

## Rifan Plays for Ahmed's Birthday

*A young girl wants to play the oud for her music teacher on his birthday, but settles for a different audience.*

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Rifan skips towards the checkpoint, humming at a steady waltz. The melody soothes her nerves as she approaches the barbed wire. The rhythm in her head serves as a counterpoint against the distant gunfire and shelling.

The soldiers stare as she approaches, their hands at the ready, despite the fact that she is a child holding nothing but an oud strapped to her back. She is confident they won't shoot her, but she also knows they have shot children in the past.

She recognizes a few of the soldiers. They stare at her through the barbed wire fence. Some are frowning. Most stare blankly. But the short one with the scar smiles. She smiles back at him, pulling the oud from behind her back.

Now that she's found her audience, she begins to tune her instrument.

*Earlier that day...*

Rifan ducks underneath the plastic tarp that serves as her front door, expecting to greet her parents. But the tent is empty, save for her brother laying on the bench, staring up at the tent ceiling. He's making shadows with his fingers. He sees her and sits up.

"RIFAN? WHAT ARE YOU DOING BACK HERE?"

Yusef shouts when he speaks, his hearing still not recovered months after the explosion. She can feel herself getting agitated around him more easily.

"Ustaz wasn't at his tent. I wanted to see if Ummi or Baba saw him."

Before he can shout a response at her, Rifan ducks back out of the tent and starts skipping towards the water line. There are fewer people than usual.

Her parents are at the largest tent next to the well. It serves as a makeshift meeting space. No more than 12 people at once. Otherwise, it isn't safe. Her parents are crying.

This is not unusual, but she struggles to place the source of the tears. Is this old grief or new?

Rifan is already crying before she realizes why.

*Earlier that day...*

Birthday parties are not safe. Ustaz Ahmed does not want one. But the community cannot abide muting their celebration for one of their most respected teachers. Education is the lifeblood of the camp, and music has always been a salve for the soul. Ustaz Ahmed has taught many of their children to sing. He has played at many of their cousins' funerals. He is a well-known beacon of organization and support in the community.

Perhaps this is why he was targeted.

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Rifan stares into the eyes of the short smiling soldier with a scar.

They all stare back at her, but they do not see her.

"I wanted to play this for my teacher. Today was his birthday. You killed him, so now you must listen to me play."

She begins to play. The notes fall softer than rain across the battered streets of the life she was born into.

She plays all night, but they do not listen.