

## **To Dance Through the Fire**

### **WWI 1915: The Battle of Sarikamish, Sarıkamış Turkey**

The light from the sun barely filters through the overcast sky. I glance towards the horizon, dark hills and trees loom in the distance, like an ever-watching monster. My hooves squelch through the mud-caked ground. I snort heavily, trying to ignore the ever-pressing weight on my back. I swish my wet tail in an attempt to rid it of the clinging, dried mud.

The person in front of me, leading, holds his gun defensively in front of him. Guns are funny things, used for protection to save lives and destruction to take lives. Humans still haven't figured it out, have they?

A small ridge appears, I shift my weight from one leg to another attempting to navigate it, I am not used to this added weight. Suddenly I lose my balance. Frantically I scramble up the side of the ridge. My foreleg grazes against the cruel sharp rocks and warm blood seeps out of the gash.

Somebody with a deep, harsh accent yells, "What are you doing, stupid horse?!"

The whip comes down sharply on my flanks slicing through my frost-bitten skin like a hot knife. Snarling, I bare my teeth and kick in pain and anger. Consequently, another whip meets me. My blood runs red hot, anger courses through my veins. How dare they call me a stupid horse! How dare they treat me, Arrialla the great, like that!

Before La Gurrea I was one of the most distinguished horses in all of Italy. My mistress Aurora was beautiful, she was mine, and we were the Double A act. Folks would come from miles around to see us. I would gallop around the circus arena whilst Aurora danced with fire on my back. Aurora used to say that if horses could talk, I would speak with the tongue of a graceful Italian lady, rolling my r's and sentences as delicately and smoothly as the trapeze artist leaping from dangerous heights. Before stabling me for the night in my carriage, Aurora would scratch me just behind the ears, my favourite place to be rubbed. Sometimes, we would lay down together and she'd softly sing to me in her sweet Italian language. My eyes would close, and my ears would hang loosely. On some nights, Aurora would drift into the realm of dreams pressed up against me; her head resting on my neck, her brown wavy hair mixing with my white mane. An empty space in my heart longs to feel Aurora's soft touch again. I wish I knew what has happened to her, and where she is.

Trudging through this boggy wasteland makes my circus life seem like a lifetime ago. Quite frankly, I don't know how I ended up here. One minute I was dancing with fire, and the next I'm dancing with death and mud. I tense at the memory of being taken away, my heart skips a beat when Aurora's last words echo through the caverns of my mind...

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*It was a cold, stormy dark night; the train had pulled up in a siding somewhere in the middle of Italy. I was pacing my stable carriage anxiously, pawing at the wooden floor and kicking my feed bucket. Lightning occasionally struck illuminating the sky and, in the distance, thunder angrily roared. Nobody had lit the lanterns in my carriage, nor had they laid clean straw on the ground for me.*

*That was strange, I thought.*

*Usually, I was fed, watered and looked after before sundown. The red wooden sliding door opened, creakily, and a wet black nose sniffed its way in.*

*Nord, the circus wolf slinked over to me.*

*What's he doing here, I thought angrily. His black coat shone with rain.*

*"Good evening Arrialla, may the bow of strength and the arrow of knowledge be upon you," he growled.*

*Snarling, I snapped, "what do you want?" I never liked Nord much, he reminded me of a clairvoyant warlock.*

*"I have come to tell you, to warn you even, that the celestial moon has spoken."*

*He paused for dramatic effect.*

*"She warns that something, or someone sinister looms in the distance awaiting to strike."*

*Despite my lack of attention, Nord continued.*

*"Darkness is approaching, one wants power over all. Spirits will leave and in their place pain will dwell. Blood and tears are destined to be shed."*

*Nord always spoke in this dark mystical manner. I merely nodded my head in dry acknowledgment. Nodding in return, Nord jumped out of the carriage, and I thought I had gotten rid of him until he appeared again.*

*"I warn you Arialla, the end is near for the ones we love, someone is out for blood."*

*Lightning struck illuminating the old black wolf and a shiver, like ice, crept down my spine. Perhaps it was the eerie light cast by the rising full moon, or maybe it was his green eyes and sharp crooked teeth, but for the first time fear prickled my fetlocks.*

*A few minutes after Nord had slinked off, the red door opened again and this time I was greeted with my Aurora.*

*"Ciao, my dear Ari-Arialla."*

*Her sweet Italian accent washed over me like a cool river, however something was wrong. I detected panic in her voice.*

*She busied herself filling my water bucket when suddenly she dropped the bucket and turned to me. She grabbed my head and cried into my mane.*

*"Oh Ari, they are after us, we cannot keep running, we must help our country."*

*I comforted Aurora until her crying turned to small racking sobs.*

*She looked me right in the eyes, and said, "I love you, mi amore, mi cavalla."*

*Our moment of calm was cut short by the door being wrenched open. Aurora's scream echoes through my head even to this day. The men were angry and indifferent. They shouted*

*at Aurora, holding up a gun. She kicked one hard and slammed the carriage door. She threw her arms around me and whispered words of courage, praise, and love.*

*“Be the fire itself, my Arialla,” she whispered; before the door was thrown open and Aurora, my Aurora, dragged into the night.*

*How I wish I had paid attention to Nord.*

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The memory of Aurora being taken still makes me tremble.

Miserable rain begins to fall feebly from the dull sky, the atmosphere couldn't be any worse.

My coat is caked in blood and dirt; my once-pristine white coat is now merely a tangle of human misery and filth. I glance to my neck and snort in relief.

Before they took Aurora away, she tied a silk ribbon to my neck. I remember with remorse and longing her trembling fingers as she fastened it. Not tightly, just enough so it would stay. The ribbon used to hold her hair back, it is the one piece of home and my darling Aurora I possess.

Somebody suddenly hauls on my reins, and I am jolted from the alleyway of memories once again. I halt abruptly, stamping and pawing the ground in frustration, my mouth screams in agony.

Aurora would be appalled by this treatment.

The leader, a human man, glances around. My ears prick up, I hear sounds. Instinctively I want to hide and take cover from this threat. The man aims his gun towards the scampering sounds. The leader shoots as a group of other coloured men emerge from the scrub brandishing weapons.

**BANG BANG BANG!**

The bullets whistle towards the group; two men fall to the ground, dead. One slumps forwards clutching his stomach. Red blood pours from the large wound. I lock my eyes on him. He seems small, smaller than the others. His dark brown eyes somehow find mine. Perhaps it has always been the bond between human and horse embedded in my ancestors or maybe it was out of pure remorse for him. I still do not know why I was drawn to him, but in that moment, I wished with all my heart I could nuzzle him, comfort him. Silently I pray that someone will end his misery. The shrieks and screams from the dying boy two metres away drill their way into my head.

Bullets fly at us from the other group, I hear one whistle past my head. I rear up, my head and ears pounding. I tense and begin to jitter; I roll my eyes showing the whites of them. My heart rate elevates, and I begin to foam at the mouth. Fear courses through my veins. I want to gallop away but I am restrained, I panic more and begin to buck. Shots ring out through the marshland and hell erupts. Birds take flight from the scabbly trees. I want to get away from these murderous ruthless animals, humans. A shrill scream pierces my ears, shots fire and a deadly silence follows.

The smoke clears eerily, slowly almost. I breathe heavily, sounding like our old circus locomotive. My sides heave with each breath, my flanks thick with blood and sweat. I glance around the scene. Probably twenty men lay dead on the ground.

During the chaos, my reins were dropped, I am free to walk around the scene of misery.

The small boy is barely alive, he lays there in the mud whimpering and breathing ever so shallow. I amble slowly over to him. I bow my head and nuzzle him ever so slightly. I lay down next to him, he reminds me of the many children that used to watch our circus. He reaches out a shaky, weak hand to pat me.

“*T- T- Teşekkürler.*”

He barely whispers the word. I nuzzle him once again. The boy begins to shake uncontrollably, summoning all his strength, he raises his left hand to his chest. A small, crumpled piece of paper is tightly enclosed in his bloodied hand. His eyes fleetingly flick to me, peace floods through him and his spirit leaves his body. He slumps to the side, eyes glazed and empty.

Numbness spreads through my body, like millions of spiders crawling over me. I rise silently, scared to wake the resting boy.

His hand is still clutching the small piece of paper. Gently, I nudge his arm with my nose. His wrist rolls over revealing the paper.

A photograph.

A young lady, with kind eyes and lines in her face beams at me from the dirtied parchment. I look closer, a tiny sentence is written in a different language, below it is scribbled English. The curly writing reads, *please come home darling*. A shiver, like liquid lead runs through my spine. Perhaps she was his mother, or sister, or maybe his Aurora.

My legs mindlessly walk around the scene. Only two men remain alive. There is blood everywhere. I recall what Nord had predicted, somebody wants power and dominion over all living beings. And I hate them for it.

Kehar’s angry words flash into my head: “Humans are the ones who should be chained and in cages.”

Obviously, there was an exception for Aurora.

Kehar was the tiger of the circus. Even higher in the circus hierarchy than Nord. He was wise, fierce and brave, and he too danced with fire. I never understood Kehar’s words, I never had the audacity to do so; after all, I had only ever felt Aurora’s gentle touch.

But standing here, enveloped in the destruction poured out before me, Kehar’s words roar through my head laced with poison and loathing. Nord’s prediction and Kehar’s rage slice through my heart, draining it of love and warmth.

The two men, solemnly sit on the muddy ground, too weak and shocked to leave. One pulls out a flute from his rucksack.

My blood runs cold.

Aurora used to play the flute.

A slow haunting tune, eerie and warm, floats through the battle ground, a scene of death; the music, like mist settling around us as a silvery blanket. How wrong this moment of peace seems, yet how inviting and haunting. Music, and a battleground, they do not match. None of this does. Guns killing and guns protecting.

Nord said one wants dominion over all souls. I do not hate the soldiers, the men, nor do I hate the weapons.

I hate the one forcing them to do this, the alpha, the stallion, the corrupted leader.

The scrub rustles, both men look up. Soldiers approach at a run, guns drawn. Two wounded men, to thirty armed troops. There is no hope for us this time. But in all truthfulness, I do not want them to fight.

I used to dance with fire and love, and now I'll die fuelled with fire and hatred.

The world erupts into chaos and sound once again; shots firing left and right. Men falling everywhere, their blood staining the ground forever. Another group approaches more bangs, more noise. Instinctively I want to admit defeat and leave. Gallop away forever and never turn back.

But no, I will not.

The bangs pierce my ears, but I do not care.

I am Arialla the great. Blood of the noble Arabian breed courses through my veins. I will die undefeated. I will die with dignity; the humans cannot take that from me, yet. I look to my ribbon, to Aurora's ribbon. I will leave this earth with my mind on Aurora. Will the humans ever sort themselves out, will they stop being a destructive race? Power hungry animals they are, killing their own herd.

Dominion is everything to everyone and love is nothing to no one.

Excluding Aurora.

The humans need to sort themselves out, because after all they are only mutant monkeys, they are only human.

Somebody falls next to me, dead. Crumpled and defeated. Someone's Aurora is gone, somewhere someone will be crying a million tears.

Bullets rain into my side, as though someone has thrown them. They claw their way into my body, piercing my heart. But I do not care. As the world explodes into fiery hell and sound, I imagine I am a creature of the element itself. A creature that dwells in fire and dances through smoke. A creature that adorns itself with flames and embers. As an object, round and spiky, thrown at my hooves explodes, I am silhouetted for a moment of time as that creature.

After all, I am fire itself.

