams for soccer. She already knew they would’ve been in the same one. When she was done singing, she just handed him the bread, and he split it in two and gave her half.

“Thank you, baskanim,” she said.

“No, thank you,” he took a bite of his nan. “You know, heval Sara? I’ve never really made a lot of fuss out of my birthday, but this right here, is really special. Thank you, friend.”

“It’s really nothing, baskanim,” she took a bite of her nan as well. “And I still have something else for you. This one is a gift.”

She took another piece of cloth out of her pocket, and put it in his hand. He was not expecting it, she could tell, and he seemed unsure as to what he was supposed to do with it. She motioned for him to check what was inside, and when he did, she just looked at him.

“Seeds?” He seemed confused.

“Those are nane seeds, and some are flower seeds, although I don’t remember exactly which ones. I know you travel a lot, baskanim, and it just thought that maybe you’d like to, sometimes, leave roots somewhere, even if it is with these little plants.”

“That’s so kind of you, heval,” he closed up the cloth and put it in his pocket. “I just think I should let you know, I’m not exactly gifted for this type of thing, so please don’t be upset if those plants never grow.”

“It is okay, baskanim,” she said. “You’ve already planted the seed of revolution in all of us, and it will always keep growing.”

“Are you sure it was only me?” He told her, and she was surprised by his comment. “Because the way it has always seemed to me is that you have planted some important seeds, as well.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, baskanim?”

“You, heval,” he explained. “You have made unbelievable contributions to this movement, to who we are today, to women in this movement. You’ve done for them what you just did for me. You gave them seeds, but not just that, you also helped them plant them, and you

made sure they grew. They will, in turn, sow more plants in more women, and this movement will not end. Women will lead us to victory, and when that happens, you'll be the one to thank.”

“We've worked together, baskanim,” she said.

“I know, heval,” he admitted. “You've been a great comrade, and an even better friend.”

He stood up as she did, and he hugged her with an energy only he could transmit. That force, that passion for an ideal, that beam of hope that he had been handing them for decades now, everything that had kept her strong all those years in jail, all that hardship and trouble and pain, was summarized in that one hug. Her life as a revolutionary had brought her many satisfactions and victories, many joys, and a feeling of belonging that she had never experienced before. But it had also brought her a friend, a close friend, an ally, a comrade, someone that she knew she could always count on. And that, was something she was unable to explain. Having him in her life was an indication that she had made the right decision, and that a life of revolutionary, although sometimes lonely, would not bring a lot of people, but would always bring the right kind.

September 1994, PKK Camp, Qandil, Iraq

Sakine was almost done with her cigarette, first one in ages, when she felt a presence coming closer. It was the chairman, tea in hand. He sat in silence next to her, and they remained like that for a while. She smashed the remainders of her cigarette on the ground, and kept looking at the horizon.

“I didn’t mean for it to be an attack,” he finally said. “I didn’t want to make you feel bad, if that’s what I did.”

“You did what you had to do,” she said, unconvinced. “I just didn’t expect you to call me out in front of everyone like that.”

“You’re a successful combatant, heval. You’ve done a lot of things for this organization. From time to time, I need to keep things on track.”

By that, he meant to say that he needed to keep her in check, or at least that was how she had felt, standing there in front of everybody while he asked her questions that ranged from the most philosophical right down to the most ridiculous.

“So, heval Sara,” he had said. “One of the most important jobs that you have undertaken in this organization is making sure that women are included in all steps of revolution, isn’t it right?”

“Yes, baskanim,” she had answered, not really sure where he was going with it.

“Good. Then tell me, heval, what would you say has been the driving force behind your choice to make this the focus of your fight?”

Sakine had wanted to tell him she hadn’t really understood the question, but she knew better than to say that. It was clear to her what was happening, and all she could hope was to give the right answer.

“Well, baskanim, I’m a daughter of Dersim. Women from my village were sacrificed by the Turkish state in an attempt to annihilate the Kurdish people. At first I didn’t understand why, but it just felt wrong that women were always the ones to suffer the worst fate. Then I started looking around and realized that this situation was not only the case in everyday life but also during times of war. I decided to give women an opportunity, the option to be part of the

revolution from the start, to make it happen not only for Kurdistan but for us. When Kurdistan is free, baskanim, it'll be by the hands of women.”

“Hmm, interesting, heval,” he had said. “Should I be worried, then, that you might try to take over?”

If it wasn't because she knew that he wasn't one to joke with serious stuff, she would have thought it was a prank. And a bad one at that. She wanted to tell him that to his face, but she was exhausted. For the first time ever, she didn't want to sit around and listen to him, she just wanted to go. And she knew that he knew it.

“Hey, look at me,” he said, kindly. “You know I'd never hurt you, no matter what, right? And I would never put you in a bad position, not after everything you've done.”

There was a power struggle, and it was the first time that she even ventured to think it. Before, she would've never thought that way, but after what had happened that day it had become evident that at some point the chairman had felt that she was a threat to his leadership in the organization. She knew how much the other comrades, both men and women, respected her and valued her ideas and opinions. Yes, maybe she had expressed disagreement at times with certain measures taken by the party, or she had proposed slightly different ways of action, but nothing that could threaten the leadership of the chairman.

“It takes time for things to move forward,” Sakine finally said, not really sure he'd know what she meant. “I guess that's the reason why... If you see me as a threat I—”

“I don't see you as a threat, heval,” he paused for a second then continued, “not the way you think, at least.”

Men are complicated, she thought, and she couldn't help but go back to all those times she was told she was too emotional in her actions or her writings. All those times in jail that she

would write articles from her cell for the party's newsletter, only to get them back with the feedback "good, but a bit emotional" in some shape or form attached to it. Yet there she was, with someone who was too scared of what she was doing.

"Look, those are things I have to do. I can't let them think that I don't look into what you're doing just because we're friends. I need to show them that I don't play favorites. You understand that, right?"

"I do, baskanim," she said.

He was right to a certain degree. After all, he usually did that to other comrades. He'd make them stand in front of everybody and grill them, ask them questions, make sure their loyalties were in the right place. She'd been to way too many of those meetings before and, granted, she thought at times the chairman was a bit too harsh on the comrades, but she never saw it as anything more than routine interrogations. So, what had changed when it had been her turn? It didn't take her long to find the answer: she was just hurt that all those years of friendship didn't grant her preferential treatment. Yes, to a certain degree she'd expected their friendship by itself would be enough for him to skip all that.

It was a wake-up call of sorts, even if she didn't want to see it as that—there was a part of her that felt that she was overreacting, and that it was a mistake for her to even feel bad about this.

"You know how much I care about you, right?" He finally told her, probably sensing that she was very much hurt. "I'm begging you please don't take it personal. This means nothing about our friendship, and that's a part I've never questioned. Look at all of this," he said, waving his hand around. "All these people and these camps, I'm ultimately responsible for. It's also a

matter of making sure that our comrades are safe. And they need to know that I'll always make sure that everything around us goes well."

She wanted to ask him what did that have to do with anything, but she didn't. Instead, she looked at him insistently, almost as if she wanted him to be able to look at her and just like that understand why she was that upset. But she was sure that he wouldn't—either because he didn't know why, or because he just wanted to pretend that he didn't.

"You know?" Sakine finally told him. "Maybe it's me. It is true that I've always had some problems understanding that friendships shouldn't get in the way of our struggle."

"I know where this is going," he said. "Look, heval, regardless of what happens I'm telling you; you'll always remain my friend, and I'll never doubt you. Do you seriously think I'd still be here if I doubted you? Do you seriously think that somewhere in my mind I have the smallest doubt that you may want to harm me?"

She didn't say anything, noticing the blatant contradiction. If he didn't doubt her, then why did he feel the need to pretend he did? Was that some sort of performance to keep everyone believing he was being fair amongst the comrades? She remained quiet, thinking that he didn't expect an answer. It took her a couple of seconds to realize he was actually waiting so she just said, "I know."

"And the others know that, too. Everyone knows and if you don't believe me just go around and ask. But, heval, at the same time, that doesn't mean I can just treat you different to others, it wouldn't be fair. Not to them, but also not to you."

"I don't think we need to go over that again," she said. "I guess I just didn't see it coming. And it's not the interrogation, just in case you want to know. It's the feeling of not being trusted. That's it. You can interrogate me all you want, but I won't let you question my loyalty."

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing, to question loyalty from time to time. You know? You should probably question mine every now and then.”

She was livid, questioning whether those words had really come out of his mouth. Where in the world was this conversation going? She stared at him, in shock, and he just started laughing.

“Ya heval, don’t look at me that way, c’mon, I’m just teasing you!”

But he wasn’t. She knew it, and she knew he was just about to tell her why.

“Look, heval,” he said. “What I’m saying is that blind trust is never good. That’s it. You have to learn not to trust anyone fully. It sounds bad, I know, and even sad, maybe. But if there’s something that I’m sure you’ve learned all these years in prison, and even here in the outside, is that loyalty is not always a given.”

That much she knew, and he was right. During her years in jail she had seen more than one comrade betray their ideals—Şahin being probably the biggest traitor. That low life who not only had given name after name of the comrades outside, but had also decided to go around jail reciting principles of Kemalism, and trying to get them to leave their principles behind and deny the existence of Kurdistan.

And, come to think about it, the chairman himself had experience betrayal firsthand when Kesire had left him and the party in ’87; that was one of the first things Sakine had learned after meeting the comrades in the outside once she was free. She never asked him, though, and he never brought it up, so she assumed he just didn’t want to talk about it. Sakine, although hurt by her friend’s pain, understood that that which bothered her about Kesire so long ago was nothing

other than the fact that she was a traitor. Sakine had doubted a comrade once, maybe the chairman was in his right to do the same thing.

“It’s not a bad thing to trust,” he continued, “don’t get me wrong. It’s important, however, to challenge loyalties from time to time, to dig, to ask the right questions. And, can I tell you something? People will understand, comrades will understand. If it were only about our friendship, heval, I would never question it, but we’re also comrades. There has to be a divide there, no matter how hard to make. And I know you know that, and I know you understand it. I’m not worried that you’ll stop being my friend, or that you won’t be loyal to me anymore. I know that you still care about me just as much as you did before that meeting, and I know that, even if now you don’t necessarily understand what’s going on, you’ll not question the friendship that exists.”

There was a silence. She wasn’t sure if he expected her to elaborate on something, or if he just wanted to give her a minute to think. He finally stood up and walked away, and she understood that he wanted her to think about it, to gather her ideas.

Maybe it was on her best interest, after all, to make that division between friendship and camaraderie. Even if it was true that the division between the two dimensions of a relationship might become blurry at times, she needed to keep this professional. For some reason, it didn’t hurt as much anymore. Yes, she had been questioned, but so had pretty much everybody before her. The chairman needed that confirmation of loyalty--the chairman needed even maybe that assertion of power, because, why not? But, her friend had not doubted her, and wouldn’t. These conflicts were to be expected in situations like this. Can you be a friend and a leader? If so, then where do you draw the line? And if you’re friends with the leader, then how do you make sure that you know not to mix one part of the relationship with the other?

February 16th, 1999, PKK Camp, Qandil, Iraq.

When Sakine learned that Apo had been arrested, she was devastated. It had taken the comrades forever to tell her, the night was starting to fall and with it the cold breeze of the last weeks of winter. In the end, they had only told her when they understood that it would be worse if she found out from someone else. It had fallen on heval Murat, heval Ozcan, and heval Raşid to tell her, and as they walked towards her, she immediately knew that something was not right, she just never expected it to be that.

How could that have happened? Sakine knew that something was off when she hadn't heard from the chairman in a while. He had been able to write to her before leaving Syria, saying he would keep her posted one way or another, and that she would be the first one to know when he made it to Kenya. She knew he would let her know, or someone would, but as the days stretched out, she started getting that ominous feeling that something had gone terribly wrong. When the three comrades came to see her, blank faces and incertitude in their eyes, she just knew.

She plopped in the closest chair she could find and asked for a cup of water. She wanted to cry but didn't want any of the people around her to see her like that, so she held back her tears as best she could. There was no way that could be happening. Why? Why the chairman? It wasn't a coincidence, someone had arranged for that to happen, they just needed to find who. And now, what? Where were they taking him? What would happen to him? So many different questions were racing in her mind that she was finding it hard to concentrate in only one. People

around her were visibly concerned, they didn't know what was going to happen, nobody knew. What would that mean for their struggle, for their organization? They had taken the chairman! But, for her, at that moment, they had taken her friend, and that was the biggest pain she was having to deal with.

They would seek the death penalty; she was sure of that. It was, after all, the best shot the Turkish state had at crushing their spirits, and only thinking about it was enough to send her in a downward spiral. Everything was in chaos, people running here and there, and the permanent fear that the Turkish military was getting ready to attack them soon, very soon. People were getting in position, grabbing their rifles, their assault weapons, setting everything so that the enemy would not be able to surprise them. Sakine reached out to the women and organized the battalion. It was the only thing she could do, to prepare the women for an eventual attack—it was also the only thing that would allow her to stop thinking. If she put herself to work, at least she would be useful. And she knew that was what the chairman would've asked her to do if he could.

“Heval Sara,” she heard someone say, and when she turned around it was Çiçek.

Neither of them said a word, instead, Çiçek just hugged her in silence. For Sakine it was becoming harder and harder to contain the tears of despair and frustration, but she knew that she had to be strong, otherwise everything around her would crumble.

“I'm so sorry, heval,” Çiçek said. “We all here know what the chairman means for you. It's going to be as hard for you as it was for him back then, when you were in jail. But you'll make it through.”

She remained quiet for a little bit. She didn't want to be rude, but at the same time, she was a bit tired of everyone around her just saying things would be fine—almost as if they didn't know who they were up against. At the same time, she herself had remained mostly positive

through her whole time in jail, and sometimes that was needed. Some people just felt the need to carry the emotional soul of the group, and if they went down, then everyone would go down. That was her in jail. To lose her cool and optimism would have meant letting the enemy win. But now, now she just didn't know for how much longer her optimism could hold.

“They're going to ask for the death penalty, Çiçek,” Sakine finally said, lowering her voice. “We need to make peace with that, and I'm not sure I can.”

“Nothing has happened yet, heval,” she said. “Let's just wait and see what happens. I know it's hard. I know it's hard for all of us, but I also know that it is especially hard for you. You two have been close for longer than I've been here. The chairman will be fine, heval, and so will your friend.”

A lone tear rolled down her cheek, and she rushed to wipe it away. Only then she understood that she was afraid to be seen as incapable by the male comrades; she didn't need them thinking that she didn't have the cold blood needed for those moments, and she wasn't sure she was in the mood to handle being told that she was being “emotional.” There was one thing for sure, and it was that she had to get ready, just in case they did end up asking for the death penalty.

Another thing that was important, however, was that she find a way to communicate with the chairman. The craziest ideas came flooding her mind. There had to be a way for her to let him know that she was there, that she would miss him but that she would wait, and their friendship would be intact when he came out, the same way it had been when she made it out of jail. And then she understood that he would know it. He knew that she was there, and that she would be there regardless. He knew it and he would keep knowing it either until he died, or until they were reunited again.

## CHAPTER IV

*This is one of the letters that I was able to get my hands on. The director of the Kurdish center in Paris sent a copy to my sister, who sent it over to me in the early 2000s. To this day, I don't know how they got it. Did Sakine give it to them? Did they find it by accident? When I asked my sister, she didn't have a lot of answers either. All she said was "I mentioned you were writing a book about her, and next thing I know they sent me this." I had told my sister I was writing a book years before I actually started—a book I wasn't even sure I would ever write.*

*But Behar had given me the perfect cover, and I intended to use it every single time possible. "They said you can interview her, too, you know?" My sister told me one day on the phone, and I froze. Maybe one day, I thought, when I'm ready. I never was and I missed my chance.*

*This letter to her lawyer is then nothing more than a draft—full of scratches and overlapping writing. I was never able to find out if she ended up sending this letter, a better version at least. But I'm glad I got to see this part of her.*

*Zozan*

February 13th, 1978

Av. Pınar Sever

Izmir, Turkey

Sayın Pınar hanım,

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me last week. I'm deeply sorry that I can't come to your office this time, but I'm currently in Elazig ~~working to make sure that more women will join my organization~~ tending to some matters. As we agreed last time, I will here provide you with more background information in the matter of my petition to divorce Mr. Baki Polat. As I already mentioned, the last audience could not take place because he refused to show up. ~~I will not give into his game.~~ My previous lawyer seemed to believe that it would be in our best interest to just wait it out, and hope he decides to come next time. That's when I decided to contact you. My time is valuable and my commitments ample, and I'm sure that a busy woman like you will understand how important it is that we don't drag on matters that should be easily solved.

I do not wish to remain married to Baki bey. Before answering your question on what motivated my divorce, I ~~think I should let you know~~ want to make very clear that I didn't even want to get married to him in the first place. At the time, however, it seemed like my only option. I come from the town of Dersim, a town that has seen great devastation in the hands of the Turkish government, but also a town that has given life to some of the most magnificent revolutionaries. Since I was young, I've wanted to dedicate my life to the revolution. I knew it would require sacrifices, and I also knew I was ready to do whatever it took. ~~I didn't expect my determination to end up trapping me in a marriage with someone with whom I wouldn't otherwise have shared a word, let alone my life.~~

Before I ran away from home at the age of 17, I had already decided to join the Kurdistan Revolutionaries. They were only starting to gain traction, but I felt that they were the right fit for me. I was hoping that I could grow in my revolutionary knowledge and action along with that organization. Being Kurdish myself, it was only logical that I would want to study and improve the condition of my people in Turkey. But, as my interest in them grew, so did the problems that were coming my way. ~~It's hard to be a woman and want to do something other than find someone to marry and start a family with.~~

My situation at home wasn't easy, mostly because my mother wasn't keen to my revolutionary ambitions. ~~There was a lot of fighting, a lot of tension, she was asphyxiating me.~~ Girls my age from the neighborhood were starting to get married or engaged. ~~The more I'd hear about it the more I dreaded the day my turn would come.~~ For my mother, my only worry should be to do like them: get married, leave her house, and become someone else's problem. It didn't take me long to understand that to live my life the way I wanted to, I needed to leave my family and my hometown. I started thinking about the best way to pull that off without hurting my family more than I was already bound to. ~~Deep inside, no matter how hard it was to admit it, I still didn't want to hurt my mom.~~ The simplest solution seemed for me to pretend I was running away to marry someone, and it was then that Baki bey came back to the picture.

Came back, that is, because Baki bey had already come by my house and asked me to marry him. I still have this image of him, sitting in my kitchen, trying to convince my mother and my older brother, Haydar, to approve of the union—Baki bey is, actually, a cousin on my mother's side. ~~But even my mother thought he was a terrible match for me.~~ This episode happened when I was fifteen and still in school, and my answer was a resounding no. My mother and brother both supported my decision—even more than support, they agreed with me in that

Baki bey wasn't a good choice for me. When I told him, he took it well, ~~or at least that was what he wanted us to believe.~~ What I didn't know was that he would wait, luring in the dark. During all that time he had just been waiting for the right moment to make his comeback. ~~How low can someone sink, to take advantage of another person when they need help the most? And make no mistake, that's exactly what Baki bey did.~~ When I tell you that he was luring in the dark, I mean it.

I feel like here I have to reiterate, so that you can understand, that I didn't really intend on marrying him. It was more of a facade. I just wanted my family to leave me alone, and the easiest way was to make them believe that this was a matter of the heart. ~~I just wanted a way out.~~ I would leave Dersim with him but, once in Ankara, I would contact comrades from my organization, and make plans for me to stay somewhere else. Baki bey didn't respect that agreement. His family didn't either, and instead of reminding him that it was all part of a deal, they started pressuring me into marrying him. Baki bey had to go back to Izmir, and he couldn't take me with him unless we were married. His family said they wouldn't want me to stay in Ankara either, since I'd be an unmarried young woman, and the neighbors would talk. ~~They cared more about the neighbors' comfort than about my own—and I'm their family member! Or maybe it was all part of the plan to ensure Baki bey got what he wanted.~~ Unable to contact my friends in Ankara and with nowhere else to go, I ended up traveling to Izmir where I got married to Baki bey.

I'm sure it's hard to imagine what it is like to be forced to sacrifice something so dear as it is one's freedom. I did not love Baki bey at the time, never had, and, as this process attests, I never will. But still, he would pretend like ours was a loving relationship. ~~To this day I feel a little bit sad for his lack of self love, and how knowing well enough what my feelings for him~~

~~were and what they were not he still chose to live in a fantasy.~~ I don't really know what he expected from this marriage, if he thought that maybe by getting married ~~I would fall in love with him or what~~ feelings of love would grow in me. The only thing this marriage did was intensify our differences.

As I mentioned that day in your office, Baki bey is Kurdish, too, but his loyalty to the Halkın Kurtuluş Party, or HK, made it to where the Kurdish struggle wasn't an important part of his revolution. I tried to talk him into considering joining our organization. With his experience in the HK, he could've brought a lot to the table that would've benefited us all, but most of all the Kurdish cause. ~~I don't think I even wanted him there, but I wanted to believe I did. Maybe that way marrying him would be worth something.~~ Baki bey would always refuse to talk about it, or would redirect the conversation in a way that would help him gain some time. He would give me hope, though. He was very good at making me believe that he was seriously considering coming over to our organization.

The night we arrived in Izmir, he told me that he was close to making up his mind, and that he thought I'd be happy with his decision. I took that as a good sign, and married him the next day. Hearing that made it less dreadful, I guess. But he was just pretending. ~~And to think that for that reason, and that reason only, I ended up married to Baki bey! It was a desperate mistake, one that, at the time, seemed like the right solution, but a mistake, nonetheless. I did it out of desperation, and he knew it.~~ He knew how important this was for me, so he said what I wanted to hear, hoping it would pay off in the end.

We rented a flat with a couple of friends in Izmir. To me, living alone with him was out of the question. I wasn't really comfortable when he was around if no one else was; ~~the sole thought of him kind of repulsed me. It was not that he was repulsive as an individual~~ It wasn't

that I was scared of him, it was just hard for me to accept that he had used my moment of weakness to push me to do something I didn't want to do. I thought that spoke badly of his character and made him into the type of person I have a hard time respecting.

There was no love in our marriage but also, there was no common struggle—that was a deal breaker for me. With time I understood that Baki bey, in his ambition for power, forgot to have ideals. About a year into our marriage, it became evident that he didn't want to lose his position in the HK. He didn't care about the Kurdish question; he just cared about climbing more and more in the hierarchy of his party. At that moment I knew that, not only would he never make up his mind, but he was ~~just playing me for a fool~~ keeping the hope alive in me just so I wouldn't leave him.

I've long worked alongside men in different cities and in different organizations, fulfilling different missions. There's always been a type of revolutionary man that ~~has made me sick~~ I've had a hard time working with, and it's the man who talks about revolution and equality during meetings, because he knows it is a good talking point, but then looks at the women in his life as being less than him. That disconnect between what they say is their ideology and what they really believe in has always been problematic to me.

Baki bey was one of those. The worst part is that he felt that he could impose that mentality on me, too. He never said it to me directly, but he was always ready to dismiss my ideas as a revolutionary. One day, when we were together at a café, I was telling him about how the situation of Kurdistan could be compared to that of a colony. Baki ~~thought it would be very smart to say~~ interrupted me, telling me how after he had been a revolutionary for so many years it wouldn't be me who would teach him new things. Yet when I made similar comments when any of our comrades were around, he'd compliment me, saying I was smart and that my

contributions were extremely important, even though I already knew how he really felt about it. This is just one of many examples that I have of his ~~infinite hypocrisy~~ reproachable behavior.

As to why I didn't leave before, I think it is because many of my own comrades, ~~people that I cared about and that should've cared about me~~, made me believe it was important for me to stay in this relationship. I don't want to name them, not because I believe in protecting them, but because writing their names down can make the betrayal feel more real to me, and I don't want that. They thought it was a good idea for me to try to "gain over" Baki bey to our side, whatever that could mean. Yes, Baki was an experienced revolutionary and had been a revolutionary far longer than I had, ~~but still I don't think it was something that should've been considered over my wellbeing~~ but there was no point on keeping trying if he wasn't going to make a decision. ~~Sadly, I don't think any of my comrades stopped for a moment to think about what staying with Baki bey would represent for me. They all knew I didn't love him; I don't think there was a single one of them who could've thought that I had married Baki out of love. Then, why push me to stay with him, if we really had nothing in common?~~ Of course, my comrades would always let me know that they weren't forcing me to stay. Their advice would always end by "well, in the end you know what's best for you" or "it's just an idea," but, did they really consider the position they were putting me in?

I know well enough that I'm not the first woman to get divorced, nor do I hope to be the last. However, during my years doing field work in different cities I have learned how scary divorce can be for women. ~~Women~~ We are shamed into either staying in unhappy marriages or remaining quiet about the undoing of our unions. But I've met women who were able to make it out, and I always asked them the same question: what was ~~that trigger~~, that moment that made

them say “I can’t take this anymore”? Today, as I write this to you, I ask myself that question.

What in my marriage made me decide to simply give up?

I can’t really think of a particular moment. I think it was just the culmination of months and months of trying, talking, arguing, and attempting to convince Baki bey to give at least consideration to the Kurdish struggle. It didn’t change anything, and with every day that passed our relationship would deteriorate more. One day, just like that, I finally decided to call it quits, and asked him to leave the apartment we shared. Nothing in particular happened that day, ~~other than the fact that I looked at myself in the mirror and understood that I hated the sadness reflected in my eyes~~ it just seemed like the right time to finally move on.

I have to say, and it should be noted, that his family tried to pressure me to stay in the marriage. Our separation was hard, especially for my uncle, Baki bey’s dad. What a shame it was, of course, that I was rejecting his son for a second time, only that this time around everybody knew us as husband and wife. But this time, I decided that I wasn’t going to let guilt and social pressure dictate my life, ~~after all, none of them were there to support me when I felt at a dead end~~ and I filled for divorce. Maybe I was naive enough to believe that things would go smoothly. All that needed to be said had already been said, and there was no point in prolonging something that had been coming. ~~But I should’ve known that Baki bey would try to keep his grip and control over me.~~

I did blame myself for a long time, and I think I still blame myself today, for not being able to stand up to him sooner. ~~Not only to him, but to his family and to my comrades.~~ Everyone knew how miserable I was in this marriage, yet no one really seemed to care. ~~Only my brother Haydar who talked to Baki bey once and told him to quit playing stupid and make a decision already as far as where he stood.~~ Now I understand, though, that deep inside I was hoping Baki

bey would tell me openly that he didn't want to join the Kurdistan Revolutionaries—I wanted him to give me a concrete reason to leave him. ~~If Baki bey had changed his mind, if he had joined our group, committed himself to the freedom of Kurdistan, would I have been at peace with staying with him? A part of me thanks him that I never had to answer that question.~~

The day it was finally over, when Baki bey left the apartment we shared, I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I was finally free to move on. For the first time ~~in a long time, maybe ever, I felt like I didn't care if the comrades thought we still needed Baki or not, or if his family or my family thought it was a shame for me to get a divorce~~ in years, I felt the comfort of freedom. After I saw him walk away, peeking from my window, I ran outside, ready to feel the wind playing with my hair, ready to take a deep breath. I went to the city center and, like a little girl, got myself an ice cream and sat down in a bench close to the mosque and just enjoyed it, really enjoyed it. Like a little girl, I was free again.

When I went to the court last time, I did so hoping to put an end to this once and for all, ~~I wasn't really surprised to see that but Baki bey was nowhere to be found. I'm sure there's nothing he would enjoy more than tormenting me one last time.~~ By refusing to appear in court for the dissolution of our marriage, he is showing complete disregard for my decisions, my autonomy, and my capacity to decide on what's best for my life. ~~Regardless of where he thinks he stands, or how many rights he thinks he has because of the time we were married; he has no right to keep me from putting an end to a union that was based on deception from the beginning.~~

At this point I can assure you that we're beyond any mediation, and that hopes of reconciliation ~~are less than scarce, they~~ are plainly impossible. With this in mind I kindly request you to take whatever steps are necessary, do whatever needs to be done, fill whatever papers need to be filled. I will provide you with any and every document, signature, or paperwork

needed in a timely fashion. I do not request any alimony or compensation from Baki bey, and we don't have any children or property together. All that I request from him is that he signs without resistance the document that shall give me the freedom that I ~~believe I deserve~~ know I deserve.

Without any further concerns that need to be expressed, please receive my warmest regards,

Sakine Cansiz

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