

Once upon a time, there was a little girl named Nahr, who lived in the foothills of the Mingoran mountains and who was beloved by all. She and her mother lived in blissful isolation under the towering mountains. They grew their own papayas in their makeshift backyard garden, molded their own soap, steamed their own sheer khorma, and stitched their own shoes. Nahr, being an excitable young girl, grew more and more restless with her quiet lifestyle. The only time she could truly find excitement was midweek.

Each week, Nahr and her mother would hike down the trail to the town square and sell their shoes in the local vendor market. Her mother would barter with customers while Nahr asked them personal questions with little to no shame. This was their business tactic. Who were the customers to deny a little girl in her search for knowledge? People seldom left their stand shoeless and without a chuckle at the bouncing Nahr's enthusiasm. The square was even more lively this week because of the annual festival at dusk. It was a perfect business opportunity.

Krishna, a regular who required custom shoe sizing and darning, approached the stand. "Hello! How is your loud neighbor? The one with the ugly niece? Did you pound on the walls as I suggested? Surely, she will learn to stop moaning about her headaches now," Nahr said, side-eyeing her mother to make sure she was not overstepping.

Krishna smiled weakly at Nahr. She turned to Nahr's mother and handed her a small box, her voice low. "I am so sorry about your mother, Poorna. I heard from Harpal that she has fallen ill."

Nahr saw the smile drop from her mother's face. "She what?" Nahr turned away from her mother and Krishna while they whispered and exchanged worried glances. After a gruelling wait, her mother grasped her by the shoulders.

"Nahr, my dearest child, will you please take a basket of whatever you can find in the pantry to your grandmother? I must stay and wait at the stand. We need the money for new material. I'm sorry."

Could it be? An adventure all by herself? Nahr was skeptical. Her mother never let her go anywhere alone. "I suppose Mrs. Krishna will be going with me?"

Krishna gave a chuckle. "No, girl. I can't accompany you this time. I need these shoes stitched up by the festival tonight and I have to watch the cattle." Nahr shrugged and attempted to hide her enthusiasm. All the way to grandmother's house? All by herself? Finally, an adventure! This was the opportunity she had been waiting for! Yes, it was horrible that grandmother had fallen ill, but the adventure made it all worth it.

"Wear your hijab that she made you, the red pashmina one. She'll be pleased to see you using it. And take these to put in the basket as well." Her mother handed her the box that Krishna had handed her moments before. Nahr turned to run but was stopped by her mother's hand on her arm. "Stay on the path. I mean it." Nahr nodded.

"I will." Her mother's brow unfurrowed and she smiled. She gave her a kiss on the cheek and Nahr broke into a run.

In fifteen minutes' time, Nahr had assembled the basket and was on the trail to her grandmother's house. She walked at a brisk pace, intent on returning to the town square before dusk. She did not want to miss the festival. Nahr had only gone once, when she was younger, and she barely remembered anything other than feeling an unfamiliar weight in her stomach as she bobbed around the bonfire with other children. She had eaten more delicious vendor sweets in an hour than she had in a week, and that had taken its toll on her old shoes, now vomit stained and too small for her aching feet. If her mother had enough customers, she could peddle some new shoes for herself to dance around in with a full stomach. Nahr couldn't wait to see this year's festival food.

Come to think of it, she hadn't looked at what she had grabbed to put in the basket. Nahr lifted the fabric and peeked inside. Neatly tucked in the basket was a bottle of falsa juice, fresh lamb and chicken, some citrus, and Krishna's box. Nahr lifted the top off of Krishna's box, curious as to what its contents were. A dozen habshi halwa were positioned neatly in the box, enticing her.

Nahr's mouth watered. How long had it been since she had eaten a dessert? A month? Maybe longer? Without thinking, she began to reach in.

"Good day, little red hijabi," a voice echoed past her ear. She turned around. Where an empty space was a few minutes ago stood a man six or seven heads tall with a beard down to his elbows and bright eyes.

"It's Nahr," she said.

He grinned a crooked grin. "Nahr, what do you have in that basket? Could you perhaps spare some food for a poor husband?" He stepped closer and tilted his head, as if to peer into the basket as well.

Nahr jerked the basket away. "No! You can't have any. My grandmother is ill and she lives on the other side of these mountains, so she can't come into town to get any food."

The man's face crumpled and Nahr immediately regretted her sharp tone. "Oh. I'm sorry. My wife was craving something sweet, and she sent me away to find something." He held out his scraggly hands. "I passed a very pretty field of flowers just over there, but I couldn't find any berries."

Bile tickled the back of her throat in warning. There was something very wrong about this man, her intuition screamed at her, but she disregarded it. Nahr wanted adventure.

"Well then, would you at least allow me to escort you to your grandmother's house?" he asked. "I know plenty of shortcuts."

"Can you show me where the field is?" Nahr replied.

The man looked mildly surprised. "Of course," he said, and guided her into a little groove off of the path, pointing out which turns to take and what places to avoid.

“Thank you!” Nahr cried out and waved goodbye. The man waved goodbye and waited until she was out of sight to void his face of emotion.

“Just off of the other side of these mountains, eh?” He murmured to himself. Too many times peoples’ inability to stop running their mouths had given him a luscious meal. A boy who was looking for work, a woman who wanted something sweet, a frail grandmother, and a little girl who wandered off deep into the forest, all in one week. It was almost too easy. The Wolf allowed himself a smirk as he began his trek to the other side of the mountains.

Nahr had stopped to rest her feet in a stream on her way back from the field. She was surprised by the great variety of flowers the field offered and decided to take advantage by making Grandmother a bouquet. Maybe that would disguise the missing half-dozen of habshi halwa. Nahr reluctantly tugged her shoes back on. She had only walked a short distance before she stumbled across Grandmother’s cottage – much sooner than expected. See, silly? You were overthinking it. The man did know a shortcut and he wanted to help.

Nahr rapped the front door three times. The door glided open, as if Grandmother hadn’t closed it the last time she went out. “Let yourself in and lock the door behind you,” the Wolf called out, disguising his voice. “I am far too weak to get up myself.” He coughed violently. Nahr paused, but then dismissed it. The wind probably pushed it open.

Nahr entered the bedroom and set the basket down. She approached the bed, gazing intently.

"Grandmother," she said, "What big ears you have."

"The better to hear you with, darling."

"Grandmother, what sharp teeth you have."

"The better to eat my nuts with."

"Grandmother, what large hands you have."

"The better to hug you with."

It was quiet and still for a moment before the Wolf spoke again. “Dear, there is some meat on the table I need you to finish for me.” This was the Wolf’s favorite part. People who ate sweets all the time tasted the worst – way too fatty for him – but all too fitting for an unassuming victim. Nahr was already feeling quite full from her earlier indulgence, but she obeyed her grandmother and sat down, cutting into the meat. She raised it to her mouth and took a bite. Nahr’s lips puckered. “Grandmother,” she said hesitantly, “This meat tastes odd. Is it halal?”

“Well,” the Wolf rasped. “It’s human.” Nahr screamed and reared away from the table as two scraggly hands flew to her eyes. She felt her head collide with the floor over and over again as the world slowly faded.

When she awoke, Nahr's hands and feet were bound to her back with rope. The Wolf had shut her in a closet with a sneer. The taste of sour meat clung to the inside of her cheeks still. Nahr spat at the ground. A harsh hack came from the opposite corner of the closet.

"Grandmother! You're alive!" Grandmother coughed. "I think...The man that talked to me in the forest – Grandmother I'm so sorry –" she was cut off by another coughing fit.

"Never mind that. A knife," Grandmother wheezed. "I keep one in every room of the house. It should be underneath the floorboard there." Nahr shifted forward until she felt a loose board dip under her weight. "I'll get it," Grandmother inched toward the board and slowly dipped her feet into the storage space.

Nahr held her breath. The storage space was much deeper than expected. She turned her head to watch Grandmother out of the corner of her eye, weighing down the floorboard still. Her foot rose shakily, the knife balanced on her big toe. Grandmother's breath hitched and her chest spasmed.

"Don't cough now, Grandmother," Nahr prayed. She scooted off the board slowly and Grandmother coughed, the knife only making a tiny clattering sound. It was wedged in between the floorboards and sat almost completely upright. Nahr edged her way over to it and began to rub the rope between her hands against the blade.

"What are you doing in there?"

The Wolf's voice rung about the room. Nahr could feel her heart pounding in every inch of her body. The knot was halfway frayed. Nahr shifted her weight. She just needed a little bit more time.

"Hurry," Grandmother groaned. The Wolf's footsteps grew louder. The tip of the knife punctured Nahr's forearm, prompting a yelp from her. The rope fell loose around her wrists. She could move her hands.

The knife clattered against the floor, loudly this time. "I said, what are you doing in there?" The Wolf roared so loudly the hairs on Nahr's neck stood on end. She looked over at Grandmother, her breathing uneven.

"Get him," she rasped as the Wolf threw the door open. Nahr lunged into his leg and he yelped in pain. He dropped to the ground, and Nahr fell forward into his neck. The Wolf clawed at Nahr's head and she cried out as he tore out some of her hair. She tried to stand up but fell, and The Wolf bit her bleeding arm. She screamed and stabbed him again – firmly, this time – in the chest, and the Wolf went limp.

Her forearm was stained with blood from where she had poked herself. Grandmother was slumped against the side of the closet, breathless but alive. There was a dead man in the middle of the room. But she and Grandmother were safe, and that was all that mattered.

Grandmother helped Nahr drag the Wolf's body into the field of flowers. They would let nature run its course.

"To all those he might have harmed," Grandmother said, giving his corpse a swift kick to the shoulder. Nahr shuddered. The falsa juice seemed to be working miracles for Grandmother.

"Grandmother, I thought you were ill," Nahr remarked, clear of humor.

"I just wanted attention. I have a flair for the dramatic and the common cold."

"Do you mean to tell me that I could have avoided being murdered and gone to the festival?"

"You only have the chance to defend yourself once," Grandmother tsked and descended into a coughing fit once more.

And so, Grandmother darned the tear in her hijab with the beard hair of the Wolf. Nahr missed the festival, but her mother crafted her a new pair of shoes. And going forward, Nahr never ventured off the path again.