



Bahar Atesi

Festival of Spring Fire



E.R. Zaugg



*"Yenilenme aci'dan gelir.
Renewal comes from pain."
—Tursi Proverb*

About ten years ago...

Deniz watched the flames rise into the evening sky and felt nothing.

That was by design. His Weaver's Ring—Cevreleme, whose name meant "Containment"—pressed cool against his finger, and into it he pushed the irritation that threatened to surface. The noise of the crowd. The smell of unwashed bodies pressed too close together. The sight of women with their maysaks slipping, showing glimpses of faces that should have remained covered.

All of it, contained. Pushed down. Locked away.

With control came peace.

The bonfire at the center of Arslan Meydani—the Lion's Square—roared and crackled, fed by the dried branches and herbs the Qin had blessed that morning. Bahar Atesi, the Festival of Spring Fire, was Tursim's oldest celebration. A time to contemplate renewal. To study how dead things became fuel for new growth. To master the soul's transformation through discipline and devotion.

Deniz approved of the theology, if not the execution.



The common people had corrupted it, of course. They always did. What should have been a solemn meditation on spiritual refinement had become... this. Dancing. Singing. Young men leaping over the flames to prove their courage, young women watching with barely concealed hunger.

Vulgar.

He pushed that judgment into Cevreleme as well. A Qin did not feel disgust. A Qin observed, assessed, and corrected when necessary.

"The flames burn well tonight, Brother Deniz."

He turned to acknowledge the other Qin who had approached—an older man, his beard grey and his robes immaculate. Hafiz. A useful man. Properly devout, properly deferential.

"They do," Deniz agreed. "Though I wonder if the people understand what they're meant to represent."

Hafiz's smile was knowing.

"Understanding is for the learned. The common folk need only participate. The ritual shapes them whether they comprehend it or not."

A sensible perspective. Deniz inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the wisdom.

The crowd cheered as another young man leaped over the fire. His feet cleared the flames by a hand's width, and he landed in a crouch, grinning, while his friends clapped him on the back. Somewhere in the mass of bodies, a woman laughed—too loud, too free.



Deniz's fingers twitched toward Cevreleme, but the irritation was already contained before it fully formed. He was getting better at this. Smoother. The emotions barely surfaced anymore before he locked them away.

Peace.

He was about to turn away—he had seen enough of this spectacle, had performed enough of his public duty—when something caught his eye.

A child.

A boy, perhaps eight years old, standing at the edge of the crowd with the particular stillness of someone trying not to be noticed. He was watching the fire with an intensity that seemed out of place on such a young face. Not the excitement of his peers, not the boredom of a child dragged to an adult celebration.

Focus.

Deniz watched, curious despite himself.

The boy's lips moved slightly. His fingers twitched at his side—small movements, almost invisible, the kind of thing no one would notice unless they knew what to look for.

Deniz knew.

A spark leaped from the bonfire. Not toward the crowd, not following the wind—sideways, in a direction that made no physical sense. It spiraled once, twice, then vanished into nothing. And more importantly Deniz could see the Weaves, the threads of magic the boy had seemingly just discovered for himself.



The boy smiled. A small, private smile. The smile of someone who had just discovered a secret.

Interesting.

Deniz studied the child more carefully now. Worn clothes but clean—a family with standards but limited means. Dark hair, serious eyes. No visible parent nearby, which suggested either neglect or unusual independence. Given the focus, the control, the intent behind that small Weave...

Unusual independence seemed more likely.

He waited until the boy slipped away from the crowd, heading toward the quieter streets that led to the merchant quarter. Then he followed.

The boy moved well for his age. Aware of his surroundings, careful not to draw attention. But he was still a child, and Deniz had lived for centuries. Following him was trivially easy.

He caught up in a narrow alley between two cloth merchants' shops, stepping out of the shadows just as the boy passed.

The child startled but didn't run. Good instincts. Running would only make things worse.

"That was a dangerous thing you did," Deniz said quietly. "Playing with fire in a crowd."

Fear flickered in the boy's eyes, but underneath it—calculation. Assessment. The child was thinking, even through his fear, trying to determine what this stranger wanted and how to respond.

Very good instincts.



"I don't know what you mean... Qin," the boy said. His voice was steady. Impressive, for someone his age facing an adult's accusation.

Deniz smiled. It was not a warm smile, but it was not cruel either. It was the smile of a teacher who had found a promising student.

"What is your name, child?"

A pause. The calculation again.

"Kemal..."

"Kemal." Deniz tasted the name. "Do you know what you are, Kemal?"

The boy's jaw tightened. He knew. Of course he knew. Children like this always knew they were different, even if they didn't have words for it.

"I'm no one. Just a merchant's son."

"You are a Weaver," Deniz said. "Or, more accurately, you will be, with proper training. Without it..." He let the silence stretch. "Without it, you are a danger. To yourself. To your family. To everyone around you."

Fear now, real fear. The boy understood the implications. In Tursim, foreign Weavers were tolerated out of political necessity, but a young boy from a poor family...

"But with training," Deniz continued, "you could be something more. Something important. Something powerful."

He crouched down, bringing himself to the boy's eye level. This was the moment. The hook, set properly, would hold for years.



"I am Brother Deniz, a Weaver, a Qin of Tursim and a servant of The Konsey. I can protect you, Kemal. I can teach you. But only if you are willing to learn."

The boy stared at him. Fear and hope warring in his young face.

"What... what would I have to do?"

Deniz's smile widened slightly.

"Only what is right. Only what Alsiyama teaches. Serve the faith. Serve the Konsey. Use your gift for the good of Tursim."

The hook sank deep.

"Yes, Qin... Brother Deniz..." Kemal whispered. "I will learn."

Deniz rose, placing a hand briefly on the boy's shoulder. A gesture of benediction. Of ownership, though the child wouldn't understand that yet.

"Go home, Kemal. Tell no one of this. I will send for you when the time is right."

The boy nodded and fled into the darkness.

Deniz watched him go, feeling something that might have been satisfaction before he pushed it into Cevreleme. Emotions were weakness. Even positive ones.

But this... this was a good night's work.

Another tool, acquired. Another piece, positioned on the board.



He turned back toward the square, where the bonfire still burned and the people still celebrated their shallow understanding of renewal.

Let them dance. Let them leap. Let them think they understood anything at all about transformation, about renewal and pain.

The real work happened in the shadows.



Closer to the present day...

Elif watched the flames and felt everything.

That was the problem.

The bonfire roared at the center of Arslan Meydani, the same as it did every year. The same blessed branches, the same sacred herbs, the same Qin intoning the same words about renewal and transformation and the soul's journey from death to rebirth.

But this year, her father was not standing beside her with his hand warm on her shoulder.

This year, her mother was not humming the old songs under her breath, the ones she said her grandmother had taught her.

This year, Elif stood alone in the crowd, surrounded by thousands of people, and felt the flames burn through her like they were consuming her instead of the blessed wood.

Yenilenme aci'dan gelir.

Renewal comes from pain.

She had heard that proverb her entire life. Had nodded along when the Qin explained it, had written it in her careful script during her lessons, had believed she understood what it meant.

She understood nothing.



Pain was not this. Pain was a scraped knee, a harsh word, a disappointment. Pain was something that faded, something you pushed through, something that made you stronger.

This was not pain.

This was absence. A hole in the world where her parents had been. A silence where their voices should be. An emptiness so vast that she could not see its edges, could not find its bottom, could not imagine ever being full again.

Her father had died first. An accident at the docks—a cargo net had failed, and he had been standing beneath it when the ropes snapped. They said he hadn't suffered. They said it was quick.

They said a lot of things.

Her mother had not died of grief. That would have been easier to understand. Grief was natural. Grief was expected. Grief was something that happened to you, not something you chose.

Her mother had chosen.

Three weeks after the funeral, she had kissed Elif's forehead, told her to be brave, and walked out of the city toward the hills.

Toward Nawia.

Everyone in Tursim knew the Great Tree that grew in the valley beyond the western ridge. Everyone knew what it meant when someone made that pilgrimage. You walked to Nawia when you had given up on life. When you had nothing left. When you wanted the Dryad to carry you to the next world.



Sometimes people came back. The stories said that Nawia's Dryad could look into your soul and see if there was still something worth living for. If there was, she would send you home with renewed purpose.

Elif's mother had not come back.

She had looked at her daughter—eighteen years old, alone, terrified—and decided that pilgrimage was her answer. That whatever waited beneath Nawia's branches was better than staying. That Elif was not enough reason to live.

I was not enough.

The thought was a wound that would not heal. It was worse than the grief of losing her father. That had been cruel and random, the universe's indifference made manifest. But her mother's death was not indifferent.

Her mother had left her.

On purpose.

With a kiss and a blessing and a walk into the hills.

Elif didn't believe in Nawia's mercy anymore. She didn't believe in the Qin who spoke of sacred release and peaceful surrender. She didn't believe in a faith that built a beautiful path to death and called it kindness.

She believed in the anger that burned in her chest, hot and alive, the only thing that had kept her breathing for the past two months.



A cheer went up from the crowd as a young man leaped over the flames. He landed cleanly, raising his arms in triumph, and somewhere behind Elif a group of women giggled and whispered about his fine legs, his strong arms, his prospects as a husband.

She wanted to scream at them. She wanted to tear at her clothes and her hair and her maysak and howl her grief into the night sky until everyone heard her.

But she didn't.

She stood still, her face composed, her hands folded, her maysak properly positioned. Because that was what was expected. Because grief was meant to be private, contained, managed. Because the woman who made a scene was a woman who brought shame on her family.

What family? she thought bitterly. What shame is left to protect?

The bonfire crackled, sending a shower of sparks into the darkness. Elif watched them rise and vanish, one by one, and wondered if that was what souls looked like when they left. Small bright things that burned for a moment and then were gone.

Were her parents sparks now? Were they rising somewhere, transformed, renewed?

Or were they just... nothing?

The thought was heresy. She knew it was heresy. Alsiyama taught that the faithful were gathered into the eternal flame, purified and preserved forever in divine light. To doubt that was to doubt everything.



But standing here, watching the fire that was supposed to represent hope and rebirth, all Elif could feel was the heat. The destruction. The way flame consumed everything it touched and left only ash behind.

What renews from this? she thought. What grows from ash?

"You should not stand so close, child. The smoke will ruin your clothes."

The voice came from beside her—an older woman, plump and prosperous-looking, with the particular tone of someone who believed their advice was always welcome. Her maysak was silk, her robes were fine linen, and her expression was a mixture of concern and condescension.

"Thank you," Elif murmured, because that was what you said, you accepted advice and obeyed those better than you. "I will move back."

She didn't move.

The woman frowned but said nothing more, turning back to her companions with a small shake of her head. Young people these days, her posture said. No respect for their elders.

Elif felt a spark of something that might have been anger—the first real emotion besides grief that she'd felt in weeks. It was small and hot and entirely inappropriate, and she held onto it like a lifeline.

Her father had been a clerk. A good one—reliable, honest, skilled with numbers. He had worked for one of the trading houses near the docks, keeping their accounts in order, making sure the coins added up. It was respectable work. Steady work. Work that should have been enough to live on, enough to keep a small family safe.



But he had been standing in the wrong place. And then he was gone. And the trading house had sent their condolences and exactly nothing else—no pension, no support, no acknowledgment that twenty years of faithful service meant anything at all.

Her mother had been a dokuma before she married—a woman with skilled hands and an eye for patterns, who had made beautiful carpets before her husband asked her to stop working and keep his home instead.

She had stopped working. She had kept his home. She had raised his daughter.

And then she had walked to Nawia and never come back.

The home was gone now—sold to pay the debts that accumulated when one person died and another simply left. The trading house had taken what they claimed they were owed. The landlord had taken the rest.

Elif had nothing now. She was eighteen years old, educated enough to read and write and do figures, skilled enough to weave if anyone would hire her, and possessed of exactly one silk dress, one linen dress, three copper coins, and a choice between starvation and marriage to whoever would take her.

The men who had already approached—through intermediaries, of course, always through intermediaries, always proper—had made their terms clear. She was pretty enough. Young enough. Poor enough to be grateful. They would take her as a second wife, perhaps a third, and she would be grateful for the food and the shelter and the place to belong.



She would belong to them.

Elif watched the fire and felt the anger grow.

Yenilenme aci'dan gelir.

Renewal comes from pain.

What if that was a lie? What if pain was just pain—senseless, purposeless, consuming? What if the Qin who spoke of transformation and growth and the soul's refinement were just telling stories to make the suffering bearable?

What if nothing renewed?

What if you just... burned?

Another cheer from the crowd. Another young man proving his courage by jumping over fire. Elif turned away, unable to watch anymore, and pushed through the mass of bodies toward the edge of the square.

She didn't know where she was going. She didn't have anywhere to be. Her parents' home was gone, sold to strangers. The room she rented was barely large enough for a sleeping mat. The future stretched ahead of her like an empty road leading nowhere.

But she walked anyway. Because standing still felt like giving up, and she wasn't ready to give up.

Not quite yet.

The merchant quarter was quieter, the celebrations more muted. The shops were closed for the festival, but through some of the windows, Elif could see families gathered around smaller fires, sharing food and drink and stories.



She stopped in front of one shop without knowing why.

It was a carpet seller's shop—she could tell by the samples displayed in the window, the rich colors and intricate patterns visible even in the dim light. It was closed, like all the others, but something about it held her attention.

The sign above the door was painted in careful script: Halici Sofiya. Sofia's Carpets.

A woman's name. A woman who owned a shop. A woman who had put her own name above her own door, as if she had every right to be there.

Elif stared at that sign for a long time.

Her mother had walked to Nawia. Her mother had looked at the world and decided there was nothing in it worth staying for.

But this woman—this Sofia—had looked at the same world and built something. Had claimed a space. Had put her name on a door and dared anyone to tell her she couldn't.

A woman can own a shop, Elif thought. A woman can have her name on a door.

A woman can choose to stay.

It wasn't a new thought. She had known, intellectually, that such things were possible. There were women merchants in Tursim, here and there. Not many, but they existed.

She had just never thought it could matter to her.



But standing here, in the darkness, with three copper coins to her name and nothing ahead but other people's choices—

What if I could make my own choices?

The thought was terrifying. The thought was impossible. The thought was heresy in its own way, a rejection of everything she'd been taught about a woman's proper place.

But it didn't go away.

Elif stood in front of the closed shop, staring at the name on the door, while the distant bonfire crackled and the city celebrated renewal all around her.

Yenilenme aci'dan gelir.

Renewal comes from pain.

Maybe that was true after all.

Maybe she just hadn't understood what kind of renewal was possible.

She turned away from the shop, finally, and walked back toward her rented room. Tomorrow she would have to make decisions. Tomorrow she would have to find a way to survive.

But tonight, for the first time since her parents died, she felt something besides grief and anger.

She felt hunger.

And hunger, she was beginning to realize, might be the most dangerous thing of all.

