Children of Solace

Nzar Xald

**Novel**

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**Chapter 1**

I hadn’t expected the attendees in the hall to sit so calmly in their chairs. In my experience, they tended to fall into three categories. The first were there out of habit, seeking the comfort of a crowd. The second were listening intently to snatch a phrase that could later be sold in the political market for their livelihood. The third were present not by choice but compelled by their own long-standing, voiceless, and numbing pain, expressed through tears and intermittent sighs. This last group seemed as though they were sitting beside a beloved, breathing their last breath, leaving them forever. Their heads bowed, then raised again, their eyes meeting mine, filled with pity. Their faces, flushed and beaded with sweat from the sting of sorrow and pain, seemed to implore me, as if longing to say, “Enough, why remind us of the past? The pain you describe with words, we have already endured in reality.”

They were not the only ones who had suffered. I, too, had endured pain, but mine was of a different nature. As an explorer, I had spent years searching for the pain of humans, animals, trees, the Earth, the sky, and other existences. To some extent, I understood their suffering and felt sorrow for it. My presence in the hall was to remind them of their sorrows through the mention of specific humans, animals, trees, springs, streets, and mountains.

I wanted them to listen to their own cries, to feel the cold whisper of impending doom, to remember the destruction of their homes, buildings, and cellars. I wanted them to recall the ghastly sight of their beloveds' lifeless bodies, mutilated for jewellery, looted pockets, and plundered assets. I wanted them to remember the horror, the loss, the disappearance of children, men, and women - family and relatives - all victims of brutal, senseless violence. I wanted them to recall their exiled days and hardships.

I wished for them to die and resurrect, so that they, instead of me, could speak openly and honestly before the world about the causes of their demise. The same went for me; I desired to die and be wished back to life, so that I could speak for myself about the reasons for my death. This was because neither my narration of their pain, destruction, death, and misery nor their tears and sighs could fully account for the past pain. I knew that none of us had the capability to fully express our past, present, or future pains and deaths.

The more I read, the more sceptical I became of my own words. Transitioning from self-scepticism to scepticism of others, I pondered out loud, “What will they say or think after my death? It will likely be as sceptical as what I am expressing now. Thus, one of us remains sceptical, and the other becomes the subject of scepticism. No indefinite trust will persist between us, and within this realm of scepticism, our credulity will diminish.”

This realization led me to avoid delving further into the topic. I decided to set it aside for later and, instead, began to express what I truly wanted to narrate to them.

It was then that Kawan initiated.

It was a pre-dawn hour, just like any other morning, when Omar set out from home to work. The walls of the houses that lined the narrow alley on his right and left were indistinguishable, whether constructed from stones, bricks, concrete, or mud. The darkness of the coal-black night enveloped everything, painting the surrounding in its hue as if darkness itself had swallowed the world. The deepest the darkness grew, the more one could sense its overwhelming power.

The lights in the houses were extinguished as if their occupants had collectively agreed to trade sleep for darkness. The tops of the tall lamp posts along the alley were concealed in shadows, leaving it uncertain whether the globes in their lamp bases had burned out on their own or had been shattered by children during the day, using slingshots to either find solace or take revenge for their failed attempts at bird hunting.

The cloak of darkness proved advantageous for the clandestine members of Kurdish political parties, as the night was their sole opportunity to distribute party manifestos and leave graffiti throughout Halabja town. It seemed as if the night had forged an alliance with the town’s inhabitants. However, their manifestos and graffiti would only endure for a few hours on the doors of schools, bathhouses, offices, mosques, malls, and shops, as they would be painstakingly removed one by one by state officials at the crack of dawn.

His torchlight stretched ahead of his feet, casting beams that illuminated the even and uneven ground of the alley. It revealed the intertwined paths of other narrow passages on both sides, the remnants of chalk lines from little girls’ games like foursquare, leapfrog, and marbles. Empty cans, dented oil gallons, once used as makeshift toys and playing fields, scattered around. Occasionally, the beams would bounce off parked cars and carts and illuminate the wooden and metal front doors of the houses, showcasing their various locksets, handles, and metal knockers. These details seemed like props arranged for a grand performance, unveiled by the torchlight in Omar’s hand. Yet, they couldn’t rival the radiance of sunlight, which effortlessly reveals hidden entities lurking in the darkness of night.

The sounds of an elderly man’s cough and a recently awakened baby emanated from the neighboring houses. They seemed to express irritation towards the encompassing darkness of the night.

In the town’s outskirts, the barks of dogs echoed sporadically, their motives shrouded in mystery. Did they feel disconnected from their packs or miss the company shepherds? Were they barking out of hunger or fear? Fear of what? Perhaps the eerie ambiance created by the abandoned and empty villages on the town’s edge and beyond. The Iraqi Government had demolished those villages, compelling the residents to settle in camps near the city.

The chirping of crickets blended with other distant sounds, forming a chorus serenading the darkness of the night. Their melody continued until the beams of light single caught them, momentarily silencing their song.

Omar used his flashlight to navigate his way to the bakery, where he worked every morning. He heard the distant rattle of gunshots, an alert that did not deter him but quickened his pace. After a while, he heard a sound closer to him, resembling the rhythmic clanging of a tinsmith’s hammar, as if someone aimed to disturb the night by straightening bent containers, crafting baking metals, and forging barbecue grills. He halted, listened. “Tinsmithing at night?” His words a whisper.

Plunging his hands into his loose trousers, he searched until his fingers brushed against an old Dinar. He left it untouched, still in its place, and stretched his right hand to his left wrist, becoming anxious when he couldn’t feel his wristwatch. He searched his jacket, shirt, and trousers’ pockets once more, but his timepiece eluded him. He remembered leaving it at home. Before resuming his walk to reassure himself, he plunged his hand into his trousers’ pocket and grasped the Dinar, exerting a slight pressure between his thumb and index finger. He had reason to be anxious as, a week prior, on the same path in the same alley, he was stopped, searched, and ruthlessly beaten by night bandits for lacking money.

Kawan once heard him recount that night as follows:

“I only have three and a half fils on me,” Omar said.

“That is not an enough,” the bandit replied.

“God knows that if I had the money, I wouldn’t be here this early morning, heading to work at the bakery.”

“Why don’t you carry more money?”

“I am going to work, why would I need a large sum of money?”

“They beat me mercilessly that night, taking my money and wristwatch before letting me go,” he added.

Since that night, he only ventured out of his house in the early morning without carrying a significant amount of money, to minimize the anticipated anger and threat of bandits.

**Chapter 2**

In the ally, he crept bit by bit toward the discordant and irregular sound, which he thought resembled the work of a tinsmith. He saw a shadow in front of him on the left side. eH pointed the light in that direction, revealing a donkey standing in front of a house’s entrance. The beams of light circled around the donkey, as it rapidly swished its tail and frequently dipped its head into a garbage can beside the entrance door. The donkey raised its head, looking at the light as if to say, “Thank you, because of you, now I can better see the discarded food in the can.” It was a saddleless donkey with a slim and worn-out body. The size of its head made it difficult for the donkey to easily reach the waste inside the bin, but it showed no fear of getting its head stuck inside. It resembled a desperate human being, unhesitant to delve into tight and smelly bins in search of discarded food to surviveOmer thought to himself , It’s obvious that this is one of the abandoned donkeys from the destroyed villages. If its village remained intact, it wouldn’t be seen here in this dark alley. It would have been in its stable, peacefully eating its hay and fodder. When needed, its owner would put on its pack saddle and harness.”

The destruction of villages not only ruined the lives of thousands of people but also countless stables, nests, and coops that housed donkeys, horses, mules, dogs, cats, birds and more. This situation created a condition where there were no more burdens for donkeys to carry, no livestock in pastures or under the shade of trees for dogs to guard, and no harvested crop fields for birds to flutter over and glean from.

The misery of these animals and birds was that, unlike human beings, they were not entitled to any substitute shelters, camps, or provided fields by the state. They were forcibly disowned and left to find their own space to stay and food to survive. The nights were the only peaceful time for them, as mischievous boys were not in the town’s alleys and streets to disturb and harm them. Unless awakened by the sound of their front doors’ empty bins being rattled by hungry and homeless donkeys, people late at night would not bother to stand up and see what the innocent animals were up to.

Omar redirected the light ahead and continued on his way, leaving the donkey and the bin behind him in darkness. His light created a tunnel through the night, giving him hope that he would soon reach his destination. Everything was quiet, and the only sound he could hear was of the bin, which grew louder as it became emptier.

Suddenly, voices in Arabic from his right and left sides exclaimed: “*Qif la tataharak*/ Stop… don’t move …” A nearby cat, with its eyes glowing like lasers, appeared startled and hissed before quickly fleeing the area. Even for cats, darkness was the only time for them to rest and feel relatively safe to roam the alleys and streets away from rascal town boys. They searched for foods in the bins or hunted for scraps of meat covered with colanders left in the open courtyards of households. However, they were at risk due to the influx of hungry, homeless dogs and pointer dogs coming from the destroyed villages, competing for food.

Omar’s dropped his light, and the sound of it hitting the ground and its broken lens echoed in front of him. No beams of light remained to illuminate his surroundings; darkness engulfed them once again. It was unclear how quickly he dropped it, but so soon understood the menacing nature of the strange order.

“Raise your hands,” a deep voice loudly commanded him. The sound of footsteps approached from both behind and in front of him. With each step getting closer, his heart beat faster, feeling as if they were stepping on his chest. His breathing grew tighter and tighter as if the foot steeps were squeezing his body. The sound of boots mixing with the clinking of arms and cartridges filled the air. A sharp, sudden sensation shot through his body, starting from his toes and reaching his head, as if needles were poking him. He felt thousands of ominous threats that he couldn’t comprehend in that moment and in that darkness. Before long, a cold metal object reached the back of his shoulder-the muzzle of a gun pressing against his entire body.

His hands remained raised above his head, becoming heavy and numb. Somebody behind him quickly asked, “Who are you?”

“My name is Omar.”

“What is your job?”

“I am a baker at night.”

“What about during the daytime?”

“I work as a nursery guardian.”

“Where is your house?”

“Four alleys down from here.”

“Do you have a family?”

“Yes.”

“How many children do you have?”

“Five.”

“Any of your sons a Peshmergah?”

“No, Sir. They are all girls,” he understood from their voices and questions that they were members of the state security forces. His hands remained raised, while other parts of his body grew numb and heavier. The gun’s muzzle continued to press against the back of his shoulder, causing his body to tremble like branches of a young tree in a strong wind.

Two hands behind him Began searching his torso, armpit, and down to his ankles, but they found nothing. They withdrew their hands briefly before searching him again, this time blindfolding him with a piece of clothing. To Omar, the difference between the natural darkness in the alley and the darkness created by the blindfold was merely a shortening of the distance in darkness. He realized that there was darkness within darkness; the darkness created by the blindfold. In the former, the stars had the right to shine, the moon to beam, cat’s eyes to glow, thunderstorms to mix with heavy rain and wind, and oil and kerosene lamps to provide light. Human beings, unless scared or blindfolded like Omar, would always seek out even the slightest source of light, hoping to reach them or find solace in their presence.

With his eyes covered, whenever Omar looked or searched, he encountered nothing but darkness. When he breathed, he could only inhale air mixed with the scent of gun oil and smoky gunpowder. In his imagination, he could almost smell the remnants of napalm, rockets, and bullet, as if they had ceased not long ago.

His hands were still raised when someone came forward and brought them down, folding them behind his back. They also took his deformed Kurdish turban, using it to further secure his hands together. “Maybe they heard my thoughts!” Omar silently speculated. He realized that a few minutes ago, he had been thinking about the villages and their inhabitants, the orchards and vineyards, the springs and qanats, and the lives of homeless donkeys, dogs, cats, and birds.

He heard the sound of a car approaching, its exhaust smoke mixing with his face and intensifying his struggle to breathe. Two hands in the front grabbed his ankles and pulled them, causing him to almost lose balance. Another pair of hands held his shoulders, lifted him, and dumped him onto the backseat of the car.

Lying on his back, Omar felt the pressure of the tightened hand restraints against a spare tire in the middle. It pushed against his chest, causing discomfort as the car started moving. The repeated jolts and bumps on the road inflicted pain upon his back and hands, making him fear that his spine might crack and any moment. The armed men occasionally kicked him with the soles of their boots and cursed him, expressing their anger.

Amidst the tumultuous journey, the only audible sound was the restless engine of the nearby wheat mill, repeatedly going “Whirring, whirring…” as if it were the sole free voice in the town centre.

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**(Chapter -3)**

Last night, he was thrown into a prison cell, confined and isolated from the outside world. As he attempted to find some solace on the single concrete slab serving as his bed, he soon discovered its cruel design. The surface was steep and slippery, deliberately constructed to deny any form of comfort to the prisoners. It offered no respite, only a constant reminder of their punishment. The space between the bed and the cell’s iron door was so narrow that even a child could not lie on it, let alone a man like him.

Gazing at the towering walls of his cell, he couldn’t help but lament the abilities bestowed upon animals and insects by a higher power. Their natural talent to climb, perch, and find rest wherever they pleased seemed like an unattainable luxury to him. Regrettably, there existed no shared language between human beings and these creatures, save for the limited realm of body language. This communication barrier prevented humans from unravelling the secrets of such innate abilities, intensifying his sense of hopelessness.

His eyes wandered upwards, drawn to a frayed fabric cable hanging from the blades of an ancient and rusted ceiling fan. Approximately half a meter in length, its severed end dangled menacingly in his direction. The break in the cable hinted at a forceful encounter, resembling the aftermath of a violent struggle. Images of executioners employing such methods to extract information from prisoners filled his thoughts, adding to his growing unease.

The surrounding walls bore the marks of desperation. Dirt and grim covered their surfaces, intermingled with symbols, words, and signs etched haphazardly by desparate fingertips and tiny rocks. These enigmatic engravings resembled abstract artwork, their true meanings known only to their creators. There was no logical explanation for their presence except as an expression of the prisoners’ overwhelming emotions. Through these crude markings, they sought to alleviate their psychological and physical suffering, hoping that someone-anyone-would understand. Only their fellow inmates could decipher the encoded messages, trully comprehending their pain, sorrow, and flickering hope. These etchings would serve as a testament to what they had endured, a silent outcry for justice and acknowledgement. But who, other than their mothers, fathers, wives, children, brothers, sisters, friends, and loved ones, would bother to unravel the stories behind these inscriptions? Who else would care enough to learn whether they were still alive or had succumbed to the relentless torture inflicted upon them?

‌**(Chapter -4)**

A feeble natural light struggled to penetrate through the glass, woven wire mesh, and bars of a small window positioned in the cell’s right corner at the ceiling. Despite the early morning hour, a constant bright light on the roof near the fan ensured prisoners remained disoriented, oblivious to the passage of time. The size of the window and the dampness of the cell indicated that sunlight was not permitted to linger within those walls**.**

Gradually, the increasing sunbeams dimmed the artificial light's brightness, casting window-like patterns on the cell’s walls. However, this brief display seemed fleeting, as if the sun merely seized a moment to showcase its artistry.

He struggled to find his turban and, in his weakened state, failed to remove his jacket. The previous night had been brutal, marked by relentless kicks, punches, and gun-butt beatings from the armed men. Exhausted and stiff, every movement reminded him of the excruciating pain coursing through his muscles. It felt as sharp as a dagger, threatening to cleave his back in two.

Seeking respite, he sat on the bed but inadvertently slid towards the adjacent wall. With great effort, he pressed the balls and heels of his feet against the wall, balancing his body and finding a semblance of rest. Gazing at the ceiling, he noticed the broken cable once more. As the brightness of the light compelled him to close his eyes, he rose to search for the switch or any accessible wires, but they eluded his sight. Returning to the bed, he assumed the same position, lying on his back with feet against the wall, attempting to shield his eyes from the penetrating light. However, even through closed eyelashes, he felt its probing presence as if it were in search of secrets. Sleep beckoned, its power gradually numbing his eyelashes, threatening to seize his thoughts and consciousness.

Outside the prison, faintly audible amidst the surrounding silence, a man’s voice resonated, softly singing Siyachemana. The mournful melody expressed his grief over the destruction of his village, vineyards, saplings, orchards, and the spiritual Xaneqa, as well as his entire homeland, condemned to a scorched-earth policy. The sorrowful notes embedded themselves in Omar’s emotions, pushing him closer to the edge, ready to surrender to oblivion.

**(Chapter -5)**

He placed a saddle on the back of his horse, tightened its bridle, and detached its rein from the anchor fixed in front of his house. Raised his left leg, he put his foot in the stirrup, grabbed the horse’s long mane, and mounted. With a gentle squeeze of his calves against its ribcage, he signalled it to go.

The horse ambled leisurely for a few minutes, its swan-like neck moving its head back and forth. Soon it Began to trot, then canter, then transitioned into a gallop. It picked up speed, its head and neck bobbing, its breath quickening. Its legs pounded the ground so swiftly that it seemed its chest might soon graze the earth. Its tail whipped behind it, while its mane tossed left to right, up and down.

Its muscles worked tirelessly, heat emanated from its body. Sweat formed around the saddle, gradually spreading across its back and chest, causing him to become hot and sweaty as well. The sweat made it difficult to grasp the rein; he had to adjust his grip, using both thumbs and baby fingers to maintain control.

Soon, they reached a rugged, stone-covered plain, heading towards an unknown destination. The rhythmic clatter of hooves, “clap…clap. ..clap…clop,” echoed through the deserted landscape. Suddenly, without cue, the horse slowed its pace, switching from a gallop to a canter. It flicked its head violently, neighing a high-pitched, wheezing sound. It swerved side to side, bite at the rein angrily, and began to buck.

He wrapped the reins tighter around his wrists and hunkered down on the horse’s back. However, the horse’s movements grew wilder, its hooves sparking against the stony ground. He could no longer maintain balance, so he let go of the reins to avoid being dragged and fell onto the ground.

Opening his eyes, he found himself between his bed and the iron door of his prison cell, yet the sound of horseshoes, “clap, clop..clap…clop,” still echoed from the main street outside, through the small prison window. It was the horse of Osman, pulling a cart loaded with gravel and sand,“ chu...chu, hay.. chu…hay,” urged to go faster by its owner.

The dawn chorus of sparrows- a rhythmic “chip… chirrup…chip…chirrup,” from the gnarled branches and delicate twigs of the aged mulberry trees lining the prison courtyard. These heralds of daybreak signalled the start of a new day. Just like unprivileged humans, the sparrows were restless, forever on the lookout for their next opportunity to forage. Their lives hinged on finding a mere scrap of bread, a lone seed, or, on lucky days, the succulent worms buried within berries. Their scavenged feast served not only themselves but also the hungry mouths of their chicks waiting in the nests. Like feathered acrobats, they fluttered from one branch to another, one twig to the next, their movements swift and purposeful. Occasionally, they would swoop down to the ground, their demeanour cautious and alert. Their tiny beaks would then industriously sift through the fallen mulberry leaves, seeking edible morsels in the detritus. Once their search bore fruit, they would zip back into the protective embrace of the trees. Hidden amongst the foliage, they would take a moment to preen their plumage before venturing out again. Their cyclic movements, almost ritualistic in nature, had an uncanny resemblance to a game of hide-and-seek, their playful innocence juxtaposed against the austere backdrop of the prison.

Outside his cell, in the corridor, the echo of security forces’ boots, shouts, the jingle of chains, and the sound of heavy metal doors being locked and unlocked created a disturbing clamor. The noise grew louder as they approached his door, followed by the jingling of keys.

A tall, pot-bellied officer with dark skin entered the room. He wore camouflage and greeted him in Arabic, his voice thick with sarcasm. He didn’t wait for a response but began laughing heartily, flashing a gold-crowned smile. With a curt, “Let’s go out,” he grabbed him by the wrist and led him out of the cell.

They walked down a corridor lined with various cells. Guards carrying Kalashnikovs patrolled the hallway, occasionally peering through the small netted peepholes of the cell doors. When the officer and Omar approached, the guards ceased their patrol, saluted, and resumed their duties.

Soon, they reached a small gate on their right. After bending to pass through, the sparrows in the yard swiftly took cover in the mulberry trees as if they recognised a threat. The passage led to several rooms, each labelled with a small wooden sign indicating its purpose: police, accountancy, telephone, and telegram offices.”

They passed by the offices, then reached a corner where a door stood, unmarked and anonymous. The officer knocked on it with his left hand before opening it. He led Omar into the room, stamped his right foot on the floor, and saluted a man. The man was slim, tall, and pale, with medium-length curly hair tied into long black sideburns that resembled goloshes. Dressed in a white suit, he stood straight and imposing behind a desk. “Please, please sit down,” he greeted Omar warmly.

Two-seater sofas were arranged facing each other in the lower part of the room. Two men, attired in traditional Kurdish dress with turbans wrapped around their heads, stood in front of one of the sofas. A photo of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein showed him smiling from a glass flower-framed portrait, which hung high on the wall behind him as he sat on an ornately decorated silver chair, adorned with Agal, red Shemagh, a white thawb, and royal Bisht.

Omar glanced at the Kurdish men with a perplexed expression. “Sllawtan lêbê,t/peace be upon you,” he greeted them in Kurdish.

“Sllaw le xosht, bexêrbeyit/upon you be peace, welcome, “the men replied, inviting him to sit on the other sofa.

The officer saluted the men, silently exited the room, and closed the door.

The man settled into his chair and addressed Omar, “My name is Harbi; I’m the head of Halabja’s security force,” he disclosed in a gentle voice in Arabic. He then extended a packet of cigarettes from his desk toward Omar. “Smoke a cigarette, please,” he suggested respectfully.

“Thank you, but I don’t smoke,” Omar declined, placing his right hand on his heart as a sign of mutual respect.

“I’m very sorry; I genuinely don’t know why they’ve detained you here!” Harbi abruptly cleared his throat, then resumed. “Can you understand me well? If not, we have Mr. Hakan and Mr. Bulent here today; they, too, are Kurdish and can help interpret for us,” he explained.

Hakan and Bulent, each fiddling with a rosary in their hand, leaned in at Harbi’s words.

“We’re ready, Sir,” they declared enthusiastically, turning their faces toward Omar.

“Thank you, but my Arabic isn’t too bad,” Omar assured them.

Hakan and Bulent shared a glance before leaning back into the sofa’s pillows, eyeing Omar sideways as they inhaled deeply.

Harbi, meanwhile, turned his attention to a folder on his desk. He flipped through some papers before looking up at Omar. “Do you see Peshmerga during the night?” he questioned.

“No.”

“In the alleys, on your way to work, you’ve not seen them?”

“I have seen them several times.”

“Then why haven’t you reported any of these sightings?”

“Sir, I can’t. I’m a baker. I’m sure you have your own people for this,” Omar replied.

“And who might they be?” Harbi asked with a hint of irony.

Omar glanced at Hakan and Bulent before addressing Harbi. “Sir, the government is powerful; I am sure it is capable of many things.”

“Such as?”

“Sir, there are many things.”

“Such as what?” Harbi asked. “Give me an example.”

“Sir, it could be anything you say or think of,” he responded in a hoarse tone.

Harbi looked at him with a dominant smile, then said: “You’re right. Therefore, it should be possible for you to tell us about the rebels’ movements.”

Omar looked troubled. “Sir, please forgive me, but I cannot do that. I have many children, and that’s already a huge responsibility on my shoulders. That’s why I am working day and night to make enough money to take care of them.

Harbi looked at Hakan and Bulent, then turned to him, “You don’t need to exhaust yourself. We help you overcome this forever.”

“Sir, I am the only source of income for my family. My children are small; they won’t

survive without me,” he pleaded.

"You know what I am saying. You need to know the truth that the government helps those who are helpless. Ask Hakan and Bulent how well the government has been looking after them and their families. Do you think they do not have dignity? They have children like you.”

Hakan and Bulent smiled.

“Sir, I am working hard, so hard that my entire body gets socked in sweat before I can make the money I need,” Omar explained.

Harbi banged his palms against his desk and laughed loudly, saying, “Ha…ha…ha…ha,” These two men also sweat and get socked. Do you think they make money while lying in bed?”

Hakan and Bulent nodded several times to acknowledge what Harbi was saying and occasionally turned their faces towards Omar.

“Sir, I know.”

“Do you know? Then tell me, I need to know too, like you. Did you see Peshmerga last night?”

“No.”

“Did you hear the gunshot?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Sir, I don’t know exactly where to say.”

“Why?”

“Because on many nights, gunshots can be heard here and there.”

“Who makes them?”

“Sir, I don’t know.”

“Who were responsible for the ones last evening?”

“Sir, believe me, I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“How can I possibly know?”

“Who was killed?”

“Sir, by God, I do not know.”

“What do you know?”

Hakan interjected, “Sir, we have a Kurdish proverb that says: ‘Say I do not know, and you will be safe,” He stared at Omar intently.

“Three nights ago, the rebels ‘martyred’ one of our comrades in front of his children in his own house. A few days before that, in the town centre, they threw a hand grenade at one of our spies at midday. Fortunately, he escaped, but the shrapnel killed an innocent young boy who happened to be a passerby. Let’s assume our spy is their enemy. What was the sin of that innocent boy?” He fell silent.

To alleviate the uneasy silence, Omar spoke up: “Sir, I consider all forms of killing to be crimes. I understand that the death of your comrade will have a negative impact on his children negatively. May God protects everyone.”

“His children are the sons and daughters of our leader Saddam Hussein. My God protects him, and we will take care of them. But what about you? If you were to die, who would look after your children? Do you think the rebels would care about them?”

“Sir, I have no affiliation with the rebels whatsoever. I am a simple, impoverished citizen who earns a living through hard work. All I ask of God is to watch over my children after I’m gone.”

“Hedgehogs may be poor, but they can devour a snake,” Hakan murmured.

“Where are those mosque preachers?” Harbi questioned.

“Who, Sir,” Omar asked for clarification.

“Those who fled the town?”

“Sir, I do not know.”

“Are they in Iran?”

“Sir, what can I say? I do not know.”

“You know very well that they are in Iran, a country governed by Shia Muslims; what do you expect them to do for Sunni preachers?”

“Sir, what shall I say?”

“What about Sunni Muslims from other parts of Iraq? What will they do for the preachers and for all of you?”

“Sir, I do not know that either.”

“You don’t need to know, but I’m telling you so you understand. Iranian government won’t do anything beneficial for them; instead, they will use them as mercenaries to help Iranian government to occupy villages, towns, and cities in Iraq. Don’t be naïve. Not just Iranian government, but none of the Sunni Muslim countries will do anything significant to assist you.”

Omar interrupted, “Sir….”

Harbi interrupted him in turn, saying, “All Muslim countries are cooperating with us. Tell me if I’m speaking the truth?”

Omar interrupted again, “Sir…”

“Tell me a single name of a Muslim country that, out of religious or humanitarian concern, has truly helped you, shown empathy, or advocated on your behalf?” Harbi asked.

“Sir, what should I say?” Omar replied, uncertain.

“Do not say anything, but I will tell you everything. I will explain what we have done to you so far and what we will continue to do in the future. I will reveal how those countries have remained silent throughout the past years, and how they will continue to do the same in the future,” Harbi stated.

“It is true, sir. They don’t care,” Hakan added.

Omar looked at them and asked, “Sir, what should I say?”

“The entire world is assisting us politically and logistically. The bombs, rockets, and bullets fired by our warplanes, helicopters, and guns against rebels and their supporters, as well as the TNT that we used to detonate the entire Kani-Ashqan neighbourhood of this town, are supplied by superpower countries, including Muslim nations. Tell me, do you believe this to be true?” Harbi questioned.

“Sir, what should I say?” Omar responded.

“It’s clear that you don’t want to grasp the essence of questions; I mean, the rebels are deceiving all of you. They lie not only to you but also to themselves. You may wonder, what lie?”

“Yes, sir.”

“They kill our people and even each other. Have you ever witnessed or heard of good Kurds killing one another under the authority of the Arab Socialist Ba’th Party of Iraq? So why did they turn on each other in those mountains under the command of different warlords? If they have ceased such actions, it’s not because they care about your interests, it’s because of Iranian government’s request and their own interests. Do you know why?”

“What should I say, sir?”

“Iranian government wants to employ them against us. Isn’t that true?”

“What should I say, sir?”

“You don’t need to say anything. Just listen to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We support Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in our country, but have you ever seen or heard that they have helped a single one of our soldiers infiltrate Iranian territory? So, why do your rebels secretly bring the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)into this town, which is their ancestral land? Can you tell me why?”.

“Sir, I’m not involved in politics and have no connection to them.”

“Why not? Don’t you know who indiscriminately bombs this town? Are you trying to tell me it’s not Iranian government? Why do the rebels assist them? Why don’t they demand that the Mullahs stop? Last year, on August 6, 1986, Iranian government’s rockets killed 200 innocent citizens and injured over 100, totalling more than 300 causalities in a school in the Sirwan district of this town. Can you tell me why? Yesterday, a woman and two children were killed in the town’s Pîr-Muhemed neighbourhood, again by Iranian government’s rockets. The day before yesterday, they killed a boy on his way to school. Last week, they severed an old man’s leg in the town’s Mordana neighbourhood. You know very well that none of those victims were members of our state’s security forces, police, military, comrades, or soldiers. They were all ordinary citizens, just like you.” He paused and then picked up an empty glass from his desk, grabbed a nearby jug, and filled the glass with water. He brought it to his mouth, sipped it until the last drop, used his tongue to dry the front part of his moustache, bit his lips, and then stroked his moustache while staring at Omar. He said, “Aren’t you afraid of becoming a victim of one of the Iranian government’s rockets, just like other citizens of this town? Tell me, when you die, who will think of you?” He paused again. “Even if you do not die from the rockets, one day they will force you and your family to leave the town, as they have done to hundreds of families.”

“Sir, may God protect us.”

Harbi furrowed his brow, and the wrinkles etched from lines on his forehead: “God is with righteous revenge. Do you believe that when we destroyed 750 houses in Kani Ashqan neighbourhood, we were wrong? We were well aware that the households were innocent. The ones at fault are those who bring the (IRGC) into this town. It seems that you have some sympathy?”

“Sympathy for what, Sir?”

“For those 25 injured citizens, we forcibly removed them from their beds in the twon’s Anab hospital and buried them alive in Bamok village’s military base. Does that bring you grief?”

“What grief, sir?”

“For those 26 individuals, we apprehended them while travelling between the town and Said Sadiq district and later buried them alive in Shaneder military base,” he paused, “Do you know why?”

Omar remained silent.

“Because they participated in civil disturbances, attempting to prevent us from destroying the villages. Ha, ha, ha… ha” Harbi laughed loudly.” We do as we please, and that is the fate of those who try to stand in our way,” he stated.

“Sir, what should I say? May God solve all problems; may God has mercy on us,” Omar responded in a subdued tone.

“What kind of mercy? God’s mercy has limits, and so does ours. It has been eight years since I started working in this town, and my initial task was to investigate the infiltration of the IRGC into the town, aiming to attack our bases and distribute photos of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in alleys and streets.” Harbi bent his head on the desk, picked up a cigarette with his right hand, placed it in his mouth, and lit it using his Golden lighter. He deeply inhaled the smoke and exhaled it over the desk, then placed the cigarette in an ashtray on the desk. He looked at Omar while holding his head and continued, “Do you know what the rebels tell us?”

“By God, I do not know.”

“They tell us occupiers and refer to Hakan, Bulent, and their colleagues as Mercenaries. I leave it up to you to judge and tell me, what should we call them?” Harbi smirked at Omar.

“Ha, ha, ha, ha…” Hakan and Bulent laughed.

Omar glanced at Hakan and Bulent, his face filled with fear, then looked at Harbi.

“Is it not true?” Harbi asked him.

Omar shrugged his shoulders and briefly glanced at the three.

Harbi took his half-ashed cigarette from the ashtray, inhaled it, held it with his lips, and slammed the desk with both hands, “It is impossible; you must have an answer.”

“By God, I do not know what to say.”

“Why? Are you scared?”

“Sir, I am working hard; I fear of being disappointed.”

“If you tell us the truth, you won’t be disappointed. I know you’re scared, but don’t worry. We have a solution to help you overcome your fear. You’ve now been introduced to Hakan and Bulent. They are from your town, and you all speak the same language. From now on, you don’t need to come here to pass us information about the rebels. You can contact these men outside.”

“Sir, that’s a really good solution. We would love to help him in any way he wants,” Hakan and Bulent said excitedly.

“What do you say?” Harbi asked Omar.

Omar carefully studied Harbi’s face, lowered his head, and remained in that position for two minutes. He raised his head a couple of times without looking at them. He felt ambivalent and didn’t know whether to say yes or no, but he sensed that choosing yes would secure his safety.

Silence filled the room.

Harbi, Hakan and Bulent waited for Omar’s response, monitoring his trembling lips, legs, and hands second by second.

Omar slowly raised his chest and head, took a deep breath, and looked at Hakan and Bulent one by one.

The two of them leaned forward, stretching their upper bodies toward him, leaving only half of their buttocks on the top cushion of the sofa.

Omar turned his gaze towards Harbi.

Harbi continued to stare at him, unblinking.

Omar glanced at Hakan and Bulent again, then back to Harbi. “Sir, ex…ex…excuse me. I cannot.”

Hakan and Bulent quickly pulled back to their sofa pillows as if they had been pushed. The sofa creaked loudly, and disappointment washed over their pale faces. They had hoped to bring Omar into their world of spies.

Harbi picked up his lighter and banged it firmly on the desk. “Bang, bang, bang…” He glared at Omar while still scrutinizing his face to determine if his response stemmed from fear or conviction. He threw the lighter onto the desk, looked at Hakan and Bulent, then back at Omar, studying his body for a moment. He pointed his index finger toward the door. “Stand up and get out of here, but reconsider your response carefully.”

**(Chapter -6)**

Every early morning, Omar wasn't the only one making his way to the bakery. His childhood friend, Baram, would also be there but earlier than him. Together, they had the job of heating the clay oven, manually mixing a large dough trough of dough, forming hundreds of dough balls from the mixture, and arranging them on handmade wooden trays layered with flour. These trays, stacked one on top of another, would be prepped and ready for flattening and baking.

Around 6 in the morning, the owner of the bakery, a middle-aged man, would join them. His responsibility was selling the baked goods. Jokingly he would often announce to the customers, “Apologies, the hooks have ravaged my bread. Next time, I need to bring a needle and thread to stitch their pieces together,” a commentary meant for the ears of Omar and Baram.

Seeking to escape the owner’s irony, Omar would dedicate extra time to knead the dough and use his metal hook more carefully to extract the baked bread from the two tandoors, striving to ensure no bread would tear—a seemingly impossible task.

Besides his bakery duties, Omar also worked five days a week at the nursery.

The previous night, Omar was absent from the bakery as he was held in prison. His absence was not uncommon, it happened whenever he or his wife or any of their children fell ill. Baram, aware of these circumstances, would manage the bakery by himself until the owner arrived.

Until two years ago, Baram had been a teacher. However, Prior he was accused of participating in political activities against the Iraqi state and spent several months in prison under torture. Despite the torment, he never confessed to the charges and was eventually released. The state subsequently disqualified him from teaching and ordered him to relocate to the south of the country to work in a canning factory. Choosing defiance, he didn’t go, and instead found work at the bakery. Baram was unmarried, not by choice, but by cruel fate. He had loved a woman and had proposed to her multiple times, but her father had disapproved. This refusal led the woman to self-immolate and die. In her memory, Baram chose never to marry. He lived in a small rented house not far from Omar’s, and in his free time, he devoured books on philosophy and literature.

Today, after a long shift at the bakery, Baram felt exhaustion wash over him. Leaving the bakery, he Began the walk back home.

**(Chapter -7)**

“Rat, tat, tat,” someone knocked on Omar’s front house door. Inside the house, a number of children shouted loudly, “Father came back, father came back… dear father came back,” Samya’s hands were deep inside a basin in the yards washing clothes, “Go quickly help your father with the shopping bags,” told the girls while raising her head.

The girls, one after another, started running, racing! Racing for what? To see who can be the first to open the door, help the father with the shopping bags. One of them won and opened it; they saw it was not the father! Swiftly looked at Samya. “Mam, it is Uncle Baram!” said surprisingly.

“Is your father at home?”

“Our father!”

Samya hurriedly pulled out her foamed hands in the basin, stood up, and approached Baram. “Where is Omar? What had happened to him?”

The girls started crying.

Ameen, a neighbor, raised her head behind the enclosed front yard that divided her house from that of Omar. She looked at them, engaged in self-talk and feigned sympathy: “May God help these only daughters, I hope nothing has happened to their father.”

They ignored her.

Baram, “Did Omar come to work last night? “

Samya, with her teary eyes, “Yes.”

Baram’s face contorted in anguish, “he didn’t come last night. I thought he or one of you were ill.”

Samya looked at him with imploring eyes, “Please go and find him.”

Baram declined his head, paused for a moment of introspection and went deep in thought, considering his thoughts and expected fears. He silently asked himself, “The places that I can think of he had been taken to are the security apparatus and the military bases of the town. Not only can I not go to those places, but I even pass by them with apprehension. There are no other places I can go to search for him. Those known places are only there for imprisoning, torturing, killing and disappearing innocent people,” he responded to himself before raising his head.

“I do not know where to go,” he told Samya.

Samya dishearteningly, “what shall we do?”

Bram, “I am going.”

Samya, “Where to?”

Baram, “To the mosque!”

Samya astonishingly, “What has prompted this sudden interest? When have you ever prayed?”

Baram, “I am not going to pray! But to speak to the preacher!”

Samya, “For what?”

Baram, “To help us use the loudspeaker to call out to search for Omar.”

The girls started sobbing as they did not grasp the limitation of Baram’s power. They expected their father to be back like any other day. “Dear Baram, find our father quickly, please,” they pleaded while embracing him.

“Do not worry…do not worry, we will find him,” told them before leaving the house.

Samya and her daughters went to the disclosed drawing room and sat down worriedly, waiting for Baram to come back with good news.

Ameen, who was still behind the wall of the front yard watching them, resumed self-talk, “Thank God, it was good you gave me four boys; now they are grown up and have their families and houses. When my husband passed away, they were still young, but I made a decision to send them out to work; they managed to do it, simultaneously helping both themselves and me; if they were girls, we would have died of hunger. I feel sorry for Samya’s only daughters; oh, unlucky Samya, the helpless lady, you cannot do anything; if something were to happen to Omar, people would deluge you and your daughters with thousands of fabricated stories; what can you do? You may wait for your son-in-law in the future; there is a Kurdish proverb saying, ‘a thousand sons-in-law cannot equal one own-born son’. Who knows God’s intentions; you are pregnant; oh, yes, may he bless you with a son soon.”

They looked at her.

Suddenly, the sound of the mosque’s loudspeaker resonated, “For your attention, for your attention, may God bless you with his divine light; a man by the name of Omar is missing; he is a resident of Pîr-Muhemed neighbourhood, he left home early yesterday morning to go to work, but he has not yet returned; may God bless you with his divine light, he has little children if anyone has any information about his whereabouts, please let us know as soon as possible. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated, and may God’s blessing be upon you for helping ensure the well-being and safety of his children.”

They were attentively listening to it: “For your attention…for your attention, may God bless you with his divine light; a man by the name of Omar is missing...”

They were also eagerly waiting, their eyes frequently darted towards the front door, hoping to catch a glimpse of Baram or someone else who might bring good news. And, they would occasionally raise their heads, watching Ameen again, who was still keeping an eye on them.

Suddenly, in the midst of their eager wait, they were jolted by the distinct sounds of the key turning, signalling someone attempting to open the front door.

They stood up.

As the door creaked open, a hand extended and slowly pulled the curtain.

It was Omar; his dishevelled appearance could easily be interpreted as an indication that something bad had happened to him; his weary and haggard face, void of a hat and turban, reflected a visible sign of exhaustion and sleep deprivation, evoked concern among his wife and daughters who laid eyes upon him.

They surged forward, converging upon him, their arms wrapping around him in a tight embrace. Tears of uncontainable happiness welled up in their eyes, swiftly washing away the remnant of sorrow and replacing them with pure, radiant joy.

They gathered around as the loudspeaker resumed its announcement again,“…may God bless you with his divine light; he has little children; if anyone has any information about his whereabouts, please let us know as soon as possible…”

Their smiles intensified, and soon they burst into laughter together, unable to contain their joy-“H, ha, ha, ha.” echoed through the air.

Ameen withdrew her head behind the wall.

**(Chapter-8 )**

Several years had elapsed, and we now found ourselves back in the same town. Time had reshaped its contours, bringing new circumstances for those who remained.

Kafee, an elderly lady whose face bore the intricate tapestry of time, with lines and wrinkles woven by the gentle fingers of age, sat quietly in the corner of a cellar. This cellar, built beneath the ground floor of Halabja’s cigarette factory for storing tobacco, now held more than just its intended cargo. Beside her was her daughter, Mina. Kafee used her bare index finger to delicately trace signs and symbols onto Mina’s right palm, resting gently in her lap. Occasionally, Mina tilted her head, drawing it closer to her mother's hand, almost allowing her forehead to graze it.

Omar, Samya, their children, and Baram were sitting in another corner. Omar and Baram fixed their gaze upon Kafee and Mina, deeply observing and becoming perplexed by their actions. They continued to watch them, except when the sound of a rocket from outside disturbed their attention, causing Kafee’s finger to

accelerate its movement on Mina’s palm.

Outside in the factory’s yard, gentle breezes were coming in through a little long hall at the lower part of the only door of the cellar, kissing the kerosene lamp’s draught glass before making its wick’s flame dance! The lamp was placed in the middle of the cellar; its flam was flickering, intermittently illuminating the faces of those who were sitting close by, now and then.

I pondered the significance of the scene upholding before me as Omar silently observed the interaction between the grandmother and her daughter. The curiosity bubbling within him pushed him to articulate his thought through self-talk, still fixated on their exchange.

Seeking answers, Omar turned to Baram, hoping for clarity. Baram promptly responded, enlightening Omar about their relationship. “She is her daughter, and through symbols, she imparts wisdom,” Baram explained.

Surprised by this revelation, Omar eagerly questioned, “What kind of symbols does she draw? And why?”

Baram patiently elaborated, “The symbols depict events, pose questions, offer consultations, and provide and advice.”

Omar wondered aloud about the peculiar medium of communication, questioning whether these profound messages could be conveyed through spoken words or written with pen.

Baram clarified, “Indeed, they can be expressed through spoken words or written down, but the grandmother has found a unique way to communicate with her daughter. She utilizes her finger to draw signs and symbols on her palm, each representing a message or an events in their lives.”

Omar, struggling to grasp the depth of their interaction, turned away momentarily, his mind searching for understanding amidst the darkness that surrounded them. Looking back at Baram, he questioned, “But in this environment, what can she possibly convey to her daughter?”

Baram’s response was poignant, tinged with the harsh reality of their circumstances. “She tells her not to fall victim to the Iranian government’s bombs. We fled our home tonight to seek safety here,” Baram said, abruptly interrupted by the distance explosion, and exclamation mark emphasizing the danger that loomed.

Realizing the urgency of the situation, Omar swiftly addressed his daughters, cautioning them against remaining still. The imminent threat of shrapnel and debris penetrating their shelter reminded him of the fragility of their existence.

Turning back to Baram, Omar expressed his astonishment,” Does narrating life events, questions, and advice take so long?”

Baram reassured him, “No, there is more to her narration than that.” Baram Began listing the significant topics the grandmother imparts, shedding light on the broader scope of her communication. “News about us, these women and children, the Peshmerga, the brutality of the Ba’th regime, blocking vital resources, displacing people en masse, leaving innocent creatures homeless; about the harrowing destruction of 5,000 villages, and the forcible removal of 180,000 Kurdish women, men, and children from their homes, who were subsequently buried alive. She relays information about the detonation in the Kani Ashqan neighborhood, where 80 people were buried alive. She shares news of the town’s demonstration against forced displacement and the struggles of impoverished and kinless individuals.”

Omar, bewildered by the magnitude of her messages, questioned the purpose of consulting with the naïve child. Baram revealed, “She seeks her daughter’s input on what to do if they become separated.”

Perplexed, Omar pressed on, “What advice could she possibly offer?”

Baram explained, “She advises her on how to navigate desperate times, how to escape danger. She imparts knowledge of what to do if she, herself, does not survive. The range of advice she can provide is far-reaching.”

Omar, still struggling to comprehend, confessed, “I find it difficult to grasp. How can these intricate events be conveyed through mere fingers and palm gestures?”

Baram’s response carried a deep understanding of their unique bond. “It can and it will. They say unborn babies, even in their mothers’ wombs, experience emotions like happiness, sadness, hunger, and tiredness. And as this girl is blind, deaf, and mute, the grandmother has found a way to establish a communication with her using her finger. She is a mother, and she will convey her love and care in any way she can. Communication transcends words and voices.”

Deep in thought, Omar pondered the profoundness of the mother and daughter’s communication, as well as Baram’s insights. Sensing his contemplation, Baram interjected, “This method of communication with the blind, deaf, and mute has been in use for a long time.”

Omar absorbed Baram’s words, allowing them to settle within him, expanding his understanding of the intricacies of human connection even in the most challenging circumstances.

Omar: “Where?”

Baram chimed in, shedding light on the method’s practice in foreign countries. “In foreign lands, people learn this method in special schools and even find employment based on it, sustaining their livelihoods.”

Omar, intrigued by the notion, questioned, “Do you think the grandmother has received any formal education in this technique? How did she acquire such skills?”

Baram responded, acknowledging the possibility of self-learning, “I’m unsure if she has studied or not, but as I mentioned before, she is a mother who has taught herself. Not all knowledge is acquired through schools and teachers; the necessity of life and daily needs often propel human to learn and invent.”

Curiosity lingering, Omar redirected his inquiry, focusing on Baram’s own source of knowledge. “And you, where did you obtain this information?”

Baram revealed, “From books.”

Eager to delve deeper, Omar inquired about the content of the book that had enlightened Baram. “What does the book say about this subject?”

Baram shared the wisdom contained within the pages, “The book reveals that the use of signs for communication traces back to the time of Socrates. He proposed that if humans lacked tongues and voices but still desired to understand one another, they would rely on hand gestures, head movements, and other body parts as means of conveying meaning. This very method is now employed by individuals who are unable to vocalize their thoughts.”

Confusion gripped Omar as he processed the new information, his gaze briefly shifting to the flickering kerosene lamp. “Who is Socrates?” He asked, seeking clarification.

Baram answered patiently, “Socrates was a Greek philosopher.”

This conversation was interrupted by Samya, who interjected with urgency, urging them to focus on finding a solution. Baram reassured her with enthusiasm, “Don’t worry, liberation is within our grasp.”

Samya deeply concerned for her children, responded, “I’m not worried for myself, but for my children.”

Amidst the tense atmosphere, a radio crackled to life, capturing the attention of those present. The sound of someone turning the dial in search of a specific channel filled the air, until it settled on one. The resounding war anthem emanating from the radio, accompanied by the speaker’s voice relaying important news, captivated the listeners:

Omar’s two enfant sons Began to cry, prompting Baram to request assistance from Samya.

Tenderly, she cradled the babies and skillfully calmed them, while her older daughter, recently engaged to her cousin, took charge of comforting her younger sisters.

Omar, sensing a language barrier, inquired if Baram understood Farsi. “Listen and inform us of the current state of the war,” he asked.

Baram, engrossed in the radio broadcast, glanced at the flickering lamp and quietly muttered to himself, “Events have unfolded.”

Those nearby approached Baram, anxious for the news. They implored him,” What does it say, Baram? Tell us…What has happened.”

Baram gave them a side glance and said, “It’s the voice of an Iranian government’s radio, saying, “Our forces have controlled all strategic areas of Halabja. Soon they will reach the road leading to the city of Karbala!”

“Bah…Bah/ Good…Good,” sarcastically expressed Mam Wali, another man staying in the cellar.

“Oh, yeah, sure, because Halabja is definitely just a stone’s throw away from Karbala!” said Samya while still holding her babies behind Baram.

Kafee was listening, her head turning towards any direction where she could hear someone talking, then lowering her head and passing the conversation on to Mina.

Omar as if he hasn’t understood yet said: “What has happened? What is it saying?”

“We have been destroyed. This time too, we have been destroyed,” Mam Wali said worriedly.

Baram straightened his chest, “Nothing for you to worry about. The Iranian government is not alone. They have the Peshmerga with them, and they have a plan. The Peshmerga will take responsibility for the town, its people, and their properties. These are high priorities for them. They know what the Iranian government is up to.”

“How do you know, nothing for us to be worried about? It seems that your Farsi language is not good enough. The radio speaker said, the Zalm bridge, located 21km in the northeast of Halabja, has been destroyed,” Mam Wali looked at him and said.

Baram, “Why?”

“Why did you say that?! Their intention is clear. They do not want anyone to flee towards the city of Slemani,” Mam Wali exclaimed.

Samya interrupted, her voice filled with doubt “I don’t think so they have destroyed it. If they did, how would they pass to go to Karbala?” Just then, another rocket hit the ground outside, causing a tremor that sent fear rippling through everyone in the cellar. The children started crying, and the adults Began fervently praying.

“I understand that you are educated, but age-wise, I have more life experience. I faced numerous challenging situations and witnessed hardship firsthand. Therefore, I find it difficult to persuade myself and maintain the same level of optimism as you do. Considering Iranian government’s treatment of the Kurds in East Kurdistan-occupying their land, subjecting them to oppression, and even resorting to violence and killing-how can we trust them? How can we believe they will protect our rights and territory here? Do you think our children’s lives would be better than those of Kurdish children in Muhabad, Kermanshah, Sina, and Saqqiz etc.? For the past eight years, we have lived under the constant threats of their rockets. Our houses, shops, and markets are not military targets, so why do they continue to bombard them? None of our women, men, and children are soldiers, spies, or civil servants of the Ba’ath party, so why have they become victims of their bombings? Whom do these random rockets and bombs that fall upon us today belong to? Today, our fear extends beyond Iraqi rockets and warplanes, and you are well-aware of that, aren’t you?” Omar anxiously expressed to Baram.

Suddenly, the radio fell silent.

“This feels different,” Baram replied.

Mam Wali asked, “How so?”

“It’s a new revolution, with fresh leadership that has learned from the past mistakes,” Baram explained.

Mam Wali attempted to rise, he said in a self-reflective tone, “şîrîn wa meço, zamim ekûlêtewe, sallanî pêşûm bebîrdetewe. Dear, let’s not take the conversation in that direction. It reminds me of my past years,” he told him, citing this Kurdish proverb.” He slowly approached Baram and Omar, asking “Which one of you is so naive and easily trusting?”

Baram smiled and replied, “It was me. Please, uncle, have a seat.”

Mam Wali sat down and placed his bindle of belongings and the radio in front of himself. His glasses, with a broken hinge held together by a piece of wire, rested on his nose. Adjusting the makeshift repair, he turned to Baram and asked, “My son, can you see this bindle?”

Baram and Omar followed his gaze, their attention drawn to the bindle, momentarily glancing over his poorly repaired glasses.

“This is not the first time I’ve carried a bindle. I’ve wrapped in it all I have, and it brings me solace. Wherever I go. I will take my bindle and this old radio with me. There may come a day when I am left with nothing, and I risk losing my life as well. My son, my life has taught me that the occupying army will never bring freedom but instead bring death, destruction, and destitution,” Mam Wali added.

Baram reassured, “Our leaders are sagacious. They won’t let the things you fear come to pass. While It’s true that Peshmerga is accompanied by the IRGC, they won’t blindly follow all of their decisions.”

Mam Wali retrieved a wrinkled handkerchief from beneath his belt, gently wiped his face with it, and then bowed his head. With trembling hands, he Began unfolding the bindle, revealing a small framed photo of a young boy.

Baram and Omar’s eyes were drawn to the photo, and they exchanged glances, their expressions filled with curiosity and perhaps a hint of sympathy.

Mam Wali tenderly caressed the photo with his left hand and placed his right hand over his heart. He then raised his head, meeting Baram’s gaze. “I had only one son, his voice filled with emotion. I raised him in the true Kurdish spirit, hoping he would lead a fulfilling life, not just for himself, but for our people and this nation. Unfortunately, that hope was never realized. Neither I, as a father, nor he, nor the people of this country, saw that dream come to fruition.”

Mam Wali bowed his head momentarily before lifting it again, his eyes filled with sadness. “My son fell victim to the horrors of Kurdish fratricide. No matter how deeply I analyze the past and connect it to the present, the desired outcome seems unlikely to be achieved.”

With a firmness in his voice, Baram interjected, “Uncle, your son is a martyr,” his words carried a sense of assertiveness, conveying his respect and acknowledgement of the sacrifice Mam Wali’s son had made for their cause.

“Martyr! “Mam Wali exclaimed.

To comfort him, Baram placed his hands on Mam Wali’s shoulders and spoke in a calm tone. “I assure you, those wounds will heal.”

Mam Wali’s voice trembled with emotion as he continued, “Those wounds will only truly heal when they cease to inflict pain, when they no longer cause suffering. When will we feel that our sacrifices have brought us the defense and happiness we long for. Think back to the Peshmerga of the 60s and 70s- what became of their hopes for liberation and freedom? You have witnessed it all, before and after the capitulation of 1975. My son, your father, mother, brothers, sisters, and countless others- what have we achieved? We have only known sacrifice and suffering, enduring life in tents, displaced and homeless, confined to camps in Iran. Then returning to the subjugation of the Ba’ath Party, a subjugation that persists to this very moment.”

Kafee’s sudden cough interrupted Mam Wali’s words, causing everyone to turn their attention towards her. Kafee glanced at the others but couldn’t withstand their unwavering gaze. She took a deep breath, lowered her head, and traced her finger along Mina’s palm.

“What have we achieved?” Mam Wali repeated, his voice filled with uncertainty.

Baram, unable to offer a response, remained silent.

Mam Wali sighed, his voice heavy with despair. “Nothing, absolutely nothing. We were utterly abandoned. Our leaders, along with their families, fled to Europe and America. My son, I am growing older and weary of the endless cycle of grieving, fleeing, enduring miseries, witnessing destructions, and rebuilding my home time and again. What worries me the most is the lack of strategy and disorganization among the Kurds. Previously, despite some level of unity under a single leadership, we witnessed the futility of our efforts. And now, in this chaotic state, with a common cause but numerous factions driven by their own narrow interests, I ask you, what can we possibly achieve? It’s as the Kurds say, ‘Gundi fre Kwêxa (one village with many headmen) Tell me, what can we accomplish under such circumstances? Where will we be led? Haven’t you heard the saying, ‘Malli fre kaybanu tozi ta serazhnoye’? (a house with many households, its dust is up to the knee) They haven’t lied, have they? When they ask, ‘Mn agha u to agha, kê bereman bo raxa?’ (if both of us are chieftains, then who will lay down a rug for us to sit on?’) Believe me, amidst this segregation and desperation, I struggle to discern even a glimmer of hope on the horizon.”

“Uncle, please don’t be pessimistic,” Baram pleaded.

“I am not pessimistic; I simply cannot see anything,” Mam Wali responded, his voice filled with frustration.

Samya let out a deep sigh, sharing the weight of their worries.

Some of the children had already fallen asleep, while the rest, with their heavy eyes showing signs of drowsiness, were on the verge of slumber.

Mam Wali alternated his gaze between Baram and Omar.

Baram and Omar glanced at the photo once again, a poignant reminder of the past.

Mam Wali carefully folded the bindle and secured it with loops, placing it alongside the radio. He stood up, returned to his designated space in the cellar, sat down on his unfolded blanket, pulled its edges to cover himself and the bindle.

**(Chapter -9)**

The atmosphere in the cellar was relatively quiet, with only intermittent sounds breaking the silence. Kafee stood up and walked towards the kerosene lamp. She picked it up, adjusted its light to a dimmer setting, and carefully placed it back in its original spot before returning to her designated place. Omar and Samya laid down, preparing to drift off to sleep.

Occasionally, someone would quietly wake up and make their way outside to use the restroom, skillfully navigating a path through the tangled web of outstretched legs. Meanwhile, Kawan remained awake, a silent observer in the cellar since the Beginning, witnessing all that transpired within its walls.

Every so often, the small, elongated hallway at the bottom of the cellar’s lone door would usher in whispers of cool air. This time, however, the air brought a distinct chill. The residents, feeling the temperature drop, snugly wrapped themselves in their blankets. The flickering lamp flame, dancing to the rhythm of the nocturnal drafts, cast an ever-changing shadow play.

Kawan’s gaze swept over his surroundings, finding everyone else in a deep slumber. The only sounds punctuating the silence were the occasional sputter of the dimming flame, the deep, rhythmic snores of children, and the intermittent coughs of the weary and ill. The cool air brushed against Kawan too, prompting him to pull his blanket closer for warmth.

In the distance, the sounds of bombs, rockets, and bullets hitting the ground could be heard, followed by the chatter and footsteps echoing through the alleyway behind the cellar. Kawan rose silently, peering through the small window above his head towards the alleyway. The moonlight greeted his gaze as he strained to see the alleyway more clearly. There, he observed men and women hurrying by, some clucking their children tightly, others carrying backpacks on their backs and shoulders. Withdrawing his head, he slowly made his way towards the steps of the cellar’s entrance.

As soon as he reached the front yard, the scent of scattered tobacco filled his nostrils. Raising his head and looking at the roof of the building, he noticed a stork perched on its long leg, diligently building its nest with its beak. Leaving the yard behind, he walked towards the alleyway, heading towards his house, feeling a sense of loneliness and emptiness. To find solace, he sought the comfort of twilight, attempting to recall the stories he heard, the books he had read, and the memories of his past experiences. It was a bittersweet nostalgia that enveloped him.

**(Chapter -10)**

Kawan stood in front of the Goran bookshop, his gaze fixed on the captivating showcase filled with new publications. Carefully scanning the display, he felt a surge of excitement for knowledge. With eager anticipation, he stepped inside and purchased a freshly printed book detailing the rich history of the town. He found a quiet corner nearby and immediately delved into the book’s pages. Lost in its engrossing content, he became oblivious to the bustling activity surrounding him. People hurried past him, weaving through the vibrant markets, while cars zipped by, creating a symphony of movement. Vendors passionately extolled the virtues of their produce, enticing customers with the promise of freshness.

Surprisingly, he managed to devour two chapters uninterrupted by the lively ambiance that enveloped him. He closed the book and left, making his way towards the Qayser-i-Hamîd Beg.

At the gate of the Qayseri, he descended to its walkway, surrounded by a variety of shops. On his right and left, a collection of diverse establishments, many of them owned by Jewish merchants. The first shop that caught his eye belonged to a Jewish man named Shawl, who specialised in selling Epson soap. Nearby, there was a shop displaying ornate cups and plates, as well as various items associated with Jewish traditions such as Kiddush, Menorahs, Hanukkah, candles, Sabbath supplies, Tzitzit, Kippas, Tallits and ceremonial candles.

Further along, others vendors proudly showcased their jewellery collections, featuring exquisite bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and rings adorned with the Star of David. The jewellery sparkled under the display cases, catching the attention of passerby. Just bedside the jewellery stalls, an old-fashioned barber shop attracted a diverse clientele. Both elderly gentlemen and young boys, wearing traditional Kurdish attire complete with long stretched Payot and turbans, entered the shop to prepare themselves for the upcoming Yom Tov day.

Among the other shops, one was dedicated to selling Henna, sugar, and tea, catering to the various cultural practices of the area. A weaver could be seen diligently crafting rugs and blankets, occasionally dipping tufts of wool into large pots filled with vibrant dyes. The rhythmic sound of loom echoed through the air as the weaver and his partner worked side by side.

Adjacent to the weaver, a skilled blacksmith meticulously polished pots, plates, trays, and an assortment of utensils, bringing out their radiant shine. In addition to this, he expertly sharpened knives, daggers, and a unique sugar axe. Meanwhile, a cobbler nearby skilfully crafted and repaired shoes, sandals, bags, purses, ammunition pouches, and various attires for horses, mules, and donkeys.

Lastly, there was a merchant offering bulk food items such as wheat, bulgar, lentils, and more. The shelves were neatly stocked, displaying a wide array of essential ingredients for the local community. The atmosphere in the Qayseri was alive with the vibrant colours, scents, and sounds of the bustling marketplace, each shop contributing to the tapestry of life within its walls.

Amidst the vibrant marketplace, women adorned in colourful and intricately patterned garments graced the scene. Their silk-made read felt headdresses, known as fez or pushin, were true works of art, embellished with delicate gold or silver coins sewn onto them, accompanied by cascading tassels. Golden and silver chains adorned their necks, extending up to their heads, where Hamsa necklaces added an additional touch of charm. Their waist and finger rings glimmered in the sunlight, and anklets adorned their feet, emitting a soft jingle with every step they took.

These women possessed captivating beauty, enhanced by their alluring ebony eyes, perfectly shaped eyebrows, and long, thick eyelashes that framed their gazes. Their jet-black pigtails, reminiscent of sinuous snakes, cascaded down their sun-kissed skin, adding an element of allure to their overall appearance. As they gracefully strolled through the Qayseri’s walkway, they carry tiffins filled with homemade Kosher delicacies for their husbands, their dangling earrings and tassel ornaments swaying and dancing, captivating the attention of passersby and shopkeepers eagerly awaiting potential customers.

Within the walkway and the various shops, a symphony of accents and tones filled the air, representing the diverse mix of Jewish, Yarsani, and Muslim men, women, and children. The voices intertwined seamlessly with those of Horaman and Sharazoor regions, harmoniously narrating the tales of different cultures that coexisted peacefully within the town. This melting pot of traditions and dialects created a tapestry of diversity, making the Qayseri a testament to the harmonious coexistence of various communities.

Kawan continued his leisurely stroll along the enchanting walkway of the Qayseri, basking in the pleasant ambiance created by the small domes that provided a cool and refreshing atmosphere. The meticulously paved bricks beneath his feet added to the charm of the surroundings. In the distance, a captivating fountain gracefully adorned the centre of the courtyard, its gentle cascades a soothing melody. The arcades that encircled the courtyard were adorned with skylights, allowing streams of natural light to illuminate the space.

As Kawan ventured forward, his eyes absorbed the intricate details that surrounded him. The air was filled with a symphony of delightful scents. The women adorned with necklaces crafted from clove beads emanated a subtle, aromatic fragrance, while the flower displays in the nearby shops released a captivating floral aroma, infusing the atmosphere with a touch of enchantment.

Immersed in his sensory delight, Kawan revelled in the scene, savouring each precious moment. However, as he continued his exploration, he found himself passing through one of the arcades on his right, leading him to the back gate of the Qayseri.

In the midst of his departure, the resonant voice of a preacher reverberated through the area, calling out, “Allah u Akbar!” Bang (the Muslim call to prayer) echoed in the air, capturing the attention of the devout Muslims residing in the Qayseri. One by one, they left their shops unlocked, temporarily setting aside their worldly endeavours to fulfil their religious obligations. Kawan, too, decided to follow the crowd, joining his fellow Muslims as they made their way towards the nearby mosques for the midday prayer. However, his path diverted slightly as he set his sights on a different destination. Instead of joining the others in the mosque, he made his way towards Koşk-i-Osman Pasha (The villa of Osman Pasha) a place that held significance in his heat and beckoned him with its history and allure.

**(Chapter -11)**

Kawan stood at the entrance of Othman Pasha’s villa, his gaze sweeping from left to right along the alley. Towering walls stood very high, adorned with stained-glass windows that cast vibrant hues across the surroundings.

The sight of silk curtains, some partially drawn and others gracefully billowing in the wind, added an air of opulence to the scene. Kawan’s eyes wandered up to the ornamental balcony railing, a testament to the villa’s exquisite craftsmanship.

This expansive estate had been divided into three separate living units, each inhabited by a distinct family. Adela Xanm, with her husband, Osman Pasha, and their sons, Mejîd Beg, Tahîr Beg and Ahmed Muxtar called this magnificent place home.

Upon entering the villa, a captivating sight unfolded before him- a long, elevated veranda, standing proudly about two meters above the ground, wrapped around the entire structure like a welcoming embrace. The veranda’s beauty was accentuated by gracefully designed pillars that connected the three separate living units of the villa, blending them into a harmonious whole.

Gently ascending the stone stairs, spaced at thoughtful intervals, he stepped onto the veranda’s smooth surface. It was as if each step carried him closer to a world of tranquility and wonder. The air felt filled with a sense of ease and belonging as he explored this delightful space.

Stretching out along the veranda, he noticed long wooden benches thoughtfully placed to offer rest and contemplation amidst the stunning surroundings. The gentle rustling of leaves and the distant song of birds created a serene atmosphere, making it an irresistible spot to linger and absorb the beauty of nature.

Intrigued by another charming touch, he spotted a wooden bridge that elegantly linked the second floors of two living units. It was as if this bridge symbolized the unifying spirit of the villa, gracefully connecting lives and memories across its expanse.

The enclosed veranda was more than just an architectural feature; it seemed to hold stories and memories etched in every pillar, every breeze that whispered through. It felt like a timeless space where moments of joy, laughter, and togetherness were reassured.

The villa’s veranda was a true testament to the artistry of design and the celebration of communal living. As he continued to explore, he knew that this enchanting haven held the promise of unforgettable experiences and cherished memories for those fortunate enough to call it home.

If you sat on one of the benches and gazed at the villa’s open courtyard in front of you, you could see a pond built with Persian Seven-colored Tiles with vibrant patterns under a huge pergola roofed with vine leaves. The roof held several branches holding clusters of black and white grapes hanging down as if they were flirting with someone to pick them up. The pond’s fountain, which steamed from a spring in it, was gently watering the lawn, bringing a fresh breeze to make you forget that you were in the summer season.

Beneath the open yard's walls in all parts, there were various flowers catching your eyes. Roses, sunflowers, lilies of the valley, narcissus, black-eyed Susan, gaillardia, carnations, iris, chrysanthemum, camellia, jasmine, magnolia, tulip, limonium, poinsettia, eustoma, freesia, columbine, bouvardia, mina, statice, calluna, almond, crocus sativus, amaryllis, pansy, cherry, and cypress vines adorned the surroundings, creating a colorful and enchanting ambiance. They captivated all your senses with their colors, scents, and sights in a way that brought happiness to both rich and poor individuals indiscriminately. The alluring scents of the fresh flowers and the lawn filled the whole yard, making it a delightful place to stay. When you intoxicatedly gazed at the blue sky adorned with a shining sun, you couldn’t help but thank God for His artistic and sublime power.

He entered the veranda where two young guards, wearing Kurdish traditional dress and turbans, stood at ease, each carrying a Martini-Henry rifle with their cavalier boots clicking on the ground. As he passed by, he couldn’t help but wonder why they hadn’t noticed him. He continued past windows, doors, and walls decorated with niches. In one of the rooms, lively sounds of friendly chatter and laughter echoed from the villa’s servants, intermingling with the chatter of their bustling kitchen; it seemed that they were moving around, preparing the dinner meal ready. Ascending a wooden staircase, he reached the wooden bridge that connected the second floor of the two living units. Stepping onto the bridge, he turned westward, resting his hand on its railings as he gazed into the distance through his binocular. There before him lay Sharazoor plain, embellished with scattered villages, hills, and tents, all against the backdrop of the glimmering Sirwan River, resembling a fragment of broken mirror reflecting the sunlight-a truly picturesque landscape. Majestic mountains stood in the distance, seemingly guarding the land.

On the west side, the smoke of the town’s public Hemen rose steadily into the sky, emanating warmth from the wood-fired baths. Beside the Hemem stood a Caravanserai, where a group of four or more travelers had just arrived, unloading their loads, while others who had rested were preparing to continue their journey.

Towards the northeast, his gaze settled on the magnificent Shnrwê mountain range, with its spurs extending like outstretched fingers. At the forefront, a bride astride a horse caught his eyes, dressed in resplendent Kurdish traditional wedding attire. A man gently led the horse by its reins, while several other riders, armed with rifles, rode along in accompaniment. They were on a mission, escorting the bride to his groom in one of the hidden villages nestled behind the mountains. With determined strides, they ascended the terrain, occasionally pausing to celebrate with gunfire that echoed through the air. Meanwhile, a chorus of birds sang merrily from the town’s orchards, as though they, too, shared in the joyous occasion.

Despite the early summer season, a refreshing breeze, tinged with a kiss of snow from the mountain, caressed the elevated spaces, adding to the excitement as he approached Tahîr Beg’s dwelling. Each step led him closer to the lively chatter of people engaged in conversation, drawing him towards a wide balcony that offered breathtaking views of the town’s western panorama. There seated on a chair, was Tahîr Beg himself, donning a traditional dark blue velvet cardigan adorned with silk jacket and trousers. A vibrant patterned belt encircled his waist, while an intricately designed Mshki headwear graced his head. The hilt of his dagger displayed a graceful glass rosary, and on the other side a colt pistol, both seemingly peaceful but subtly hinting at a latent warning- a reminder of his sovereignty, ready to defend if provoked. He was surrounded by esteemed guests, among them, sub-tribe leaders, a mosque’s Imam, and a synagogue’s rabbi and the others were deeply engrossed in discussion. Nearby, an Osmani Turkish Binbaşi (Major), dressed in uniform, shared a bench with a man called Mirza Hossein Shirazi. An attentive servant stood at the ready, offering cigarettes, tea, and sherbet on a silver tray as the conversation flowed.

Observing their discussion, Kawan noticed that Binbaşi was uncomfortable. He kept glancing at Tahîr Beg and others intermittently, and he regularly adjusted his body on the bench. After a moment, Binbaşi nervously addressed Tahîr Beg in Turkish, “Sayin Tahir Bey,” (Mr. Tahîr Beg)

Evet, Efendim," (Yes, Sir) replied Tahîr Beg, who, apart from speaking Kurdish as his mother tongue, was proficient in Turkish and other languages.

Binbaşi, “There’s something we’d like to bring to your attention,” he asked.

Tahîr Beg, without hesitation, instructed the servant, “Offer him cigarettes.” Then he turned to Binbaşi and asked in Turkish, "Bana hangi şikayetleriniz olduğunu söyleyebilir misiniz?” (Can you tell me what complaints you have?

“We want to connect this town to the areas under the rule of the Osman Empire by telegraph,” he explained.

To this, Tahîr Beg responded, raising his eyebrows inquisitively.

“They don’t allow,” Binbaşi replied.

“Who?” Tahîr Beg inquired.

“People,” Binbaşi responded.

Tahîr Beg smiled and asked, “What do people do?”

Binbaşi continued, “They cut the wires.”

After briefly gazing at Binbaşi, Tahîr Beg turned back to his guests, and their discussion continued. In an attempt to fill the gap of not receiving any response from Tahîr Beg, Binbaşi turned to Mirza Hossein Shirazi and quietly asked, “Have you ever visited Constantinople?”

Mirza Hossein Shirazi, with his handlebar moustache, nodded in affirmation.

“I don’t know what cursed destiny brought me to this faraway place in Kurdistan,” Binbaşi lamented.

Perplexed, Mirza Hossein Shirazi asked, “Why?”

Binbaşi sighed, “There is nothing here.”

Curious, Mirza Hossein Shirazi inquired, “What should be?”

Binbaşi responded, “Things that can keep you busy. It’s a drought country, and can’t be compared to Constantinople in any way.”

Tahîr Beg, as though he had just heard the most amusing joke, turned his face and replied with a sardonic smile, “Ah, dear Binbaşi, how could we ever survive without your insightful comments? After all, you represent the mighty Empire that thrives on our land, collecting taxes from our hardworking peasants and farmers.” His voice dripped with irony, “Truly, your appreciation for this arrangement is overwhelming.” Tahîr Beg’s words carried a sharp edge, hinting at the irony of Binbaşi’s lack of gratitude for the benefits he enjoyed as an envoy of the occupying power.

After hearing Tahîr Beg’s sardonic response, Binbaşi fell silent, visibly shocked, and his face turned pale. He seemed to need a moment to regain his composure, waiting for a few minutes before finally standing up. His voice trembled with the

impact of the conversation as he said, "Izin verirseniz, Beyefendi. Hoşça kal.” (With your permission, Sir) and then added, “Goodbye,” before he left the gathering.

Kawan walked through the same bridge, used the familiar staircase, and returned to the open yard. To his left were some rooms designated for guests and staff managing the villa’s affairs. As he glanced at the first room, he notices that its door latches were displaced, leaving it slightly ajar. Inside, a tall man with blond hair hunched over a big Russian iron box, searching anxiously for something.

Curiosity piquet, Kawan continued walking past the room, but to his surprise, a man emerged from another room. The man was dressed in a long gown and a cardigan, and his headwear was a long hat wrapped with vibrant fabrics, with a tassel hanging down from its peak. The man seemed bewildered to see Kawan there and hastily asked, “Are you looking for someone?”

Kawan replied with a question of his own, “Are you Major Soane?”

“No, I am Mansour. Who is Major Soane?” he asked.

“Ely . B . Soane, an English man of medium height with fair skin and a distinctive handlebar moustache,” Kawan explained.

"”Here, the only man with that description is Mirza Hossein Shirazi,” Mansour replied. Following the customary hospitality of Pasha’s villa, he kindly suggested, “Please, let’s first go to my room to rest a bit,” and escorted him with deference to the room. Once inside, he invited Kawan to sit on a wool rug at the upper side of the room as a sign of deference and placed a pillow behind him to ensure his comfort. Mansour then asked, “Would you like to try a Shisha?”

Kawan politely declined, replying, “Thank you, but I do not smoke.” His eyes wandered around the room, and he noticed some books neatly stacked on a niche wall to his left, among them a leather-bound Bible with a cross hanging above. Intrigued, he looked back at Mansour and asked, “Where do you come from?”

“Adela Xanm and I are from the same city,” Mansour replied with pride when asked about origins.

Kawan inquired, “Where is that city?”

“It’s Sina,” Mansour answered.

Curious about his purpose at the location, Kawan asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I am a messenger and Adela Xanm’s helper,” Mansour replied.

Kawan further probed, “Messages from where to where?”

“From Halabja to Sina and vice-versa. Besides that, I also handle my own business,” Mansour explained.

Wondering about the distance, Kawan asked, “Is Sina far away from here?”

“It takes five days on foot, one way,” Mansour informed.

With Major Soane still on his mind, Kawan questioned, “Where do you think Major Soane could be?”

“I have never heard of this name before. Here, there are only the Pasha’s family, myself, the guards, Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi, the servants, and Amin Efendi,” Mansour responded.

Questioning about a tall man with blond hair he saw, Kawan asked, “Who is that tall man?”

“Where did you see him?” Mansour asked.

“In the first room,” Kawam replied.

Mansour’s reaction seemed alarmed as he raised his voice, “In the first room!?”

“Yes,” Kawan confirmed.

Mansour chuckled and said, “It must be him!”

“Who? Major Soane,” Kawan asked, feeling a sense of anticipation.

“No, no,” Mansour corrected, The Efendi.

“Then Who?” Kawan asked.

Mansour replied, “The Efendi.”

“Which Efendi?” Kawan inquired further.

Mansour clarified, “The one who, as soon as anyone steps into the villa, greets them with a German old proverb. I’m sure he must have said it to you too.”

“I haven’t spoken to him, so what proverb?” Kawan questioned.

Mansour responded, “He says, ‘The mountain looks fine from afar, but how disappointing when under it.”

“Where did he learn that German proverb?” Kawan wandered.

“He is German himself,” Mansour revealed.

“What’s his name?” Kawan was surprised.

Mansour answered, “Amin Efendi.”

“Really? Germans also have names like Amin and Efendi?” Kawan asked, bewilderedly.

“I don’t know, but Amin isn’t his real name,” Mansour replied.

“What do you think his German name is?” Kawan inquired.

Mansour shrugged, “I don’t know.

“What does he do here?” Kawan questioned.

Mansour smiled mockingly and said, “Oh, his job, he fancies himself a doctor.”

“Is he a doctor?” Kawan asked.

“A doctor? No way! He just goes to Qayser-i-Hamîd Beg, buys Epson soap from Shawl’s shop, and sells it to people at a high price, claiming it’s some miraculous pain cure,” Mansour chuckled.

Kawan asked, “How does Adela Xanm allow him?”

Mansour responded, “She’s told him a few times to stop, but it doesn’t last long he starts again.”

Kawan then inquired, “How did he come here?”

“Osman Pasha brought him. He came with his brother, who calls himself Ali Efendi,” Mansour explained.

Curiously, Kawan asked, “Is his brother here too?”

“No. He is with Shêx Ali in Horaman,” Mansour replied.

Kawan further asked, “Are they Christians?”

“They used to be,” Mansour said ironically.

Kawan then questioned, “What are they now?”

“They are Muslims now. After converting to Islam, they choose new names for themselves,” Mansour explained.

Interested, Kawan asked, “Where did they come from?”

Mansour elaborated, “According to what they say, they lived with their father in Constantinople for a while, then moved to Baghdad, and finally came here.”

“Does he speak Kurdish? Can he speak it like you?” Kawan inquired.

Mansour replied, “Yes, he can speak Kurdish.”

Continuing with his questions, Kawan asked, “Does he pray?”

Mansour answered with a half-smile, “He does, but inconsistently.”

Kawan reassured, “It doesn’t matter.”

Mansour quickly added, “Don’t misunderstand me.”

“About what?” Kawan asked, curious about Mansour’s concerns.

Mansour explained, “I don’t mind that they are German and became Muslim. I am Chaldean.”

“Do you have anything against them?” Kawan asked.

Mansour said, “Nothing, but we are different.”

“In what way?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “They turned their back on their religion, while I am, up to now, holding onto my Christianity.”

“Have they been forced to become Muslim?” Kawan asked.

Mansour replied, “No, they did so willingly.”

“Have you ever been forced to abandon your religion?” Kawan inquired.

Mansour told him, “Scan my room, and you can find the answer to that question.” He became silent for a moment and then continued, “Up to now, no one has ever pressured me about my Christianity. In this town, Muslims, Jewish, Yarsanis, and Christians live together in peace. Thank God, people like Abdulqadir no longer exist in this area.”

“Who is Abdulqadir?” Kawan asked.

Mansour replied, “He was a menace.”

“What did he do?” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “He destroyed God’s houses.”

“He must have been more than just a menace,” Kawan said.

Mansour asked, “What do you think he was?”

“A predator,” Kawan replied.

Mansour said, “Only a predator?”

“What else could he have been?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “A tyrant, a destructor. Just imagine someone who destroyed God’s houses. What a fool he must have been!”

“What did he do?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “He raised all the churches in Sharazoor to the ground, killed as many Christians as he could, deported them, and looted their belongings.”

“In the name of what,” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “In the name of Islam.”

“Why?” Kawan questioned.

Mansour explained, “He was close-minded, unwilling to accept anyone else. If he hadn’t wielded power 200 years ago, this area would be far more diverse now.”

“Diverse how? Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “In terms of people and temples of worshipping God in different ways.”

“How?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “Imagine if that stubborn man didn’t exist back then, we could visit the Gull-Ambar village one early morning, feel its sauna-like heat, hear the priests’ altar bells, and the voice of Malas in the mosques. Then, going further downwards to the plain of Sharazoor, we could see the adorned villas, houses, halls, and markets, converse with nuns, shepherds, and farmers." He sighed with sadness, “Imagining what country we would live in now if that diversity remained. We could now enjoy seeing Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Yarsanis living in peace, each praying to one God in their own places of worship.”

Mansour brought the three fingers of his right hand to his forehead, then to his left and right shoulders, and finally opened his hand, placing it on his chest, saying, “Amen.” He sighed again and said, “We should be very grateful now.”

“For what?” Kawan asked

Mansour asked, “Imagine if instead of Lady Adela Xanm, a man like Abdulqadir was in power in this town and surroundings. Do you think you could now see such a diverse and harmonious community?”

“But Adela Xanm and her husband Osman Pasha are tribal leaders,” Kawan expressed.

Mansour explained, “It’s better to have tribal leaders that promote and protect co-existing diversity and respect the pride of the country than those men who exploit people and sell the country for their own family’s narrow interests. Imagine the heads of the Osman Empire and its management are all men, but here we have Adela Xanm, a lady who rules in a way that inspires all of us, and I’m sure if you stay longer, you too will be inspired.”

Once again, Kawan glanced at the books in the niche and the cross and asked, “What has Amin Efendi done to you that makes you feel harassed?”

Mansour replied, “Changing his religion.”

“So what?” Kawan said.

Mansour explained, “Don’t misunderstand me. We all belong to one God; the only difference between us is that we worship Him in different languages and cultures.”

“That means neither Amin Efendi nor his brother have done anything wrong?” Kawan said.

Mansour responded, “That is not what I mean.”

“Then what do you mean?” Kawan asked.

Mansour said, “He is jealous.”

“Jealous toward whom?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi.”

“What does he want from him?” Kawan asked.

Mansour replied, “He wants to annoy him.”

“Why,” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “Because Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi knows about medications.”

“So, what,” Kawan said.

Mansour explained, “He is worried that Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi will expose his impostor doctor profession.”

“Why?” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “That is how he thinks.”

“Why?” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “Because he is curious.”

“Curious about what?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “For example, the room that you spotted him in is not his own room.”

“Whose room?” Kawan asked.

Mansour responded, “Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi’s.”

“Who is Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi?” Kawan asked.

Mansour explained, “He is an Iranian Persian Shia Muslim man.”

“So, what was Amin Efendi doing in his room?” Kawan asked

Mansour explained, “Other than being curious, he went there to check Mirza Gholam Hossein Shirazi’s medications and belongings, as he knew the latter was not there. When Adela Xanm comes back from Sina, I will tell her all about him.”

“Don’t tell her,” Kawan advised.

Mansour asked, “Why?”

“Tell Amin Efendi himself; let him regret it,” Kawan said while standing up to leave.

Mansour stood up too and said, “You can stay here tonight in our guest room until tomorrow morning. There will be a public recitation in the town’s market, and we can attend it together.”

“Thank you, I have to go now,” Kawan responded.

Mansour asked, “Why are you in a harry?”

“I need to find Major Soane,” Kawan replied before bidding farewell and leaving the room.

**(Chapter -12)**

After leaving Mansour, the next day, Kawan went to the town's center and stood at the grand entrance of its bustling fruits and vegetables bazaar. The market was enclosed by sturdy red brick walls, rising three meters above the ground, forming a protective square. On either side, two rows of shops stood face-to-face, each adorned with practical awnings that shielded shoppers from the scorching summer sun and the elements of winter's rain and snow.

In front of each shop, wooden stalls showcased the season's products. The stalls were filled with figs, apples, tomatoes, eggplants, okras, cucumbers, grapes, watermelon, plums, apricots, pears, walnuts, dills, courgettes, Swiss chards, vine leaves, and their owners tried to rearrange them now and then to catch shoppers' eyes.

Besides some of the shops, there were ladies sitting on rugs and selling mountainous products, including qezwan (Pistacia eurycarpa Yalt), trş (Rhus coriaria L), qnr (Gundelia rosea), xertele (Nasturtium officinale R.Br.), barû (Quercus aegilops L), Gwêz (walnut), goezh (Crataegus azarolus), çeqale (Prunus argentea (Lam.), belaluk (Prunus microcarpa C. A. Mey.), tûtrk (Rubus sanctus (Schrelxr)), and more.

One vendor crafted tree branches into baskets, trays, crates, hampers, and wickers. Another sat with a big bunch of alfalfa stalks, skilfully making brooms. Others offered hand-held wooden weaving shuttles for sale. One vendor displayed bunches of different Rayhana (Basil), and their enchanting fragrances attracted more shoppers to linger.

Another vendor sold Do (a yogurt-based drink), Mast (plain yogurt), and Keşk (drained dry yogurt). You could find all the organic products you desired. In different corners, other vendors offered animal coats, bridles, sickles, plows, yokes, pitchforks, winnowing baskets, dibbers, scythes, harrows, satchels, and pruning knives.

At yet another stall, Semavars and metal and wooden cutlery were sold. Nearby, an artisan offered animal skin-butter churns, pack harnesses, and wool wave ropes. There was another stall with bota bags, stone roof-rollers, whetstones, ban-kut (hand-held soil-roof edge tampers), querns, wooden and metal mortar and pestles, bantons, rolling pins, sifters, and proofing clothes. Some other vendors specialized in cradles, swaddles, and straps.

“Mani genm weçene?” (How much is a unit of wheat,” a buyer asked a seller in the Kurdish local dialect.

The seller replied, “50 Fils.”

“Kemtr nawê?” (Is it possible to have it for less?) The buyer requested.

“Ne bra nawê,” (No brother), the seller responded.

The buyer asked, “Bo nawê?"(Why not?)

“Dest nadat, we-xwa xom mani çlu u pênc filsm pêdage” (I cannot afford it, by God, I paid 45 fils for it.”

A tea house was built on the rooftop terrace of one of the row shops, where you could see Ballambo as of the high mountain far away. If you looked down, you could see shoppers in the middle of the market coming and going. Sellers were engaging, holding Roman scales, and attentively measuring items.

Framers and orchardists with their loaded animals from near and far away areas of the town arrived one after another to sell their products to the shopkeepers. At the end of the day, some would go back with their coin purse jingling in the pocket of their baggy trousers. Others would return on their unloaded mules with empty stomachs and no money, as they had to pay their debts.

Kawan, ascended to the tea house through a stone staircase. He sat on one of the benches facing Ballambo Mountain. From there, he could overlook the bazaar and observe people's movement. Among the row of shops opposite, one shop captured his attention. Ladies, alone and with children, youth, and adults, entered it one after another. Some bought zîra (cumin), hêl (cardamon), zerdeçewe (turmeric), darçînî (cinnamon), zancafîl (ginger), bnêşt (baneh chewing gum), and Beharat (the spice blend). A family of four made a purchase but lingered, waiting for the shop owner, who was an elderly man with a long white beard and a serene demeanour. He was writing on a small piece of paper, folding it, and calmly handing it to one of them. She kissed the paper carefully and put it in her pocket before leaving.

“What he writes for them, if it doesn't make things happen, it gives hope. We all need something to rely on, something to give us hope and keep us going,” a man coincidentally commented on what Kawan was observing.

Kawan turned his face toward the man and asked, 'What does he write?'

The man replied, “Amulets.”

The sky was as serene as the talisman’s face. When gazing at it, you could gain the hope that what is unattainable on the ground can be achieved up there. Kawan’s gaze was distracted by the sound of horse hooves. Suddenly, he spotted a tall and dapper man entering the bazaar through its gate. He carried a German Mauser rifle on his shoulder, exuding an air of confidence and authority. Following closely behind him were three riders on white, black, and brown horses, moving gracefully in a rhythmic trot with their heads bobbing elegantly. Their flowing manes danced and swayed around their necks, adding an aura of beauty and majesty to their every step. They neighed softly and seemed to have been trained to stand still as they halted at the centre of the bazaar, side by side, exuding a quiet and composed presence.

The tall man stood in front of the horses, facing the centre of the bazaar. The shopkeepers and shoppers came out from their shops and joined others, standing along the walls, watching the scene unfold. Kawan and the others in the tee house also stood, observing attentively.

The tall man lowered his Mauser from his shoulder as the riders tightened the horses’ reins firmly in their hands. Carefully, he coked the bolt, loaded a round, pressed the trigger, and fired a bullet in a safe direction. The horses spooked and bulged their eyes in response.

The tall man then addressed the crowd loudly, “Dear, we are here today as before, to read out another piece of poetry of Sir Tahîr Beg,” He pulled out a bunch of papers from his jacket and Began reciting, “She is as red, white, and subtle as rhubarb, with cheeks as watery, wet, and fresh as cherries."

“Lovely, very well written, it can only be written by you,” remarked the man beside Kawan, absorbed in the words.

The tall man continued, "Her delicate body, what shall I say, is like crystal."

“That is the one, that crystal has killed me,” The man beside Kawan reacted, lost in his own thoughts.

The tall man read on, “The perfume of her breath and breast intoxicates the mind.”

“Because of Xamze (the name of his lover) do I have a head left to be intoxicated,” the man beside Kawan deeply sighed before saying it?

The tall man, continued, “Her beauty adorned with Habesha marks, sizzles the lover's heart."

“It’s beyond the sizzling; come and see my ashed heart,” the man beside Kawan commented.

The tall man read further, "The sword of her eyebrow cuts the chest like a diamond.”

“I wish someone could cut my heart with that sword into many slices,” the man beside Kawan shared his emotions.

Kawan turned his face towards the man beside him and asked, “It seems like you have sorrow in your heart?”

“My God, deprive me of four main religions if I do not wholeheartedly wish for that tall‌ man to aim a bullet at my heart,” the man beside Kawan expressed his pain.

Kawam asked him, “Why?”

“I am expressing this fervent desire because of my unhappiness and strained relationship with my lover,” the man responded.

Kawan inquired, “What did she do?”

“She left me,” the man replied.

Kawan then asked, “Do you come here every week?”

“I do, but I have never endured pain like I am experiencing today. It makes me reminisce about my past pain. If I stay any longer, I will die,” the man responded.

Kawan wanted to make a farewell, but the man interrupted him by asking, “Do you have the same problem as I do?”

Kawan smiled and replied, “I do. I am looking for a man.”

They bid farewell to each other, left the tea house, and each took a different direction.

**(Chapter -13)**

Several years had passed since last events.

Kawan steadily approached the heart of the town. In the distance, the crescendo of claps and chants resonated through the air. As he drew nearer to the centre, he noticed two men positioned at different angles, each passionately addressing distinct crowds of men and women who encircled them.

Among the orators stood a young man dressed in labourer’s attire, sporting a Russian pilotka hat, clutching a piece of paper. With fervour, he declared, “Down with the monarchy system! The pact between the Iraqi government and Great Britain merely Begets oppression. Let us bring an end to feudalism and embrace the principle of equality!” With a decisive motion, he turned the paper in hand and posed a resounding question to the assembly, “What is it that you desire?”

“Land reform,” responded the assemblage in unison.

The speaker inquired again, “What is it that you desire?”

“The cessation of oppression,” came the unified reply from the crowd.

Once more, the speaker questioned, “What is it that you desire?”

“The removal of the prime minister, “the crowd affirmed.

Confidently, the speaker folded his paper, cast a glance across the gathering, and proclaimed, “Under the emblem of the red banner and guided by the leadership of our communist party, bolstered by the support of the Soviet Union, a fortress for labourers, farmers, and artisans, our triumph stands assured.”

“Guaranteed…guaranteed, with the support of the Soviet Union, a fortress for labourers, farmers, and tailors, “the crowd chanted in unison.

The speaker declared, “Our unwavering course follows the footsteps of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.”

The crowd raised a diverse array of tools: pickaxes, sickles, crowbars, mattocks, spades, mallets, towels, groovers, concrete mixing trays, hammers, books, and pens,“ They echoed the slogan, “Our unwavering course follows the footsteps of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin.”

On the opposing side, a figure donned in Kurdish attire, complete with a camane u Mshkî (a mixed fabric headwear), spoke with a hoarse voice to his followers. “In the name of God, and invoking all tribes and clans of this region, we beseech the mighty king of Iraq to grant the rights of the Kurds,” he said. His assembly fervently responded, “Kurdistan or death! Let it never be uttered that the Kurds have perished. The Kurds endure; our devotion is to Kurdistan.”

The two speakers and their groups engaged in an intense competition, engaging in a duel of voices and applause. Additional participants joined their ranks, swelling their numbers. After a time, each group embarked separately, maintaining a distance between them, chanting slogans while marching toward the police headquarters located in the elevated district known as Sera neighbourhood.

At the headquarters, a gathering of police officers clad in lengthy khaki jackets of green hue and knee-length trousers awaited. Belts were cinched around their waists, while starched puttees rose to their knees. Completing their attire were well-worn black shoes featuring a flat profile. Adorning their heads were green sidara hats, and ammunition belts crossed their waists diagonally, with two rows intersecting their chests. Browning pistols were holstered at their sides, while their fingers remained poised on the triggers of Mauser rifles. Their stances resembled those readying themselves for a hunt, each officer emerging from the headquarters to encircle the perimeter while maintaining a noticeable distance from one another.

The marchers’ chants persisted: “Our unwavering course follows the footsteps of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin,” and The Kurds endure; our devotion is to Kurdistan.”

The sound of a police officer’s rifle reverberated, quickly multiplying into two shots, three, and more. In unison, the police officers squeezed their triggers. With each bullet discharged, the force of their rifles reverberated through their bodies, unsettling the position of their hats. Empty bullet cases leap and fell to the ground, kicking up clouds of dust.

The fear of shooting and the sound of slogans mixed. The marchers scattered all around to escape. The police, still with their bodies bent, pursued to arrest them. Kawan, too, ran away. While running, by chance, he encountered a woman. They both continued running until they reached the Jewish neighbourhood, where in its labyrinthine alleys, they managed to disappear from the view of the police.

The distance between the red bricks and mud-made houses in the alleys was so close that one could easily jump from one side to another. Their roofs seemed as if they were scared of something; wherever they could, they merged and embraced each other. To determine how many houses were there, one had to go to the roofs and look down into the open yards to believe that there were around 70 to 80 Jewish households.

Some of the houses had balconies overlooking the bazaar, where ladies were weaving wool and looking after babies in cradles, and men were reading Torah. They sometimes, through the lines of bamboo blinds covering them, checked their front street now and then.

Kawan and the woman stood a bit in front of one of the houses, looking perturbed. He gazed at the Hamsa sign hanging on the front of the house’s wooden door. The woman quickly scanned the alley before leading him into the house. She, with one hand, adjusted her tichel and, with the other, closed the door behind her, “Please… please come in,” she warmly welcomed him before leading him to a room through a veranda. A mezuzah was affixed to the right side of the door’s frame at shoulder level.

Suddenly, the squeak of a door opening was heard, “Aster, my daughter Aster,” came the thin voice of a lady. Aster left the room and returned with an old, perturbed lady. The lady astonishingly glanced at Kawan, then turned her face towards Aster and said, “When the shooting started, I was on the balcony,” With a furrowed brow, she moved closer to Aster. “Are you OK? What is that blood on your tichel?” She quickly left the room and, after a few minutes, returned with an engraved brass water ewer pitcher, a basin, and two bags-one with some cotton balls and wound dressing and the other some ashes. While tending to Aster’s head wound, she muttered to herself in Hebrew, “Ani lo Ma’amin… ani lo Ma’amin” (I can’t believe it). She fell silent for a moment and then turned to Aster, asking, “Who’s this boy?”

Aster looked at Kawan before responding, “Granma Zulma, he is a friend of Heme.”

“Where is Heme himself?” Zulma asked, her voice tinged with worry.

Aster replied, “I’m worried about him, too. We were together, they shot at us, and we were separated from each other.”

“Why did they shoot at you?” Zulma inquired.

Aster replied in a serious tone, “We were at the demonstration.”

“Why did you go?” Zulma pressed further.

Aster responded earnestly, “If we didn’t go, this stressful life wouldn’t change.”

“My daughter, we are the minority; we can only manage to protect ourselves,” Zulma replied.

Aster explained, “So what? Let us be the minority. We need a system that doesn’t differentiate between being the minority and the majority - a system that views Muslims, Ezidis, Jewish, Yarsanis, and Christians equally. Look how, under the name of God and through the Monarchy system, they have divided the world; how they, using different excuses, have pitted humanity against each other; how they have sanctified ethnicities, lands, and ranks; how they have created the hell we live in.”

“You stand against people too,” Zulma responded.

Aster replied, “We don’t stand against them.”

Zulma inquired, “Whom do you stand against?”

“Stand against the King of Baghdad,” Aster responded.

Zulma replied, “The King is the King.”

“Let him be the King,” Aster said.

Zulma asked, “Why? what has he done?”

Aster replied, “He decides on our behalf.”

Zulma inquired, “What does he do?”

“He sells out the country’s oil,” Aster responded.

Zulma asked, “He gives it to whom?”

“To Great Britain,” Aster responded.

Zulma inquired, “Why?”

“For his crown not to drop and his throne not to shake,” Aster responded.

Zulma asked, “Who will drop it?”

“We,” Aster responded proudly.

Zulma asked, “Who will shake it?”

“We,” Aster replied.

Zulma inquired, “Why?”

“To topple his authority, “Aster responded.

Zulma asked, “Why?”

“Why should we not? We are working hard,” Aster replied.

Zulma asked, “If you are working, what does he do?”

“Living in an ivory tower; eating, drinking, entertaining himself, and when exhausted from all of this, sleeping in his royalty bedroom, “Aster responded.

Zulma responded, “He is the King, it’s always been like this and will be in the future.”

“Let him be whoever he wants to be, but not at our expense and drudgery,” Aster reacted.

Zulma asked, “How can it be?”

“Why not,” Aster responded.

Zulma explained, “If your rights and drudgery are not taken, what would be left for the King?”

“Nothing, absolutely nothing,” Aster confirmed.

Zulma, in a softer voice, asked, “Has Heme taught you all of these?”

“No, I love him, I wish to remain alive until I see his ketubah with my own eyes,” Aster responded lovingly.

Zulma asked, “Then who has taught you?”

“That man,” Aster replied.

Zulma looked at Kawan and said, “This man?”

“No,” Aster responded.

Zulma asked, “Then who!?”

“The man whose photo is above our heads,” Aster responded.

Zulma raised her head and looked at the photo, and said, “May Yahweh (God) protects him.”

Aster laughed.

Zulma reacted, “Why are you laughing?”

“He is not alive,” Aster explained.

Zulma clarified, “I don’t mean that round and bold head.”

“Who do you mean? “Aster inquired.

Zulma clarified, “I mean, dear Heme, may Yahweh protect him for the sake of the current Passover.”

Kawan was listening, intermittently looking at them and the photo. It was the photo of Vladimir Lenin in a framed glass, hung high in a corner of the room.

“Taq…taq…squeak…squeak,” It was the sound of the door from which Zulma had entered earlier. It was a small wooden door which linked both Aster and Zulma’s verandas together. Aster, Zulma, and Kawan, were on the veranda.

“Alia? Please come in,” Aster called out, but when the door opened, it was Isaac, Alia’s husband.

Isaac anxiously looked at them and hoarsely said, “I just came back from Qayser-i-Hamîd Beg. People said that Heme had been arrested by the police.”

Zulma raised her head, furrowed her brow, breathed deeply, looked at Linin’s photo, and squinted her eyes to see him clearly, saying, “Yahweh, for the sake of this holly Shabbat, protect him.”

“Amen, amen, “Aster and Isaac responded.

**(Chapter -14)**

As time passed and new events unfolded, Kawan found himself standing before the unlocked front door of the synagogue in the town's Jewish neighbourhood. He eased it open, peered in, and caught sight of the Rabbi, the Cantor, and another individual in the open courtyard. They were in a hurry, gathering Sifrei Torah (Torah scrolls), Ner Tamid (Eternal light), Menorah, and various religious articles. Upon spotting him, their expressions turned anxious, as they hadn’t anticipated anyone seeing them. The trio exchanged glances with one another, then briefly looked at Kawan before lowering their heads and returning to their collection tasks.

He grew increasingly perplexed and stepped away from the front door. As he neared the town centre, a vibrant hub of activity greeted him, unlike anything he had witnessed in the town before.

Within the heart of the town, a throng of people bustled about, engaged in a lively exchange. He approached a gathering where a man and a woman had laid out an assortment of household items for sale on the ground before them. It struck him how human beings sought delight in discovering each other’s hidden treasures; even those uninterested in purchasing were drawn to spectate.

He overheard a potential buyer inquire, “Do you happen to possess any jewellery for sale?” The sellers promptly replied, “Regrettably, no.”

Curiosity piqued, the buyer probed further, “May I ask why?”

With unwavering certainty, the sellers responded, “In our close-knit community, none of us is willing to part with our jewellery at a low price.”

“How much might this beautifully adorned buffet cost?” another buyer queried, indicating a piece of furniture.

The woman, taking charge of the response, stated, “It is priced at 50 fils.”

Curiosity didn’t wane as the buyers asked about a pair of chairs, “And these two chairs?”

The woman replied, “They are available for 10 fils each.”

Kawan decided to explore another group and overheard a buyer’s question to a seller, “Could you enlighten me on the cost of that bamboo blind?”

“Of course,” the seller answered, “It is priced at 15 fils.”

Inquisitiveness led yet another buyer to ask, “And what might be the cost of that clay water cooler?”

The seller promptly responded, “It is priced at 10 fils.”

Turning his attention to a collection of duvets, rugs, pillows, and assorted bedding, a buyer inquired, “How much for these items?”

The seller’s reply came without hesitation, “The complete set is priced at 25 fils.”

A different buyer was intrigued by a mortar and pestle, asking, “And the cost of that mortar and pestle?”

The seller disclosed, “It can be yours for 11 fils.”

Kawan observed an elderly couple who appeared to be tailors, selling their sewing equipment. A potential buyer approached and inquired, “What is the cost of your treadle sewing machine, along with all your needles, threads, thimbles, scissors, measuring tapes, and the rest?”

The seller replied, “100 fils.”

The buyer decided, “I’ll buy them.” Then added, “What about your kitchen utensils?”

The seller considered and responded, “With your sewing items, the total comes to 120 fils.”

Meanwhile, Kawan shifted his attention to another group, where a fabric merchant had attracted a crowd. A buyer asked, “How many rolls of fabrics are there?”

The merchant promptly answered, “50 rolls.”

Curious about the price, the buyer inquired, “And how much do you ask for them?”

The seller stated, “Two dinars.”

Further examining the wares, the buyer questioned, “And what’s the price for those large tea boxes and sugar bags?”

The seller responded, “One dinar.”

As Kawan moved through the market, he found himself amidst another gathering. A buyer directed a question to an elderly couple, “What do you have in that bundle of cloth?”

The couple replied, “Three pairs of men’s trousers and jackets.”

The buyers carefully inspected the contents of the bundle and then asked, “How much are you asking for these?”

The sellers replied, “20 Fils. “

In an attempt to bargain due to their used condition, the buyer remarked, “They appear to be second-hand and quite worn.”

Undeterred, the sellers inquired, “What’s your offer?”

The buyer haggled, “I’d offer 10 Fils.”

After a moment’s consideration, the sellers agreed, “Alright, you can take them.”

The market buzzed with activity, captivating not only Kawan but also many others who were entranced by this unique spectacle in the town. Amidst the lively interactions and exchanges, Kawan couldn’t help but feel spellbound by the unfolding scenes, which seemed unprecedented in the town’s memory.

As he continued to observe, Kawan stumbled upon yet another conversation. A buyer approached a seller and inquired, “Do you have a house for sale?”

The seller’s response was straightforward, “No.”

Perplexed, the buyer questioned further, “Are you a tenant then?”

The seller confidently negated, “No.”

Confused by the seller’s stance, the buyer pressed on, “Then why aren’t you selling it? What are your plans for it?”

The seller’s response was plain, “I have no plans.”

Intrigued by this answer, the buyer persisted, “But why? Why won’t you sell it?”

The seller explained, “I can’t sell it.”

Puzzled, the buyer sought clarity, “And why is that?”

The seller replied with resignation, “It will be taken by the state.”

The buyer inquired further, “And what does the state intend to do with it?”

The seller concluded, “It will be confiscated.” The vibrant atmosphere of the market continued to weave a tapestry of stories, leaving Kawan and the other onlookers engrossed in the unfolding event. Curiosity now extends beyond the seller’s individual situation as Kawan inquired, “Is it only your house that faces confiscation?”

“No,” the seller responded.

The buyer asked, “Whose houses, then?”

“All of us. From now on, all the Jewish houses in this town will be owned by the state of Iraq,” the seller explained.

The buyer asked, “What will the state do with them?”

“It will put them up for sale,” the seller said.

The buyer asked, “And what will it do with the money?”

“What money? It will all go to the state’s treasury,” the seller responded.

The buyer inquired further, “How did they allow you to sell these items?”

“I wish they hadn’t,” the seller said after taking a deep breath.

The buyer asked, “Why?”

“When I sell my house contents, I feel as if I am stabbing my heart with a dagger,” the seller responded.

The buyer asked, “Why?”

“They are cherished heirlooms, used by me and my wife, our children, and our parents and grandparents,” the seller responded.

The buyer said, “You feel sad?”

“Very much so. Not just sadness but also fear, loneliness, and nostalgia. I don’t understand why I ended up having a fire sale for these items so easily! They will be taken away, and I will never see them again, “the seller lamented.

The buyer asked, “What could be a solution?”

“There could have been one,” the seller responded.

The buyer asked, “What would that have been?”

“Leave the items at home where they were,” the seller replied.

The buyer asked, “Why?”

“To demonstrate my trustworthiness and gratitude,” the seller answered.

The buyer asked, “Why?”

“Because these items played a role in keeping my life happy,” the seller explained.

Perplexed, the buyer inquired, “What have they done?”

“They ensured I never experienced shortages, instability, or loneliness,” the seller responded.

The buyer attempted to comfort him, saying, “Don’t feel fear.”

“I wish I could feel only fear,” the seller responded.

The buyer asked, “What other feelings do you have?”

“I feel like I have committed a crime,” the seller confessed.

Quizzically, the buyer asked, “What crime?”

“The crime of detaching my children,” the seller replied.

The buyer inquired, “Why do you intend not to take them with you?”

“No, I will take them,” the seller clarified.

The buyer said, “So, what is your worry?”

“I’m concerned about making them leave their dreams here,” the seller explained.

The buyer offered comfort, “Don’t be scared.”

“I am not just scared but…” the seller trailed off.

The buyer asked, “Is something else bothering you?”

“I am anxious,” the seller expressed.

The buyer asked, “What for?”

“My life is on the brink of change; the very air I breathe will soon belong to another land. My dwelling will shift elsewhere, unfamiliar alleys and streets awaiting my footsteps. My eyes shall behold a new palette of colours while foreign tongues and melodies shall grace my ears. Even the songs of birds will differ,” the seller explained.

Curious, the buyer asked, “Won’t you find joy in these new experiences?”

“No,” replied the seller definitively.

The buyer pressed further, “How can you be so sure?”

“Because a sense of melancholy weighs upon me,” admitted the seller.

Perplexed, the buyer inquired, “Why so?”

“Thus far, every facet of this town, its people included, has bestowed happiness upon me,” the seller clarified.

From time to time, Jewish families would transfer their household belongings to the marketplace. These items, once intimate, were now displayed for anyone’s view and purchase. As the day wore on, more and more people flocked in, and more buyers from neighbouring villages flocked in, causing the items to dwindle in number.

Buyers could be observed carrying their newly acquired possessions, be it in hand, upon their backs, or atop their animals. Mules, horses, and donkeys were laden with the heavy cargo, one load after another, preparing to depart the town.

Seated in a corner, a middle-aged Jewish man-also a seller- meticulously folded a fabric tissue that safeguarded his earnings from the day’s sales. This was his last earnings within the town’s boundaries. As Kawan approached him, their eyes met, and the man hastened his folding. He clutched the bundled fabric close, a subtle gesture signifying his determination to shield his hard-earned money.

“Have you managed to sell all your belongings?” Kawan inquired.

The man looked at him for a moment and replied, “Everything has been sold to you. I can only hope that you won’t find yourself compelled to sell them to someone else.”

Curious, Kawan probed, “What leads you to think that way? How do you feel about this?”

The man lowered his head with a hint of sorrow and confessed, “I feel as though I’m being stripped of my possessions.” He then raised his head and turned the question to Kawan, asking, “And you? How do you feel?”

Kawan responded with empathy, “I share the same sentiment as you.”

Perplexed, the man inquired, “But If you're not Jewish and not undergoing the same emigration as we are, why do you experience the same emotions?”

“I wish I could emigrate like you,” Kawan admitted.

Confused, the man asked, “What do you mean?”

“Last night, not just me, but the entire population of this town was compelled to emigrate,” Kawan revealed.

Bewildered, the man questioned, “Emigrate to where?”

“In my dream,” Kawan clarified.

With a smirk, the man quipped, “Well, if you dreamt it, then you should already know how I feel.”

Kawan responded, “I just wanted to understand how you go through the real process of emigration- to confirm that your emotions resonate with mine."

The man asked, “What emotions are those?”

“The overwhelming sensation of being uprooted from one’s homeland,” Kawan explained.

The man retorted, “You’re witnessing my departure from your own perspective.”

“In my dream last night, I didn’t leave in this manner,” Kawan shared.

Curious, the man inquired, “How did it happen in your dream?”

“It was an abrupt departure. There was no time to pack our belongings or bid farewell to one another,” Kawan recounted.

The man continued, “What unfolded?”

“Women were separated from husbands, families torn apart. There was no one to come to our aid, no helping hand,” Kawan explained.

In an attempt to offer solace, the man said, “I hope no lives were lost.”

“I hope that wasn’t the case,” Kawan replied.

Bewildered, the man asked, “Why do you say that?”

“I found myself running over the bodies of the injured and the deceased within the town,” Kawan disclosed.

With a hopeful tone, the man said, “I hope you were able to make it back to the town.”

“I hope that wasn’t the case,” Kawan responded.

Curious, the man inquired, “What transpired then?”

“Some lost their lives, while others were left injured or without a home, seeking refuge in foreign lands,” Kawan replied.

The man asked, “Where did they seek refuge?”

“In a distant country,” Kawan answered.

The man further inquired, “Do you recall the name of that country?”

“I don’t know,” Kawan admitted.

With a sense of optimism in his voice, the man said, “I hope you eventually managed to retrieve your belongings from your home.”

“I hope that was the case,” Kawan replied.

The man inquired, “What had happened?”

“Bombardment razed half of the town’s houses into the ground,” Kawan explained.

The man, his tone filled with hopelessness, asked, “I anticipate you still managed to rescue some of the house contents from under the debris.”

“I wish that was the case,” Kawan sighed.

The man inquired further, “What about the remaining ones?”

“Many house contents were destroyed under the debris,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What about the remaining ones?”

“Most of them were looted,” Kawan responded.

The man inquired, “Who looted them?”

“I wish I knew,” Kawan replied.

The man probed, “How did you not know?”

“Even if I did know, I didn’t want to witness it,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “So, there is nothing left for you?”

“A little,” Kawan acknowledged.

The man inquired, “What did you do with them?”

“They provided two households with a lorry,” Kawan explained.

The man inquired, “Who?”

“The officials of that country,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “In where?”

“In their country,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“To return to our town,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Why?”

“To retrieve whatever remained from our house contents,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“For virtue signalling, to cover their lootings,” Kawan explained.

The man inquired, “Where did you take them to.”

“To that country,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Where was it?”

“As I mentioned earlier, I don’t know where it was,” Kawan responded.

The man consoled him, saying, “It was still good you could go back.”

“What was good!” Kawan disapprovingly responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“They sent a soldier with me. As soon as I got off of the lorry and entered our house's open yard, he followed me and didn’t leave me for a second, accompanying me from one room to another, and didn’t allow me to load what I wanted,” Kawan explained.

The man inquired, “Why?”

“He said there was not enough space in the back of the lorry,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“One lorry was not enough for two households; it was too small,” Kawan explained.

The man inquired, “Why didn’t you implore him to allow you?”

“I did, but it didn’t yield anything,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “And then?”

“Prophet appeared and helped me!” Kawan exclaimed.

The man, perplexedly, asked, “How!?”

“I told the soldier there is one small TV in that room, it will be my last item, I promise,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Did he allow you?”

“He started trailing behind me with his gun, saying: No…no…no, but as we entered the room, he suddenly became quiet!” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Why?”

“I think he was jump-scared,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “From you?”

“No,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Of whom?”

“Prophet Imam Ali,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“The prophet was standing still above our heads. He was holding a Zulfiqar sword (double-edged sword) in his hands. His lion was sitting by his feet with a confident gaze, its posture appeared as though it was poised, ready to heed a command to strike,” Kawan explained.

The man inquired, “And then?”

Kawan explained, “I stretched my hands towards the TV to hold it while expecting the soldier to restrain my hands at any second, but…,” Kawan explained.

The man interrupted him, “And then?”

“Before carrying the TV, I turned my face towards the soldier, I saw him froze in surprise, but…” Kawan added.

The man interrupted again and asked, “But what?”

“He was intermittently watching me and Imam Ali,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Did you carry the TV?”

“I did,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What about the soldier? Did he say anything?”

“Nothing at all! He calmly followed me towards the lorry,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why you didn’t load more items?”

“I didn’t want to be unfair to the other household with whom I shared the lorry,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What did you do to the TV?”

“I kept it on my lap in front of the lorry throughout the way back to that country,” Kawan responded.

The man said, “You are indebted to Imam Ali.”

“I didn’t expect him to help me have the TV,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Who?”

“Imam Ali,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“Because he wasn’t him!” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Who was he?”

“It was his photo,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What was that photo doing in there? Are you Shia?”

“No,” Kawan responded.

The man inquired, “Then why!?”

“I bought it in the market when I was a child,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Why?”

“Just for beauty, I nailed it to the wall above the TV,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Just for beauty?”

“No, for his bravery, too,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Bravery of whom?”

“Of Imam Ali and that of his lion,” Kawan responded.

The man said, “Neither Imam Ali nor his lion has been around for a long time.”

“Not been around, but a photo of them was at our home,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “How did you feel?”

“I felt a sense of bravery,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Whose bravery?”

“As I mentioned, it was the bravery of Imam Ali, his lion, and even my own. For the first time, I realised how a photo can create such a powerful deterrence. Maybe it was for the same reason that burglars have never had the courage to rob our house. What was even more interesting was that…,” Kawan tried to explain.

The man interrupted him, “What was that?”

“It was the TV,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What was it?”

"I was thinking about the kind of films that I used to watch and whether I would be able to watch them in that country, too," Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Did you see them?”

“Nothing except praise and accolades for the leaders, alongside discussions of conflict and combat,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Who were the leaders?”

"I don’t know, but what I know about them is that they were wearing black and some of them white turbans, robes, tunics, and long cloaks, and growing long beards. They all seemed to relish appearing on TV- spending hours conversing with radio stations and delivering speeches from pulpits, especially on Fridays," Kawan explained.

The man asked, “You mentioned combat, which combat?”

“I don’t know, but what I know is that they were trying to occupy a country, but they couldn’t,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “You didn’t tell me how you left the house in the lorry?”

“With a heavy heart, I left my house's front door behind, carrying a deep sorrow with me,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Did you feel sorrow?”

“Very,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“I was obliged to leave many items behind; I don't know why I left them - whether to be stolen, eventually dusted by time, or to face the possibility of the house collapsing and burying them one day,” Kawan responded.

The man showed empathy, “I can tell you’re feeling down about it.”

“Yes,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “It was unpleasant?”

“Yes, but I was still lucky!” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Can anything be more unpleasant than that?”

“Yes,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What was it?”

“Some men were sobbing,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“One of them mentioned that his home was completely obliterated; amid the wreckage, he could only identify the lifeless body of his cat,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “Why?”

“I don’t know, it was not only his cat who was dead,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What else was dead?”

"From cats to dogs, cows, sheep, and horses, to chickens, roosters, pigeons, and sparrows—death seemed to touch them all, scattered across houses, neighbourhoods, streets, pavements, and roads. What were once spaces for both humans and animals had transformed into solemn graveyards for these creatures,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What about the other men?”

"One of them mentioned that he had parked his lorry in front of his house before fleeing, but now it was nowhere to be found, and he couldn't fathom why," Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What did you do to the items you collected?”

“I placed them in a tent,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “In where?”

"In a tent at a camp near the city in the country where we lived," Kawan responded.

The man asked,” Then what did you do to them?”

“I took them to a market in that city,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “Why?”

“I decided to fire-sell them,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “To whom?”

“To the city’s residents,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “It was not nice?”

“Very much, but,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “But what?”

“There was worse than that,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What was it?”

“I could manage to gain some money out of the fire-sell, but the majority of people couldn’t obtain anything,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “What did you need the money for?”

“Money was indispensable for fulfilling needs like eating, drinking, obtaining clothes, and even for travelling by car from the camp to the city's market,” Kawan explained.

The man asked, “It seemed that you had a bad dream?”

“Very, but,” Kawan responded.

The man asked, “But what?”

“There is worse than my dream,” Kawan responded.

The man asked,” What is that?”

“Is that you are emigrating in this daylight,” Kawan responded.

The man said, “I know, but.”

“But what?” Kawan asked.

The man responded, “There is something worse than this.”

“What is that?” Kawan asked.

The man continued, “It's the possibility of your dream coming true one day.”

“This means we both understand each other now?” Kawan asked.

The man responded, “Certainly, but ...”

“But what,” Kawan asked.

The man remarked, "Had I not paid heed to your dream, I wouldn't grasp the level of comfort I'm experiencing at this moment."

After this exchange, they both departed from the market.

**(Chapter -15)**

The town had never witnessed such a significant influx of Ford and pickup trucks. At the town’s entrance, a group of enthusiastic individuals eagerly awaited their arrival. As the vehicles appeared on the horizon, these welcoming figures started waving blue fabric flags as a gesture of hospitality and advanced towards the moving approaching convoy.

Upon their arrival, the waiting group boarded the vehicles and guided them into the heart of the town. The noisy beeping of the vehicles drew the attention of countless children who had never experienced such a cacophony of sounds before.

The vehicles continued to emit their beeping sounds, prompting the children to run alongside them, clapping, whistling, and shouting with excitement. They occasionally managed to catch up with the cars, eagerly touching any part of the vehicle’s body they could reach. Some even hung on the rear bumper of the trucks destined for the Jewish neighbourhood. As they approached the neighbourhood, the number of children joining in the excitement continued to grow.

The Jewish households carefully packed their cherished belongings, carrying them out of their homes and placing them in the trunks of cars and the backs of trucks now parked in the neighbourhood's narrow alleys.

Kwêxa Waisy, the respected headman, and his wife, Xejê, were waiting near the vehicles. Aster approached them with a heartfelt apology, saying, “Kwêxa Waisy, Xejê, forgive me.”

“You are forgiven,” Kwêxa Waisy and Xejê replied, their forgiveness sincere and gracious. Alia, Xejê, Kwêxa Waisy, and Zulma exchanged forgiveness among themselves.

In his distinctive local accent, Kwêxa Waisy addressed Isaac, Aster, Zulma, and Alia, saying, “God knows, Xejê and I have never endured such sorrow in our lives before. May God guide us through these trying times, and I hope for a positive outcome for all of you. Let's hope we can reunite soon.”

Issac looked at Kwêxa Waisy and Xejê, saying: “Please forgive me.”

“You are forgiven,” Kwêxa Waisy responded, and they exchanged a customary kiss.

Many people had gathered in the Jewish neighbourhood, some to bid farewell and others to witness this poignant moment, knowing it would be the last day to see the Jewish community in the town. Soon, they would no longer encounter them in alleys, bazaars, at funerals, or during festivals.

The realization dawned that soon, half of the Qayser-i-Hamîd Beg would be emptied of its Jewish sellers, and buyers would be absent. It would also be the last opportunity for Jewish boys and girls in love with Muslim, Yarsanis and Christian counterparts to exchange their final glances, whisper their last love words, share their last gifts, breathe their last romantic moments, and shed their last tears of love for each other.

Soon, there would be no one left in the town’s synagogue to face Jerusalem and recite the Amidah prayer.

Isaac, seated in the back of one of the pickup trucks, turned to his wife, Alia, and inquired, “Have we all boarded the car?”

Alia, after a quick check, confirmed, “Yes, we’re all here.”

Isaac then asked, “Where is Aster?”

Alia replied, “She’s up front in our truck with Heme.”

Isaac, unable to see the front, said, “Alright, I’ll keep an eye on the kids.”

Addressing his son and daughter, Benjamin and Ayla, he cautioned, “Benjamin, Ayla, don’t stand still.”

Curious about their destination, Alia inquired, "Where is this truck taking us?”

Isaac explained, “We’re heading to Baghdad, from where we’ll eventually make our way to Israel.”

Alia then asked, “How will we get there?”

Isaac responded, “By plain.”

As the convoy comprising cars and trucks departed from the Jewish neighbourhood, they attracted the attention of numerous onlookers lining both sides of the road. Some bid their final farewells verbally, while others waved their hands in a sombre yet heartfelt gesture. Many people stood on both sides of the road, watching the convoy pass through the town centre. Some verbally and others waiving their hands bid their last farewell to them.

Jewish children in the back of trucks and in the cars couldn’t rest in excitement, showing themselves to their Muslim, Yarsanis and Christian school and alley friends, who were running behind them, some bumping into the back of the trucks and cars, fell over the ground, rose again and run to them again, and bump again, doing so until they became breathless.

Asher, a Jewish boy seated in the back of one of the trucks, spotted his friend running behind the cars. He quickly stood up and excitedly shouted, “Awla… Awla.”

Awla, who seemed to be searching for him, soon spotted Asher and joyfully waved his hands in response.

“Will you come to our house in Israel?” Asher eagerly asked Awla.

Breathing heavily from the exertion of running, Awla replied, “Yes, I will.”

“Come on, run faster,” Asher urged him.

Awla asked him, “Is it nice to be in that car?”

“Very, very,” Asher responded while laughing.

Awla, while still running, put his hand in the pocket of his baggy trousers, put out a wooden slingshot, and raised it towards Asher, “What shall I do with your slingshot?”

“Keep it for yourself,” Asher responded.

As they departed the town, Jewish men, women, and children gazed around as if it were their first time there, but with the heavy realization that it might be their last. Inside the trucks and cars, one person reminisced about seeing their grandparents strolling together in the bustling bazaar, while another contemplated an uncertain future—wondering about their new homes, neighbours, workplaces, and the unfamiliar streets they would soon traverse.

Yet another soul pondered and asked, “Will the place I go to, perhaps like Halabja’s orchard, embrace me? Will mountains provide me refuge? Will it be akin to Sharazoor Palin stretching out before me? Will spring dazzle my eyes and soul with the colours of flowers and dew-kissed leaves? Will beads of sweat glisten on my face in the summer? Will the mild morning weather lull me into a peaceful slumber on my house’s rooftop? Will autumn shed my leaves of sorrow onto the gentle flow of Gulan’s lake to an unknown destination? Will winter drape my house in the rain and clothe it in snow? And do you think that when I’ve had my fill of Hava Nagila for the moment, I can listen to Hora and Syachemane? (Kurdish folk songs) Will I be able to return on Shiv, Yahrzeit, Rosh Hashanah, and Tisha B’Av days to visit the resting place of my beloved ancestors?”

Some couldn’t help but sob for their family members who had passed away, saying, “We wish you were with us on this journey.”

Suddenly, the pickup carrying Issac and Alia came to a halt, and Heme quickly disembarked from the front seat. His mother Aster, followed suit, questioning, “Where are you going, my son?”

Heme replied sharply, “I’m not coming.”

“Why?” Aster inquired.

Heme explained, “I can’t abandon my revolutionary comrades.”

“What about me, my son,” Aster implored.

Heme proposed to her, “You shouldn’t go either; we both belong to the same political party.”

“Get back in the car; don’t leave your mother, “Issac urged Heme from the back of the pickup.

Heme retorted, “I won’t come.”

“Get back into the pickup; it’s safer. if you’re arrested again, there may be no escape from prison,” Issac cautioned Heme.

Despite Heme’s initial resistance, Isaac and Alia eventually convinced him, and they all returned to the pickup. However, it didn’t take long before the pickup stopped once more, and Heme quickly exited, followed by Aster.

“Come on, my son, staying here will only lead to your destruction,” Aster implored Heme.

Heme replied firmly, “I won’t come.”

“Let’s go; even if this King leaves, our circumstances will remain unchanged,” Aster explained to Heme.

Heme, taken aback by his mother’s reaction, remarked, “Mother, since when have you been like this? You’ve changed.”

“I haven’t changed; it’s because of you,” Aster responded.

Heme declared, “If it’s because of me, then I’ve decided not to come.”

The pickup’s sudden stop caused a traffic jam on the main road, with car horns blaring one after another. Isaac and Alia disembarked once more, joined by Zulma, in a collective effort to persuade Heme to change his mind. However, their pickup driver grew impatient and honked to urge them to hurry up.

“Isaac, please unload our luggage, and then you can leave,” Aster told him.

Isaac swiftly removed the luggage, and they bid their farewells to Aster and Heme before reinterring the pickup and driving away. In the lead of the convoy, the rabbi and the cantor sat in a Ford car, holding numerous Torahs and other small religious items in their laps.

The trucks and cars began moving again. Heme and Aster watched them until they disappeared from sight. Both of them returned to their rented empty house, uncertain about how to begin living differently from what they were accustomed to.

**(Chapter -16)**

Although several years have transpired since the monarch's fall from power, events have taken a different turn, ushering in a new ruler in the country, and it was indeed harsher than what Aster and others had ever imagined.

Kawan was stepping on a muddy road. He strapped his books, copybooks, and pencils by rubber bands tightly so as not to drop them and carried them around his waist. From his opposite side, a group of girls in school uniforms appeared and were coming towards him. As neared him, with a shy face, they gave him a quick glance and passed to pursue their way to school.

He neared his college’s front gate, and his friends were already there, before reaching them, they happily told him there won’t be any class as the teacher was off sick, instead of listening to the teacher who would only teach them subjects that were framed in the state curriculum. They started to talk about their subjects of interest such as the TV programmes and the news of last night’s shootings in the town. After a while, he left them, heading to the town centre.

In the town’s bustling bazaar, shopkeepers displayed various items to catch shoppers' eyes. He spotted a group of ladies gathered around a showcase of a jewellery shop, window shopping. They were attentively looking at the displayed, noise rings, bracelets, necklaces, rings, etc.

While walking, he looked at Azadi Tea-house and could hear the sound of checkers, dices and tiles hitting backgammon boards and the surface of numerous tables that were each occupied by 4-5 men huddled around the tables, playing, smoking, drinking tea, and talking. A little boy was carrying two pairs of sandals, one in his hand and the other under his armpit. He was slowly walking through the tables, saying, “I will make your shoes as shine as a mirror,” hoping that someone would be persuaded or feel sorry for him and ask him to shine his shoes. The tea maker was standing in front of his samovar, his right-hand holding tea glasses and saucers while his other hand added sugar to the glasses one by one. Then, he held the teapot and poured hot tea and water into them.

Beside the teahouse, Fadil, the only modern tailor in town, was busy with his needle and thread, sewing a partially machine-sewn jacket that lay on the table in front of him. He occasionally picked up his cigarette, took a quick puff, and then set it down in the ashtray on the table. Amidst the atmosphere filled with cigarette smoke and steam from the iron on the table, he helped a customer put on the jacket, ensuring it fit properly.

Kawan walked on the same direction, on his left he saw an advert attached to the front wall of the municipality’s open yard wall, on which was written, “Today in the town’s cultural centre, the play of ‘Madam, the twig basket seller,’ will be performed at 2pm.”

It was noon, and hunger gnawed at him, making it impossible to think or focus properly. He arrived home, promptly satisfied his hunger, and then proceeded to their modest room on the second floor of the house. This room housed his books, pencils, and other school materials in a small metal box. He reclined on his bed for a moment, delving back into the history of his town.

After a brief respite, he rose from the bed and exited the room, descending to the open yard of the house. He positioned himself in front of the sink, which held a mirror hanging above it, and studied his reflection. Retrieving a plastic comb from his pocket, he meticulously combed his hair, not stopping until he was content with its style.

From the yard, he ascended to the roof via a wooden ladder. His house was perched atop a hill, resembling a solitary beacon overseeing hundreds of homes in the Kani-Ashqan district. The neighbouring houses were wedged so closely together that even from the roof, it was impossible to discern the activities within them.

In front of his house, there was an even area spacious enough to accommodate two cars. From there, a narrow pathway extended approximately ten meters to a crossroads. On either side of this crossroads, the roads branched off, leading to various parts of the town. The third road continued straight ahead, visibly stretching for about two hundred meters before vanishing into the labyrinthine alleys, reemerging on the town's outskirts as it wound its way through the neck of Qaw-qird hill before disappearing again.

While on the roof, he gazed toward Qaw-gird and noticed that pine trees were planted in terraces from the base of the hill to the summit, as if they were reaching for the sky. He descended to the open yard, exited the house, and set off on the road leading to Qaw-gird. Along the way, he passed rows of shops on both sides, with children either in groups or alone entering them to buy sweets and biscuits. He spotted the mosque preacher, clutching parts of his long cloak to keep it from touching the ground in one hand, and holding a copy of the Quran in the other as he hurried to reach the mosque and lead the prayer.

In one of the alleys, he came across a group of women sitting in front of a house engaged in conversation. Feeling shy, he lowered his head and did not raise it until he had passed them by.

Upon reaching Qaw-gird, he could see Ballambo Mountain in the distance. Although he desired to go there, his fear of the nearby Iraqi military base atop its peak changed his mind. He turned away from the mountain, which stood in silence. To his right, far away, lay Shnrwe Mountain, still adorned with patches of snow from the previous winter, much like Ballambo with its military base. He let his gaze wander from the mountain's summit down to Ababayle village, then across the town's outskirts, Shehidan neighbourhood, and continued scanning through alleys, houses, roads, mulberry and pine trees, and vine pergolas.

Eventually, he shifted his gaze far to the right, towards Suren Mountain, now tinged with blue hues, as if it too had recently shed its winter coat. Lowering his eyes to the Sharazoor plain, he briefly paused but gradually redirected his focus back to himself. On the way, the grave markers of Gullan Cemetery stopped him and held his attention. He had no choice but to leave Qaw-gird in order to understand why these grave markers had disrupted his view.

He made his way to the graveyard and resumed his contemplation. Reading some epitaphs on the grave markers, he learned of various tragic stories: a young man killed in internal conflict, a revolutionary executed by the Ba’ath Party, a family torn apart by Iranian government’s bombardment, an only son lost to cancer, and a couple who succumbed to heartache after their son's disappearance. He couldn't bring himself to read the epitaphs of the fifth, sixth, and subsequent graves and hastened back to the town.

In the Jewish neighbourhood of the town, he paused in front of the synagogue. He peeked inside the door and observed some men gathered around a pond, dipping their hands in it to cleanse their faces, arms, and hands as they performed ablution, reciting, "God is great... God is great," with each immersion. A tall preacher in a white turban moved about slowly, adjusting his thobe and turban, preparing for the congregational prayer.

Kawan withdrew his head astonishingly and cast a quick glance to the right and left of the alley. Then, he lifted his gaze above the front door of the synagogue and noticed a faded sign that read, "Ahmedi Mosque!"

He departed from the area and made his way to Othman Pasha's villa. He paused briefly in front of the villa's entrance and then entered. There were no guards, no one to assist him, no servants, and neither Adela Xanm nor Pasha; there was no one around at all.

In the open courtyard, he saw the pond had lost its former charm, with the branches of an untrimmed mulberry tree providing a meagre shadow as if they sympathized with its dryness. The continuous drops from an old tap, which had replaced the fountain inside the pond, resembled gentle rains, as if they aimed to revive the life within the decaying leaves that had fallen from the mulberry.

He proceeded through the three separate living quarters of the villa. As he ascended a worn staircase in an attempt to reach Adela Xanm's Diwaxan (a communal gathering place) on the first floor, he encountered what seemed to be a door in the past. Here, he accessed a long, narrow, and dimly lit hall. Three arched windows on his right were devoid of glass, covered with worn, wrinkled, and baggy nylons. Filtered light seeped in from outside through the nylons, casting a blurry silhouette of Kawan within.

He surveyed the hall, searching for his lighter in his bag to shed some light on his surroundings. However, the darkness prevailed, preventing him from seeing much. Even if he could see, what could he find? The coffered ceilings beads and sapphires had all fallen; there were no remnants of the braided pendants of chandeliers or lanterns. Only broken frames of stained glass remained. Isfahani,

Kashani, and Tabrizi rugs and carpets were absent, as were clothing chests and stained-glass boards in their corners.

Tahîr Beg and Ahmed Muxtar Jaff's Diwans (collections of poems) and the latter's novelette 'The Question of Conscience' were nowhere to be found in the recesses. Their kullaballs and pesaks (felted wool short-sleeved and sleeveless vests) weren't hanging alongside Martini and Mauser rifles on the walls. Only the hearth of the wooden stove remained; bamboo blinds, Jajem (thin and shaggy embroidered carpets), and felted wool carpets and coversheets were either absent or lay folded.

Skullcaps (Fês) adorned with gold chains, lira (coin), salta (short jacket), hêlek (vest), kewa (long coat with or without sleeve), lechk (headscarf), and kollewane (shawl) were conspicuously absent. The scent of bedding and the enticing aroma of food in pots were nowhere to be found, replaced by the scent of mold, decaying wood, damp soil, and weathered bricks, remnants of years of rainwater leaks.

The Hîza (butter-skin pouch) and Henbane (container made of animal skin) were missing. The once familiar sounds of a silver samovar's whistle and the clanging of copper pots, plates, trays, spoons, ladles for curries, and rice paddles had all vanished. The hearth of the wooden stove had fallen into disrepair, with no sign of water storage jars or clay water coolers. The lively sounds of people gathering in the Diwaxan in the afternoons were silent, along with the greetings and farewells of male and female visitors.

There were no signs of girls, elegantly dressed with red coral necklaces and tattooed chins, with Kl (eyeliner) accentuating their eyes to captivate the young male visitors. The whereabouts of the Diwaxan's assistants and lanky men

remained a mystery. The coat rack for guests had disappeared, and there was no trace of the pantry or the palette used for butter churns.

There was nothing particularly noteworthy to catch one's eye, and the only sound was that of the worn, wrinkled plastic nylons covering the windows. Occasionally, they rustled softly when stirred by gentle gusts of wind from outside, as if attempting to awaken the deep slumber of days long past.

Suddenly, the startling sound of footsteps echoed through the hall. Kawan turned toward the source, a hole in the wall through which a beam of light filtered. It didn't take long for a man and a child to emerge at the edge of the opening. The man was dressed in a black jacket and patchy white trousers, with a well-worn yellow hat folded around his head. He held the right hand of a child with blond, curly, and dishevelled hair. The child was clad in a food-stained, long, and dirty robe. A green fabric tissue held an amulet secured with a safety pin to her chest. Her small, bare, and grimy feet stood beside her father's plastic shoe, now missing its laces.

With his left hand, the man held the child's right hand, who had blond, curly, and dishevelled hair. She was dressed in a food-stained, long, and dirty robe, with an amulet folded in a green fabric tissue pinned to her chest with a safety pin. Her little, bare, and dirty feet stood beside her father's plastic shoe, which now lacked its laces at the edge of the opening.

The man, with an anxious look, turned to Kawan and stuttered, "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Kawan, cautious, responded with a question of his own, "And who are you?"

The man replied, "I am Aziz."

"I am in search of Adela Xanm," Kawan inquired.

Aziz, in astonishment, responded, "Adela Xanm? I don't know anyone by that name."

Kawan pressed further, "And what brings you here?"

Aziz explained, "Out of kindness, they allowed us to stay here. It's just my four-year-old daughter and me now; my wife has left us."

"Why?" Kawan asked, his curiosity piqued.

Aziz, head bowed, responded mournfully, "I don't know if my misfortune is to blame."

"Why?" Kawan inquired again.

Aziz answered, "My wife had psychological problems."

For a few seconds, Kawan and Aziz silently regarded each other. Then, Aziz broke the silence, asking Kawan, "Are you related to the owner of this dilapidated house?"

As Kawan approached Aziz and his daughter, his face became more visible in the beam of light. "I have no connection to the owner," Kawan explained. "I am merely a traveller."

He then gently caressed the girl's hair before leaving them.

**(Chapter -17)**

He stood still on the tarmac road that ran through the town's centre. His gaze was fixed on seven men tethered by wires to several open-bed military trucks, known as "Eva," with the trucks towing them behind. Their heads, arms, and feet dragged along the road. Several soldiers were in the back of the trucks, waving and brandishing their weapons, excitedly shouting in Arabic and ululating, 'halhole, halhole’ ...”

Shop owners, shoppers, and passersby stood motionless on both sides of the bazaar road. They were shocked, paralyzed by fear, seemingly unsure of how to react to this horrifying sight.

A woman held her young son's hand and, to shield him from the scene, covered his face with a part of her veil. She was in a hurry and urgently trying to move him away from the area.

Soon, the Evas vanished from sight.

Kawan left the bazaar and headed towards his neighbourhood. In the distance, he spotted a crowd of people gathered in front of Jumhuri Mosque, surrounding a tractor. He approached them, but before he could reach them, the tractor departed.

The crowd entered the mosque, and he followed suit. Inside, he discovered seven bodies laid out in a row on a platform next to the ablution pond. Their torn clothing bore the traces of soil, blood, ashes, and the asphalt from the town's roads. Their chests were exposed, each displaying a bullet hole of the same size.

Their index fingers still appeared as if they were clenched around the triggers of their guns, even in death.

He scrutinized their dusty locks, soot-covered faces, parched lips, bare feet, and the weariness etched into their bodies. From their forlorn appearance, he pieced together the grim circumstances that had led to their demise. Turning his gaze to the crowd, he noticed a pervasive aura of sorrow reflected in their faces.

His attention was then drawn to two youths who stood on a stair tread near the ablution pond. One of them was adorned in the rich tapestry of Kurdish tradition, while the other sported simple pantaloons and a shirt. Engrossed in their covert conversation, they appeared oblivious to the sombre atmosphere that surrounded them.

Intrigued, he approached and eavesdropped on their dialogue. “These seven men, all of them were Peshmergas after the capitulation of 1975,” he overheard the boy in pantaloons explaining to his traditionally-clad companion.

The boy in traditional attire swiftly interjected, a hint of scepticism in his voice, “You mean they simply faded away?”

“No,” the boy in pantaloons clarified with determination, “capitulation, these Peshmergas were ambushed by Iraqi army soldiers and mercenaries in a village in Sharazoor. They refused to surrender, choosing instead to expend their last bullets on their own hearts.”

The boy in traditional attire couldn't hide his disapproval, his voice tinged with concern. “But why resort to such a drastic end?”

The boy in pantaloons countered, his tone resolute, “It's not suicide, it's a statement.”

The boy in traditional attire responded with a touch of irony, “Well, then, what would you call it?”

“To preserve their dignity,” the boy in pantaloons proudly answered.

Perplexed, the boy in traditional attire pressed further, “Preserve their dignity with what means?”

“With the single bullet they aimed at their hearts,” the boy in pantaloons explained, a sense of conviction in his words.

The boy in traditional attire inquired, “What does that bullet symbolize?”

“It's a seal, a solemn vow to their nation, “the boy in pantaloons responded.

Curious, the boy in traditional attire asked, “How can you identify them? Do you know these men personally?”

“Even if I don't know them individually, I recognize them by their appearance, their attire, and the self-inflicted wounds on their hearts. Have you ever closely examined their fingers?” replied the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire scrutinized the lifeless bodies and then turned his gaze back to the boy in pantaloons, shaking his head, “I see nothing.”

The boy in pantaloons spoke with unwavering conviction, “How can you say 'nothing'? Look at their fingers, frozen and curled, as if they continue to resist the enemy's armies and tanks even in death. Notice the scars left by those single bullets that, in one fateful day, pierced the hearts of our comrades—one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven, all for the sake of our homeland. Take a closer look, and

you'll see the indelible marks of nobility, gratitude, love, courage, and unwavering resolve etched upon their bodies.”

The boy in traditional attire inquired with a hint of scepticism, “You speak of them so passionately; I'm convinced you know them personally.”

“These two were farmers,” he said, pointing at the first two individuals, “that one was a manual labourer,” he continued, indicating the next person, “another was an orchardist,” he gestured to the person next to them, “one was a teacher,” he pointed to the following individual, “the one next to him was a student,” he directed his finger to the person beside the teacher, “and the one beside him was an environmentalist,” he completed, pointing at the last person. “Before becoming Peshmerga, they were all self-reliant individuals who played vital roles in our society,” the boy in pantaloons explained.

The boy in traditional attire asked, “Roles in what, exactly?”

“In safeguarding and advancing our society, in nurturing our homeland. Today, they've displayed their final and most profound role,” the boy in pantaloons answered with a sense of reverence.

The boy in traditional attire quipped ironically, “So who are these people?”

“They are who they were and who they are,” the boy in pantaloons responded cryptically.

The boy in traditional attire inquired further, “What were they doing, specifically?”

“The two farmers contributed to the growth of greenery, sustaining life; the labourer was the backbone of our nation's progress; the orchardist cultivated and harvested fruit products; the teacher promoted conversational skills and fostered scientific development; the student pursued the path of learning; the environmentalist kept our surroundings clean. Each of them played a significant and irreplaceable role,” explained the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire asked, his curiosity piqued, “Is that all they've done?”

“When our enemies razed our villages to the ground, suppressed our language, and set fire to our wooden livestock fences, hay, grains, straw, cotton, dried grasses, tobacco leaves, and peat, these selfless heroes stood their ground in resistance. I understand that you may find it hard to believe, and they are no longer here to recount their experiences in their own words... but I have a question for you,” the boy in pantaloons said.

The boy in traditional attire responded, “What is it?”

“Why haven't you heard of the pain endured by imprisoned and tortured Kurdish youths? Why haven't you felt the prolonged and anguished cries of mothers? Why haven't you witnessed the destructive spectacle of village houses being reduced to rubble by roaring explosions? How have you managed to remain oblivious to the sound of collapsing roofs, shattering windows, and doors crashing amidst deafening chaos? Why haven't you seen the crackling and sparkling of burning wheat and grains in granaries? How is it that you've missed the scent of vine branches, oaks, medlars, oak apples, wild-plums, cranberries, and their leaves, all brutally broken by force? Why haven't you thought about the anxious baa, bark, bray, buzz, chirp, cluck, gobble, honk, howl, meow, moo, neigh, peep, quack, cheeping, and ribbit sounds? How have you not noticed the anxieties and panic of buzzards, chukars, crows, falcons, hoopoes, jackdaws, nightingales, partridges, quails, skylarks, sparrows, swallows, thrushes, warblers, wagtails, woodpeckers, wrens, and owls? Why haven't you been alarmed by the destruction of their nests and the displacement of their inhabitants? How come you remain unaware of their forced eviction? Why haven't you sensed the desolation of the untrimmed grasses, separated from the scythes and sickles? How have you missed the forced separation of waterskins and jars from the springs? And why do you not understand that there is no longer any need for shepherds, let alone the use of felted wool coats? Haven't you heard of sheep bells hanging around lamp necks, still there to deter snakes and predators?” the boy in pantaloons passionately questioned all.

The boy in traditional attire responded with a sense of helplessness, “What can I possibly do?”

“Don't you think of anything?” inquired the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire asked, his voice tinged with confusion, “Think of what?”

“Consider the lifeless bodies of these fighters and the glory they achieved,” the boy in pantaloons implored.

The boy in traditional attire replied, “What can I possibly do with that?”

“How about trying to understand them?” suggested the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire sought clarification, “Understand what?”

“The significance of their heroic deaths,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire questioned, “Why?”

“To carry yourself with pride,” the boy in pantaloons replied, then fell silent.

The boy in traditional attire remarked, “That pride is the result of carrying a gun and taking to the mountains?”

“Don't you see the men, women, and children who are forcibly uprooted from their ancestral lands? Can't you feel their grief as they are denied the right to return to their highlands and lowlands? How can you overlook the displacement of religious leaders, priests, sheikhs, the rich and the poor, shepherds—all forced to leave behind their desecrated mosques, churches, shrines, meeting places, homes, orchards, homestead orchards, and terraced fields? Are you unaware that they are even forbidden from visiting the graves of their loved ones, from drinking from their springs and Karêz (irrigation tunnels)? Don't you know they've been ordered to stay away from their villages and any area within a 20-kilometer radius of their homes?” the boy in pantaloons passionately conveyed.

The boy in traditional attire sighed and remarked, “It will all come to an end.”

“Do you think the state will stop at that point? Let me assure you, it won't. It will displace us as well, and it will devastate our town. After us, it will do the same to the inhabitants of other towns and places, and eventually, it will relocate all Kurds to the south of Iraq. Then we won't see our homeland in our lifetime or even after our passing. That's why, today, I wholeheartedly envy these martyrs,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire asked, his voice filled with curiosity, “Why?”

“Because they made courageous choices in their lives, and their legacy is honored with dignity and respect even in their absence. They embraced a death that they chose when, how, and why to meet,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire lowered his head momentarily, then raised it quickly, asserting, “But they shouldn't have taken their own lives.”

“Why? Do you believe that, even when they were surrounded and had run out of bullets, they should have thrown down their weapons, raised their hands in surrender? Do you consider such actions as legitimate and courageous?” the boy in pantaloons countered.

The boy in traditional attire inquired further, “What would have happened if they had chosen to surrender?”

“The enemy would have humiliated them, parading them for the public to witness. By disrespecting them, they aimed to degrade not only these individuals but also the people in our town, including myself, you, and all Kurds. However, it was through their final act, when they directed their last bullet at their own hearts, that they demonstrated respect for themselves and for us,” explained the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire reiterated, “They shouldn't have taken their own lives.”

“If they hadn't complied, they would have faced arrest, imprisonment in one of the prisons in southern Iraq, and been subjected to excruciating torture before being executed. The fate of their bodies would have remained a mystery, and their relatives would have been billed for the costs of the execution,” explained the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire replied somewhat dismissively, “So, what would have happened?”

“Indeed, what would have happened? Many people wouldn't have known that this land produced these patriotic and courageous men,” the boy in pantaloons responded ironically.

The boy in traditional attire argued, “They wouldn't have been blamed if they had surrendered.”

“Why?” the boy in pantaloons questioned.

The boy in traditional attire responded, “Because they're not generals.”

“They may not be generals, but they are Peshmergas. Even generals, if they understand their duties, principles, and the honor of their cause, will not flee like these brave men but will stand their ground,” the boy in pantaloons asserted.

The boy in traditional attire asked with curiosity, “What would they do then?”

“They will fight until the last soldier and the last bullet,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire pressed further, “And then?”

“If they are the last remaining survivors of their armies, they will neither surrender nor flee,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire inquired, “What will they do?”

“Like these martyred Peshmergas, they will be brave and resolute,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire sought to understand, “What did these Peshmergas do?”

“They moved from one foxhole to another, conserving every bullet. After emptying one magazine, they swiftly attached another to their guns. They even used the tactical vests of their fallen comrades, employing their cartridge bullets against the enemy. Their last remaining bullets were aimed at their own hearts, ensuring that no bullet went to waste, except for the expended cartridges that thwarted the enemy's aims and objectives, just as they did,” the boy in pantaloons explained.

The boy in traditional attire probed further, his voice filled with curiosity, “Why did they choose to do that?”

“Had they left any bullets, the enemies would have used them against their comrades and citizens,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire remarked, “Generals have never taken such drastic measures, and they shouldn't.”

“Why?” the boy in pantaloons asked, genuinely interested.

The boy in traditional attire explained, “Because soldiers can be replaced, but it takes time to cultivate a general.”

“People don't become generals solely by donning tactical vests, carrying daggers at their waists, adorning themselves with headdresses, wearing camouflage attire and boots, or by possessing titles and insignias depicting stars, swords, and eagles,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire inquired, “So, how do they become generals then?”

“Through unwavering belief, exceptional honour, and valour, just like eagles,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire prodded further, “But what if a general doesn't possess any of those qualities?”

“He or she may still be called a general, but...” The boy in pantaloons started to respond before being interrupted.

The boy in traditional attire pressed on, “But what?”

“Only by name, not by action,” the boy in pantaloons clarified.

The boy in traditional attire sought clarification, “By what measure can a principled general be distinguished from one who lacks principles?”

“By the measure of their actions,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire inquired, “Whose actions?”

“The actions of these martyrs,” The boy in pantaloons responded, his gaze briefly shifting to the bodies of the fallen fighters.

They shared a brief, intense gaze, and the boy in pantaloons added, “Do you know what the military punishment for a general who abandons their soldiers or surrenders to the enemy would be?”

The boy in traditional attire raised his eyebrows in anticipation, “Which general are you referring to?”

“The general who flees and leaves their soldiers behind or surrenders to the enemy,” the boy in pantaloons clarified.

The boy in traditional attire pondered for a moment before responding, “What would the punishment be?”

“It would be execution,” the boy in pantaloons declared solemnly.

The boy in traditional attire leaned back slightly and questioned, “What about a general who openly declares that he lacks principles, despite holding the title? Would he still face execution?”

“A general, whether principled or not, official or not, who flees or openly declares himself principleless, whether voluntarily or under duress, will still be subject to punishment,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire inquired, “What kind of punishment?”

“The death penalty,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire asked, “Who has the authority to issue the penalty?”

The boy in pantaloons answered, “Either his soldiers or his nation.”

The boy in traditional attire questioned further, “Who will carry out the penalty?”

“If he's not an official general, it would be carried out by his nation,” the boy in pantaloons responded.

The boy in traditional attire asked, “What if he is an official general?”

“Then it would be an ailing soldier,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire sought clarification, “Why?”

“Why, you wonder? To shoot at him,” the boy in pantaloons replied.

The boy in traditional attire pressed further, “Why choose an ailing soldier when a healthy one could do it?”

“He could,” the boy in pantaloons conceded.

The boy in traditional attire continued to inquire, “Then why opt for an ailing soldier?”

“Because his illness is not his fault, sparing him from this act prevents his role from being compromised and his honour from being tarnished. It also ensures that the general faces the consequences of his cowardice, for wearing the insignias on his shoulders while behaving as a charlatan. It serves as an example for those who may contemplate following his cowardly path,” the boy in pantaloons explained.

The boy in traditional attire sought further clarification, “Why?”

“Why this way? Insignias should only be worn by those who are worthy, not to allow the general's uniform to be dishonoured by those who disrespect the army, homeland, citizens, and glory. We mustn't let cowardly and unprincipled individuals wear the uniform. And illness should never be used as an excuse to prevent soldiers from protecting the homeland,” explained the boy in pantaloons.

The boy in traditional attire asked, “What would happen if a nation or an army doesn't punish a cowardly general?”

“Their destiny would be a series of failures,” replied the boy in pantaloons.

“Hey, kids, it's time to go now,” came the sudden call from Zêwan, the mosque's manager. The children, amidst the bustling crowd, struggled to navigate their way, their curiosity and numerous unanswered questions filling their minds. Kawan also followed them.

It wasn't Friday, yet the mosque was teeming with people. Women frequently gathered outside the mosque, seeking information from the departing children.

Through the door of the mosque's small Shorgeh room (where the dead body is washed), the undertaker could be seen. He was busy dressing the first martyr in a Kfn cloth (burial shroud), with two men assisting him. They then carefully placed the martyr on the mosque's veranda.

“Homeland is sacred; let us return to it with our bodies cleansed,” declared Abeh, the brother of one of the martyrs, as he moved through the gathering. He occasionally paused to gaze upon the bodies, tears streaming down his face, as he continued to repeat his poignant message.

Ibrahim, the son of one of the town's traders, stood on the mosque's veranda. After dressing each martyr in their burial shroud, he reached into his loose trousers, retrieved a small bottle of perfume, and applied it drop by drop onto their shrouds.

The undertaker disrobed, cleansed, and draped the martyrs, while the two assistants collected their clothing, piling them outside the door. Then, they swiftly ushered in another martyr for the same ritual.

Outside the shorgeh, a large, soot-covered cauldron filled with water rested atop two concrete bricks. Beneath the cauldron, a few birch logs crackled and blazed, causing the water to simmer and eventually come to a boil. Periodically, a man approached with a long silver ladle, dipping it into the cauldron to retrieve hot water, which he carried to temper the cold water in a bucket in the shorgeh. Afterward, he replenished the cauldron with fresh, cold water and used a fire poker to stoke the flaming birches, continuing until he heard the satisfying crackling of the birches and saw their glowing embers.

As time passed, the piles of clothing belonging to the martyrs grew, including their blood-stained and weathered pants, jackets, vests, belts, puttees, socks, shoes, and handkerchiefs.

Evening gradually approached, and some of the children remained outside the mosque, eagerly seeking news. The martyrs, all shrouded in white, lay side by side, prepared for their final journey. They no longer worried about possessing weapons and bullets, searching for a morsel of bread, packing their haversacks, enduring hunger, thirst, and fatigue, or facing sudden surprises and ambushes. They had no need to conceal themselves, convene meetings with comrades, engage in critiques or proposals, infiltrate villages, towns, and cities, write letters, think of their children, wives, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, friends, and enemies, or take photos to capture memories. If they could speak, they would say to the men in the mosque, to the children waiting outside, to their living comrades and fellow female citizens, “Continue your struggle to achieve the objectives for which we sacrificed ourselves, even though we didn't live to see a free homeland.”

**(Chapter -18)**

As Kawan continued to ponder the distressing events he had witnessed, heard, and read about in the town, an overwhelming sense of melancholy enveloped him. Just then, a deafening explosion shattered the tranquillity in front of his house. Turning around, he witnessed the devastating aftermath of Mordana neighbourhood – all the houses and buildings, except for Jumhuri Mosque, had been reduced to rubble. As Harbi explained in this novel earlier that “The government had demolished them with bombs in retaliation for bringing the IRGC by the Peshmerga into the town.”

Kawan witnessed how TNT explosives and the buckets of wheel loaders reduced everything to rubble, sparing only the mosque, which stood as a silent witness to the oppression inflicted by one human group upon another. Alleys, walls, pillars, and trees were no longer barriers but had become piles of scattered debris, opening up his view from his house all the way to Qaw-qird hill.

In the distance, a group of soldiers emerged, walking along the road towards the town. He became alert but was somewhat reassured by the presence of several civilians in the neighbourhood, bustling about their daily activities. The soldiers appeared unarmed, barefoot, and fatigued, marching in single file with a Peshmerga keeping watch at the rear.

He turned his attention to the front door, rapping the knocker a few times, but it seemed that no one was available to answer. With that, he decided to make his way toward his maternal uncle's residence, which was located next to the Aneb neighbourhood hospital. Along the way, he noticed a convoy of cars, one after another, racing toward the hospital.

He stood at his uncle Raman’s front door and knocked it several times, but once again, there was no response. Frustrated, he made his way to the hospital where he was met with a distressing scene. A number of injured civilians lay on the veranda of the hospital, without any mattresses or blankets. Their injuries ranged from wounds on their heads, chests, stomachs, arms, legs, and backs, with some of them bleeding profusely and teetering on the brink of death. Although a few had family members by their side, the relatives appeared helpless, their tears of despair falling onto the wounded.

As time passed, more injured individuals were brought to the hospital, swelling their numbers, and the cacophony of grieving relatives grew louder. The doctors and nurses could only attend to those in dire need of immediate surgery, as the influx of patients overwhelmed the limited medical staff.

A doctor turned to a nurse, his voice filled with concern, “What should we do?”

The nurse, clearly bewildered, responded, “What?”

The doctor explained, “We don't have specialist doctors, and our only two ambulances just transported two critical patients to Slemani. God knows when they'll return.”

Suddenly, the bombardment began, and in a frantic rush, relatives, doctors, and nurses sought refuge in the hospital's underground shelter, leaving the patients stranded on the veranda.

The town remained subjected to relentless rocket bombardment by the IRGC. Women, men, and children suffered injuries and fatalities, while houses and buildings crumbled one after another. The situation deteriorated to the point where simply standing became a challenge. Medical supplies and equipment grew increasingly scarce as the number of victims continued to rise, and the town's destruction spread far and wide, leading to the loss of electricity and telecommunications.

A young boy burst into the underground shelter, his voice trembling with urgency, “The IRGC and Peshmergas have surrounded our town and set up checkpoints in some parts,” he reported.

The doctor, seemingly responding to a different question, remarked, “The Zalm bridge is the only link between Halabja and Slemani. If it's destroyed, we won't be able to transport patients or receive medications, and we won't even be able to protect ourselves.” He then turned to the relatives of the injured individuals and continued, “It seems there's little else we can do. If the situation remains as it is, I hope not, then you'll have to take responsibility for your injured loved ones.”

The relentless bombardment continued, leaving people feeling like wounded birds, uncertain of where to seek refuge. Parents clung to their injured children, helplessly awaiting the grim fate that seemed inevitable. The mortuaries of hospitals and mosques were already overflowing with the deceased, and the constant fear of further bombardment prevented friends and relatives from contemplating burial. Some families had no choice but to lay their beloved ones to rest in makeshift graves within their own yards.

**(Chapter -19)**

It was midday, and the IRGC' rockets had been silent for about two hours. Kawan was still in the hospital, searching for Raman.

Suddenly, a military jeep with a 101-millimetre rocket launcher attached to it entered the hospital. It stopped in the middle of the hospital's open yard, and three soldiers disembarked, heading straight for the doctor. They spoke to him in Arabic, asking for some Paracetamols.

“What's the news?” the doctor inquired before responding.

One of the soldiers quickly replied, “It's over... finished.”

The doctor and his staff exchanged glances. “Finished? They lost, and the town is now free from the threat of the IRGC' rockets,” one of the staff members remarked.

“On the contrary, we lost. We couldn't withstand their offensive,” the soldier explained.

It became apparent that the soldier had reasons for his response, as his army had withdrawn from Ballambo and Shnrwe Mountains, along with other high points in the area. Meanwhile, in the town, the heads of government institutions, such as the mayor's office staff, security forces, and the intelligence service, had all left for Slemani prior to the destruction of Zalm bridge. “And it's not just us; many other un-commanded soldiers are scattered throughout the town and its surroundings. We don't know what to do, hoping to be spotted by the IRGC or Peshmerga forces to be taken captive,” one of the soldiers admitted.

Instantly, a pickup truck entered the open yard, carrying five charred bodies in its bed. They were all members of one family. In fear of bombardment, they had taken refuge in a classroom at one of the schools in their Sirwan neighbourhood. While inside, a rocket struck a barrel of petrol positioned near the classroom door, setting it ablaze. The flames engulfed them.

The driver of the pickup got out, unloaded the bodies one by one, and placed them on the veranda, lining them up side by side. He silently stood over them for a brief moment, glanced around, and then departed.

Among the bodies, a five-year-old child survived, though his body was mostly burned, except for a small portion of his face. His mother, father, sister, and older brother lay beside him, lifeless, waiting for someone to bury them.

The doctors and nurses approached the child, carried him, and laid him down on the hospital floor for treatment.

Kawan also entered the hospital and gazed at the child from a distance. Suddenly, a tap on his shoulder alerted him. He turned to see Raman; neither of them spoke, as the scenes themselves were both questions and answers. Raman then walked past Kawan and approached the doctor and the nurses, saying, “Our hospital is overwhelmed with injured people. I don't know what to do.”

“You're in the same position as me. The only difference between us is that I'm a doctor, and you're a physician assistant (PA),” the doctor responded after briefly looking at Raman, then turning his attention back to the child.

Raman returned to Kawan and said, “Let's go. They say the IRGC are patrolling the town's alleys and scanning the areas.”

“I'm aware of that news,” Kawan replied. To confirm it, they drove through the town briefly and spotted a group of IRGC members walking without a care.

As they drove back to the hospital, the doctor, as if anticipating their return, hurriedly approached them. “Some residents have informed us that the IRGC are not alone; they have members of Kurdish political parties with them,” the doctor informed them.

“We didn't see any Kurdish forces with them,” Raman responded.

The doctor attempted to reassure them and said, “Yes, they were. It's crucial for us to ascertain the truth about this news, as it holds the key to resolving our predicament, that of our colleagues, and the chaos caused to the hospital due to the offensive and the bombardment.” He continued, “We're expecting a representative from the Kurdish forces to visit us.”

“Why?” Kawan inquired.

The doctor replied, “To hold discussions with us.”

“Discuss what?” Kawan asked.

The doctor explained, “About whether we should remain in the town or leave.”

For Kawan, hearing from the representative was also important so that when he returned to the ground floor of Halabja's cigarette factory, he could inform the people. He and Raman stayed in the hospital until late, waiting for the representative and others to arrive and demonstrate their responsibilities toward the public, but no one came to their aid.

The doctor, burdened with both medical responsibilities and the daily management of the hospital, felt a deep sense of disappointment due to the lack of essential medicines and equipment. He found it imperative to gather all his staff. “You are now free to decide. The choice is yours. Our primary duty is to safeguard the well-being of the people. We've done what we could, but regrettably, we are unable to do more. Our desperation doesn't stem from negligence, but rather from the shortage of medications, equipment, and support. We all understand that the responsibility for looking after a country lies with its government, and for a city, town, or village, it rests with their mayors. Today, in this town, that responsibility falls on the Kurdish forces. However, we have yet to witness any demonstration of that responsibility. Therefore, it would be self-deception to wait any longer, as it won't yield anything,” he paused for a moment, then continued, “I sense a significant danger ahead of us.”

“Of what?” the staff asked, perplexed, after exchanging glances with one another.

The doctor replied, “The Iraqi warplanes have never been this unresponsive.”

“Why?” the staff inquired.

The doctor responded, “If they had wanted to, they wouldn't have allowed their forces to surrender so easily.”

“What could they have done?” the staff asked.

The doctor responded, “Defend the army, but they didn't do that at all.”

“Why?” the staff persisted.

The doctor replied, “Like you, I'm also searching for an answer to the same question.”

“What should the answer be?” the staff inquired.

“It seems to be a ploy,” the doctor replied, then lowered his head, walked toward his room, opened its door, entered, and closed it firmly behind him.

The staff bid a quick farewell to each other and left the hospital, each heading in different directions.

Kawan and Raman continued towards the latter's house. They were approximately ten metres away from the hospital when Kawan abruptly turned back, returning to the hospital to check on the burned child. Upon arrival, he found the child still there, with ointment-applied skin that still glistened. A white, thin fabric covered his chest, belly, arms, and feet.

Kawan stood beside the child, placing his right palm on their chest and sensing that it was no longer beating. He gazed at the little one's face and noticed their open eyes, from which he couldn't discern anything except unanswered questions. Kawan remained there until he gently closed the tiny eyes and pulled the fabric over their face, covering their entire body, shielding it from those unforgettable dark days. Leaving the hospital, Kawan rejoined Raman outside, and together they resumed their journey home.

**(Chapter -20)**

Kawan and Raman sat in a room at home, having breakfast and discussing the current events in the town. It was still early in the morning, and people could be seen moving about in the streets and alleys. As time passed, the bazaar grew busier. Government institutions remained unmanned, but the fear and anxiety among the people about their future still lingered. Nevertheless, they were delighted to witness the downfall of the town's ruling regime.

Children emerged from their hiding places in house basements, buildings, schools, and mosques. They excitedly approached the newly arrived (IRGC) personnel, addressing them with enthusiasm, “Agha... Agha” (Sir... Sir). They were not afraid of the Aghas, as their parents had informed them that these individuals had entered the town with Peshmergas. The children enjoyed observing them, as they had never seen people quite like them before. They gazed at their untidy uniforms, both light and heavy weaponry, military vehicles, scruffy beards, and headbands bearing inscriptions such as “God is great,” and “Ya Ali” (O Ali - Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad), “Ya Hossein,” and “Ya Hassan” (sons of Ali), signifying their devotion to Shia Islam. Among the gear they carried, Iranian government’s soldiers had CB (Chemical and Biological) protection kits hanging around their necks. A group of excited children pointed at them and asked, “What are those, Agha? What are those?” One of the soldiers, with a sarcastic smile, responded, “Cameras.” The children, not convinced, persisted, “Can you take a photo of us? Agha, please take a photo?” The soldier, still wearing a playful grin, replied, “Sure, we will, but not right now.” The children asked desperately, “When, Agha?” To which the soldier chuckled and said, “Later in the day”.

White clouds were still motionless on the mountain tops and over the town. The sky stretched out in clear blue, interrupted only by a scattering of cumulus clouds; there was no other mark upon it. Birds darted anxiously beneath these clouds, lending a sense of urgency to the tranquil sky.

The distant hum of airplanes resonated through the air, as though they were surveilling the town to determine the fate of their fallen army's bases. Who had assumed control? How were the townspeople responding to the army's collapse? After a while, they began dropping numerous small white leaflets, almost as if conducting reconnaissance to gauge the wind's direction. To a more innocent observer, this might appear as a gesture of surrender from the aircraft.

For the next two hours, an eerie silence hung over the town, with no sign or sound of them. As noon approached, their presence reasserted itself, as they bombarded the streets, houses, alleys, and the town centre. They descended perilously close, flying without restraint and displaying no concern for the available anti-aircraft defences. The townspeople were on edge, listening anxiously as the sonic booms filled them with fear.

In haste, Kawam and Raman hurried up the deck stairs that connected the open courtyard to their house's rooftop. However, just before they could reach safety, a rocket struck their neighbour’s house, sending the door and windows of the room they had just left crashing onto the veranda. It also demolished the wall between their home and their neighbour’s, severing several significant branches from the neighbour’s mulberry tree and showering them with debris and smoke.

A sense of self-blame and regret washed over both of them as they exchanged words, saying, “We shouldn't have stayed here... What can we do now? It's too late.” They contemplated leaving and finding shelter elsewhere. Kawan suggested the cellar at the cigarette factory, an idea to which Raman readily agreed.

They exited their home, stepping carefully over piles of rubble, and entered the alley. The deafening roar of the aircraft overhead drowned out even the thunderous explosions from the bombardment. They ran in single file, witnessing horrifying scenes of martyred and injured children, women, and men; the wreckage of roofs and walls; the craters left by rockets and napalm; and the anguished cries for help emanating from nearby houses.

“Where are the children? Don't go to the roof; don't leave the cellar... What should we do? Let's go... We can't stay here... No one has survived; oh God, what has befallen us?” These desperate voices added to Kawan and Raman's fear, which had reached an unbearable level. They braced themselves for any unforeseen calamity, aware that the aircraft had the power to decide injury, death, and destruction. To lessen the impact of the aircraft's thunderous noise, they pressed their fingers against their ears. From the lifeless bodies of the martyred and injured people surrounding them, they couldn't help but glimpse a reflection of their own uncertain fate.

Kawan, crouching and trailing behind Raman, couldn't bear the deafening roar of the aircraft. He swiftly sought shelter in a roadside ditch, lying face down. It didn't take long for a rocket to impact the ground in front of him, showering him with a chaotic mix of mud, dust, powder, rocks, and various fragments. The relentless explosions of rockets reverberated throughout the town's other neighbourhoods.

After approximately five minutes, the aircraft halted their onslaught. Kawan rose from the ditch and resumed his frantic sprint. He scanned the surroundings for any sign of Raman but found no trace. As he reached the end of the main road, he spotted a few cars on both sides of the forked road, hastily coming and going. His gaze then settled on a lifeless body sprawled on the front doorstep of a nearby house on the right.

Above the town, dark, sooty clouds still billowed upward into the sky. Kawan approached the fallen figure and examined it closely, confirming it was Raman. Raman's body bled, his eyes were tightly shut, and his mouth hung open in silent agony. Kawan wondered how long Raman had called for help amidst his pain. Raman's face was encrusted with dust, shrapnel, and the road's sand and gravel, while his clothes bore the stains of both blood and the acrid aroma of gunpowder smoke.

The smoky clouds in the sky gradually drew closer to the white clouds, as if seeking their assistance in cleansing their soot-covered visage.

The distant echo of bombs still resounded, and the traffic noise grew louder. People, and even animals, grew restless as they sought refuge to endure the conditions.

Kawan knelt down, gently cradling Raman's neck, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. He placed his ear against Raman's chest and sensed the silence of a heart that had ceased to beat. This heart, from now on and for all eternity, would carry its desires, intentions, and grievances within, seeking shelter from none but God and lodging complaints against no one.

Overwhelmed by the weight of the moment, Kawan had wept so profusely that his face contorted, and his voice became unrecognizable. Raindrops fell intermittently, like tears from the white clouds hidden behind the thin evening curtain, descending upon them. He removed his own jacket and used it to cover Raman's face before slowly rising to his feet. He walked with a heavy heart, gradually quickened his pace, and then began to run.

People emerged hastily from their homes, carrying bundles of possessions, and moving briskly along the roads. A few surviving vehicles, including cars, pickups, lorries, buses, tractors, and horse-drawn carts, were filled with children, men, and women. Some carried their ailing or disabled family members on their backs. They were all evacuating the town, uncertain of their destination.

Faraj, the town's cinema usher, held a flashlight powered by four batteries in one hand and a cassette recorder in the other. For years, he had guided latecomers with his light through the dark rows to help them find their seats in the cinema. But today, like everyone else, he couldn't even guide himself. What was unfolding in the town was not a movie or a story created by imagination, performed by actors, and displayed on a cinema screen. Children who had passed away couldn't return to their parents to play in the alleys or attend school. The injuries and scars of their parents, relatives, and townspeople were not makeup that could be wiped away. These were all parts of a real-life event, and there was no way for the martyrs to come back to life once more.

Kawan continued to run through the alley when he spotted a group of armed individuals in the distance, encircling the telecommunications office. He came to a halt, ensuring they couldn't see him, and cautiously approached them, maintaining a distance of about two hundred meters. Among the group, there was a tall man who appeared to be their leader, armed with a small Smith pistol. His subordinates were entering and exiting the office.

Curious to eavesdrop on their conversation, Kawan stealthily drew nearer. He observed two of the men emerging from the office, struggling to carry a substantial piece of telecommunications equipment. The commander's eyes widened as he saw it and inquired, “Does it work?”

Despite their exhaustion, the men replied enthusiastically, “Yes, it does.” Two other men joined them, and together they loaded it onto the back of a pickup truck they had with them, concealing it beneath a blanket. The commander took the driver's seat, and the others crowded into the back before driving away. Kawan kept a vigilant eye on them until they vanished from sight.

Continuing on his path, Kawan noticed Aziz, who was pushing a cart with his young daughter, hastening to leave the town. For Aziz, too, it was a moment to flee, not a time for work, loading and unloading goods, or making money.

Kawan arrived at the town's cigarette factory, only to find that half of it had been ravaged by the bombardment. People, both individually and in groups, carried torches, flashlights, buckets of water, pillows, rugs, mattresses, and blankets as they entered the factory's cellar. Others were coming out, and the scene was one of confusion and disarray. He also spotted the stork once more, its long, unsteady legs leaping from one side to another. The bird appeared highly agitated, pacing anxiously, fidgeting, and constantly scanning the area, searching amidst the broken concrete, bricks, and stones for its missing offspring beneath the rubble.

**(Chapter -21)**

The cigarette factory's cellar had more people than the night before. There were two additional kerosene lamps placed in the middle, near the other lamp, illuminating the surroundings further.

Kawan sat down beside Kafee and Mina. Now and then, the muttering of women and men was raised amidst the children's shouting and random playing. “Children, why don't you sit down? You might knock over the lamps. We weren't killed outside by bombs, but it seems we might be burned by the lamps' kerosene,” they warned. They were right, as knocking over one of the lamps could cause the mattresses, rugs, blankets, and duvets to catch fire.

After a while, not only the children, but everyone became quiet.

Omar had his toddler boys on his lap, gazing at the flames dancing on the lamps' wicks. Samya had her little daughter's head resting on her lap, gently stroking her back to lull her to sleep.

The sound of a car moving was heard, followed by the opening and closing of its doors. Gradually, footsteps approached the cellar gate. Two men dressed in Kurdish traditional attire, with long beards and carrying Kalashnikov rifles, entered. A family of five, who had been sitting close to Kawan, seemed to have been expecting them, and they promptly stood up and walked toward the newcomers.

Kafee took Mina's hand with one hand and lifted her satchel with the other. “For the sake of God, please take us with you. It's just me and this girl. She is an orphan, blind, deaf, and mute. We have nothing but ourselves,” she implored the men as she approached them.

One of the men rubbed his beard, glanced at Mina, and said, “God knows, we don't have enough space. God is great,” before escorting the family outside.

Kafee continued to watch them in silence until they all departed. The sounds of the car's engine, the footsteps, the opening and closing of its doors, and then its departure reached the cellar once again.

“Never mind, my daughter,” Kafee reassured Mina in a whisper to herself, and they returned to sit on their rug. She placed Mina's left-hand palm on her own lap to convey the conversation she had with the men.

Suddenly, the roar of aircraft, the blast of rockets, and the napalm explosions filled the air. They awakened those who were asleep and alarmed those who were still awake. Children started crying, and men and women began to pray.

“It's better to leave here,” some of them proposed.

Others responded, “We cannot find a better cellar than this.”

Several rockets struck around the cellar, their shockwaves and flames sending a massive plume of black smoke billowing in through the tiny window. Inside, the explosions rained down ceiling debris on the frightened inhabitants.

“Where shall we go?” This challenging question hung heavily in the air on a night overwhelmed by anxiety and fear, leaving everyone unsure of how to respond.

One day passed, then two, and perhaps even three, but no one knew exactly how many days and nights they would need to endure in the cellar.

Omar and Samya had eight daughters, two toddler boys, a newlywed groom they were expecting from Slemani, a relative guest from the East of Kurdistan, and Baram, making a total of fifteen people. Moving such a large family in a situation fraught with danger and difficulties was no easy task. Staying in the cellar might have saved their lives, but what about food, drinks, illness, and the lack of proper facilities? Not to mention the lingering scent of tobacco, the stale air from breathing, and the odor of unwashed bodies after days of confinement. These were complex and pressing issues, and with the constant threat of bombardments and no external support, addressing them seemed nearly impossible.

**(Chapter -22)**

It was an early morning; the number of aircraft had increased, and they had become more active, dropping more bombs than on previous days. Their roaring grew louder, intensifying the fear among the already frightened inhabitants in the cellar.

Omar and Samya's children clung to them, both individually and in small groups. Kafee wrapped her arms tightly around Mina's neck, trying to shield her from the fear-inducing situation. However, her own fear had overwhelmed her, causing her to forget to explain the situation to Mina.

The inhabitants grew less talkative, gripped by fear and hushed tension. The sounds of the bombs and rockets evolved, shifting from a deep 'boom' to a 'muffled thump,' then to a 'whistle and bang,' and finally to a 'sudden crack,' striking all parts of the town.

“God bless us. These bombs with muffled sounds are strange to me. They might be from the Iranian government’s forces,” Mam Wali said from his seat. “I've witnessed the sounds of many Iraqi bombardments in the past, but I've never heard anything like what I'm hearing today.”

Kafee questioned, “Why don't our Kurdish men inform the Iranian government that we have no affiliation with the Iraqi army?”

Samya replied, “Certainly, they can. They can even clarify that Halabja is very distant from Karbala.”

Baram attempted to reassure them, saying, “Don't worry. The Kurdish forces won't make any decisions without a well-calculated plan. The Iranian military forces are here to assist us. Once our town is fully liberated and secure, they will return to their own country, and we will establish Kurdish self-rule.”

“But, my son, are the Iranian government’s forces here to exploit us or to assist us?” Mam Wali questioned. “Throughout history, their rulers have followed their ancestors' strategy, which is 'First deception, then killing.' Today, they have done exactly that to us, and they've never seen it as cowardice. I haven't made this up; it's documented in their history and sociology, known as the 'Subtleties of Tricks.' They've used it to safeguard their country's sovereignty, and they take pride in it. Their poet and philosopher, Sa'di Shirazi, wrote in his work 'Gulistan' (the Rose Garden) that 'A lie that serves a purpose is better than a lie that causes chaos.' There's also an Arabic proverb that says, 'People follow the religion of their rulers.' These sayings and proverbs perfectly align with the actions of the Iranian army in the past and present.”

Baram responded firmly, “I am not following any rulers.”

“I know you're not,” Mam Wali replied.

Baram questioned, “How do you know?”

“Because you don't have a ruler to follow,” Mam Wali replied.

Baram firmly stated, “I am not following any individuals either.”

“I know,” Mam Wali responded, wearing an ironic smile. “If you were following them, you wouldn't be here with us now.”

Kafee, puzzled, asked, “Why hasn't anyone shared this information with us before?”

Mam Wali burst into laughter before replying, “Ha, ha, ha, ha. Who would there be to tell you? Certainly not rulers.”

Omar turned to Baram and inquired, “Do you think the United States and European countries are unaware of the terrible conditions we're living in now?”

Baram explained, “Of course, they are aware. The diplomatic task of our Kurdish parties in the US and Europe is to raise awareness.”

Omar pressed further, asking, “Awareness of what?”

“Of the dire situation of the Kurds in Kurdistan,” Baram replied.

Omar continued, “And when do you think these countries will speak up for us?”

Baram responded optimistically, “I'm sure they will when the time comes.”

Mam Wali shook his head and stated, “What you're saying is a delusion. Our ancestors spoke the truth when they said, 'Brsî xeu be kulêrewe abinêt' (hunger is the best sauce). Do you really believe they will speak up for us? Trust me, they will never do it; past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour.”

“Why do you think that?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali clarified, “Because I haven't learned it from books or others' statements.”

“Where did you learn it then?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali replied, “From pain.”

“Whose pain?” Baram questioned.

Mam Wali responded, “My own pain.”

“What did you learn from it?” Baram pressed.

Mam Wali replied, “I learned from reading history and analysing it, distinguishing lies from truth.”

“Why?” Baram continued to probe.

Mam Wali explained, “Because nothing exists beyond me. This vast world, in its entirety, exists within me. My existence proves their existence.”

“What do you mean?” Baram asked, still perplexed.

Mam Wali elaborated, “I mean what I said: without me, they don't exist.”

“I don't understand,” Baram admitted, clearly confused.

Mam Wali clarified further, “What I'm saying originates from within me. I've felt it, seen it, and I will react to it.”

“You shouldn't think that way; you're assessing the circumstances based on past experiences,” Baram responded.

Mam Wali replied, “I should, why not? Without the past, I mean my own past, not history, I wouldn't know what to tell you now. What brought me, you, and all these people into this cellar, those bombs and rockets that you hear falling on us, and the entire cycle of killings and destruction that you witness—none of it is new to me. For me, bringing foreign armies to our motherland and Kurds killing Kurds are neither a surprise nor a new phenomenon. Even the loss of my only son was not a new bereavement, as before that, I had witnessed the grief of other fathers and mothers.”

Baram lowered his head in understanding.

Mam Wali fell silent, lost in thought.

Meanwhile, Mina alternated between placing her right hand, left hand, and sometimes both hands on her mother's lap. She turned her head left and right, hoping that one day her mother would be able to write on both her palms. She knew that what her mother was writing on her palm was incomplete, limited to the use of just one finger. She longed to ask her mother, “I want to know what games the children in our neighbourhood play with each other? What stories they share? What secrets they reveal? What they wear? What are their plans for today and tomorrow? Who indulges in conspicuous consumption? Who stopped talking to her friend? Who reconnected with her friend? Who upsets whom? Who owns more pearls? Who bought new clothes? Who changed their hairstyle? Who started using makeup? What are they studying in school? Who is the class monitor? Who has been blamed by the teachers? What anthem do they sing in the class? Who volunteers to answer the teachers' questions quickly? Who copies exam answers from friends? Who leaves the exam hall first? I want to know everything and not miss out on any events.”

Kafee glanced at Baram and Mam Wali, then turned toward Mina. She placed her finger on Mina's palm and wrote, “My daughter, what's on your mind? Why are you in such a hurry?” Afterward, she removed her finger from Mina's palm and looked back at Baram and Mam Wali.

Samya asked Baram, “What will happen to the Kurdish mercenaries?”

Baram inquired, “Which ones?”

Samya clarified, “Those who directly participated in killing, injuring, causing harm, destruction, forced deportations, and looting people's properties in our villages and towns.”

Baram responded firmly, “They will all be taken to court and punished for the crimes they have committed.”

Mam Wali pursed his lips and replied, “By God, nothing will happen to them. They will escape punishment. They'll be brought back onto the stage with new titles. My son, for us Kurds, making a revolution is just a way to pass the time. In our view, our politicians are actors, which means they are allowed to play different opposing roles at different times.”

“What role?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali replied, “Today they play the role of an angel, tomorrow that of a devil, and in the days after that, they become killers, thieves, corrupt, looters, betraying their own homeland, and engaging in other immoral deeds.”

“Why?” Samya asked.

Mam Wali explained, “Because we can't understand ourselves and them very well.”

“We have countless experts,” Baram said.

Mam Wali questioned, “Who are they?”

“We've had historians, researchers, novelists, storytellers, journalists, sculptors, film producers, and singers,” Baram responded.

Mam Wali inquired, “What have they accomplished? And what will they do?”

“They've amassed a treasure trove of experiences for us and for our future generations,” Baram replied.

Mam Wali asked, “What should we do with them?”

“To remove the darkness from our eyes, to untangle the problems in our lives... I am very certain,” Baram responded.

Mam Wali moved towards Mina, placed his hand on her shoulder, and then turned to Baram, saying, “I am certain that, just as this blind, deaf, and mute girl has not benefited from them, which is nothing except disastrous, our future generations will be the same.”

Mina's face had turned red from Mam Wali's hand on her shoulder, and she had been smiling occasionally. However, when her mother relayed what had been said, her expression turned sad.

“Why?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali explained, “They talked and wrote, but they rarely put their words into practice in real life.”

“What should they have done? What do they need to do?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali released his hand from Mina's shoulder and responded, “They were expected to back their words with actions, and that expectation still exists.”

“What would have happened if they had done that? What will happen if they do?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali replied, “We wouldn't be in our current condition, and our future generations would not have to endure what we're experiencing. What about yourself? What do you see?" he asked, but Baram remained silent. “The situation you are witnessing now is the result of the lies that were recorded for us in the past,” Mam Wali continued.

“Who wrote them?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali responded, “Machiavellians.”

“Who are they?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali explained, “Those Machiavellians are like scavengers, waiting for events to unfold and then capitalizing on the aftermath.”

“What could they have done? Their job was to merely record events,” Baram reacted.

Mam Wali replied, “They treated events as commodities in the marketplace, tailoring their work based on what could be sold, often at the expense of the truth, fully aware that they might be remembered in the same way in the future.”

“What do they do?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali replied, “They ignore me, you, and the people, pretending that they cannot see or feel our sorrows, so we must be suspicious.”

“Suspicious of what?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali answered, “Suspicious of what's written.”

“Which ones?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali responded, “What was written in the past, what has just been written, and what will be written in the future.”

“What should we do?” Baram questioned.

Mam Wali replied, “We should rely on our own thinking and collectively decide our fate through discussions.”

“How can we do that?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali assured, “We can do it.”

“When?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali responded, “When we learn to think independently, that's when we can collectively and broadly decide.”

“What will happen then?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali answered, “We will transition from being sheep to becoming our own shepherds.”

“Then what will happen?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali clarified, “Our shepherds will have no jobs.”

“Why? What have innocent shepherds done?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali smiled and responded, “I don't mean the shepherds of cows, bulls, camels, sheep, goats, and so on.”

“So, which shepherds?” Baram asked, clearly perplexed.

Mam Wali replied, “The shepherds of human beings.”

**(Chapter -23)**

Omar approached Mam Wali and said, “I wish the Jewish were our shepherds.”

“Why?” Mam Wali asked.

Omar explained, “If the Jewish residents had remained in Halabja and hadn't been forced by the Iraqi regime to leave the country for Israel, perhaps today wouldn't be so dark.” After a pause he added, “They say that power in America is often influenced by the Jewish community.”

Mam Wali responded, “America prioritizes its commercial interests and international relationships over our concerns. They assess situations based on their interests, not on human rights. Tell me, aside from pursuing their own interests, when and where have they truly helped oppressed, people like us?”

Omar suggested, “Wouldn't it be more beneficial if the Kurds could somehow influence them?”

“To what end?” Mam Wali asked.

Omar replied, “To influence America in ways that benefit our cause.”

“What can the Kurds do?” Mam Wali asked.

Omar responded, “What do you mean? Blow up those petroleum pipelines that pass-through Turkey.”

“Who would do it?” Mam Wali whispered.

Omar replied, “Who else but the Peshmerga?”

“There would be no benefit for the Kurds in such an act. Blowing up those pipelines would be like poking a hole in the pockets of America and European countries. Anyone attempting such an action would face severe consequences,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “What would they do to him?”

“He would be destroyed,” Mam Wali responded. The noise made it difficult for them to hear each other, so he motioned for Baram and Omar to move to a corner of the cellar. There, he told Omar, “America, Europe, and other superpowers are well-informed about the situation we're in now.”

Omar asked, “How do they know?”

“In the 1970s, America was considered our friend. Wasn't it the country that supported us back then? They have known about us for quite some time,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar inquired, “Then why won't they help us again?”

“You know why,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Essentially, their support was not because we were oppressed,” Mam Wali clarified.

Omar asked, “So, what was it for?”

“Because we were naive, they could use us for their own purposes,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“To further their own plans and financial interests; it's not just America, all superpowers act similarly. They are well-aware of all the events, our vulnerability, and the ruthless Iraqi government,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “How?”

“Through their network of spies,” Mam Wali replied.

Omar asked, “What caused them to abandon us and not support us now?”

“They are supporting Iraq at the moment,” Mam Wali replied.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Because Iraq is currently opposing Iran,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Because Iranian government has become a threat to the Gulf countries,” Mam Wali elaborated.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Because those countries are friends of America and Europe,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “What kind of friends?”

“Friends of their own pockets,” Mam Wali replied with a wry smile.

Omar asked, “Why are they like that?”

“It's not just them; as I mentioned before, all superpowers are alike, including communist Russia, which won't distance itself from Saddam Hussein despite the sacrifice and destruction of our people, at least not for the sake of our proletariat,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Why indeed! Their system is driven by financial interests and money,” Mam Wali replied.

Omar asked, “What should we expect from them then?”

“Whatever expectations you may have, never expect them to be a shield for you,” Mam Wali advised.

Omar asked, “Like what?”

“To deter those aircraft that roam freely above us without fear,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Why? Because every single one of those aircraft is manufactured by the arms factories of those countries and sold by them. Have you not witnessed, within the last two days, how many children, women, and men in this town have been martyred by them? How many houses and buildings they have destroyed? How many animals they have killed? Imagine, the more aircraft, rockets, tanks, and weapons that bring death and destruction, the more these factories will thrive,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar took a deep breath and asked, “What can we do?”

“Like what?” Mam Wali asked.

Omar responded, “Change it.”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha,” Mam Wali laughed.

Omar repeated the question, “What can we do?”

“My son, what do you have that would make the Americans, Europeans, Russians, and their associates speak up for you or fear you? The petroleum is not under your control, you don’t have money or gold in your pockets, and you don't possess the force to bring about change,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “So, what do we have?”

“You have yourselves!” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “What?”

“You only have the forces,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Which forces?”

“These collaborators,” Mam Wali responded. The other inhabitant of the cellar, drawn by their conversation, approached and began listening attentively. Suddenly, the creaking of the cellar’s door grabbed their attention. A girl and a boy, their clothes covered with dust, entered, exchanged greetings, found a spot, and took a seat. Mam Wali glanced at them and resumed speaking, “Following foreign armies will always lead to perilous consequences. It creates the quagmire in which we find ourselves now, resulting in death, injury, destruction, and a mass exodus of our people from their homes.” He paused for a moment.

The boy stood up, swiftly surveyed the inhabitants, and introduced himself: “I'm Aram,” then he looked at Mam Wali and said, “The dangerous outcomes you mentioned began a long time ago.”

They all turned their attention to him.

“The outcomes vary,” Mam Wali responded.

The girl also stood up and introduced herself, “I'm Kizhan,” she continued, “In the early twentieth century, we didn't willingly invite the English and French forces into Kurdistan; they came without our permission. We fought them in some areas and aided them in others. For example, in this town, Adela Xanm provided substantial assistance to the English, but they didn't do anything for the Kurds, neither in gratitude for the help nor in response to our struggles or attempts at peace. Do you know why?”

“I know, my daughter,” Mam Wali responded.

Kizhan asked, “Why didn't they?”

“Because our main problem at that time, and even now, is that we didn't and don't understand ourselves,” Mam Wali responded.

Baram asked, “How?”

Mam Wali explained, “The distance between Halabja and Slemani is approximately 80 kilometres. Despite the fact that most of the inhabitants in both regions spoke the same language and dialect and shared the same religion, they had not been able to use their common elements as a means to understand each other and come together. Instead, there were differing viewpoints and disagreements, with Şêx Mehmud in Slêmani holding one perspective and Adela Xanm in Halabja holding another. The English, in their attempt to engage in a dialogue about whether the people in these areas desired war or peace, persisted for a considerable time but eventually lost hope of reaching a resolution.”

Omar asked, “Why?”

Mam Wali responded, “Because the English forces didn't comprehend the two regions.”

Baram reacted, “Who says that was the case?”

“Gholam Mirza Hossein Shirazi,” Mam Wali responded.

Baram asked, “Whose Mirza?”

“You don't know Gholam, let alone Mirza,” Mam Wali responded ironically.

Baram asked, “Who was he?”

“He was Adela Xanm and the King, her husband’s assistant,” Mam Wali replied.

Baram asked, “King of where?”

“Of this town, which is now a kingless and chaotic place,” Mam Wali responded.

Baram asked, “What did Gholam say?”

"In his 1912 book titled 'To Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in Disguise,' he states, 'The Kurds oppose elected government leaders and prefer their traditional system of hereditary chiefs, whom they believe are born to rule and are the best leaders for their people. They argue that their hereditary chiefs should lead in Eastern Asiatic Turkey and Kurdistan,” responded Mam Wali, quoting Gholam.

Baram reacted, “That was the case in the old days.”

“What kind of old days! Although it was said around seventy-five years ago, it still feels as fresh as if someone just said it,” Mam Wali explained.

Baram asked, “How long will we remain like this?”

“Until an individual or a group of individuals decide for all,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Why did the English forces become disillusioned with us?”

“At first, they expected us to present a united front, allowing them to make a decision regarding our request,” Mam Wali explained.

Omar asked, “And then?”

“They realized that if the leaders of two of our regions couldn't come to an agreement or see eye to eye, how could they relate to our concerns?” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Did they understand us?”

“They did not,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “Why weren't they patient enough to understand us?”

“Understanding us proved to be a complex puzzle for them. If they had been willing to wait for that puzzle to be solved, they would have had to stay here until now. Consequently, they had no choice but to make a decision,” Mam Wali explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because time is valuable to the English, other European countries, and America,” Mam Wali explained.

Baram asked, “What is time?”

“To them, time is money,” Mam Wali responded.

Omar asked, “What decision did they make?”

“The decision to leave us under the remnants of the defeated Ottoman Empire and confine us to this cellar, where we are all stuck now,” Mam Wali explained.

Kafee poured her heart out, asking, “God, where can I go? Where can I find shelter for this orphaned girl who has no one but me?”

Kizhan looked at Kafee with a heavy heart, then surveyed the others and said, “Aram and I are responsible for checking on the citizens. We've searched many places in the town. Many people are sheltered in cellars. The telephone line is down, and so is the electricity. People use lanterns, kerosene lamps, and candles at night. The public water system is broken, resulting in mud in the alleys and streets. People fetch water from the broken pipes at night. Food has become scarce, and families share bread flour and bake bread using wood, sharing it among themselves. Many have left the town and gone to deserted villages outside. Some families have encountered landmines in the mountains and lost their lives. Many children, women, and men have died in their houses, streets, and on the town's outskirts. Those attempting to flee to Slemani had no alternative but to brave the perilous journey across the ruined Zalm bridge. Some individuals tried to navigate the treacherous waters beneath the bridge, resulting in tragic outcomes for those who could not swim, leading to loss of life. Moreover, at the present moment, the Iranian and Iraqi governments’ bombardments persist in the vicinity of the bridge, intensifying the dangers faced by those seeking to escape.”

**(Chapter -24)**

The cellar had never been so quiet; even the children were hushed. The toddlers, who on other days would frequently cry out for milk or other reasons, were eerily silent. That entire day, they were mostly in a deep slumber. One could only wonder what dreams occupied their minds – were they pleasant visions or nightmarish scenes? These dreams, unable to be articulated until they grew and gained speech, remained an enigma, a puzzle that Samya and Omar each interpreted in their own way.

For the others – the women, men, and youths – the day was yet another arduous one, each second laden with enduring pain.

Mam Wali turned to Aram and Kizhan, a question in his gaze. “Who rules the town?” he inquired.

“The Iranian government’s army,” Aram replied.

Mam Wali queried further, “What about the Peshmerga?”

“The Peshmerga are present in town, but their power is limited. Some are occupied with aiding their kin in finding safe havens,” Aram explained.

Mam Wali probed, “How are people managing in these circumstances?”

“En route here, we observed families in the town’s outskirts returning,” Aram noted.

Mam Wali asked, “Returning to where?”

“To their homes, seeking refuge in their cellars,” replied Aram.

Mam Wali inquired, “But why?”

“They shared with us that the Peshmerga barred them from leaving the town,” Aram said.

Mam Wali pressed, “For what reason?”

“Peshmerga assured them that they would take control of the town’s governance henceforth, eliminating fears of the Iraqi aircraft,” Kizhan interjected.

With a chuckle, Mam Wali questioned, “Really? How?”

Kizhan elaborated, “They convinced the families that their anti-aircraft defences would effectively counter any aerial attacks.”

The other inhabitants in the cellar exchanged glances, yet remained silent.

“This cellar was one of the anticipated refuges. We believe there are other hideouts unknown to us,” Aram said.

Baram interjected, “Did you come here to assist or to dishearten us? What have you brought? Bread? Water? Milk for the babies? Medicine, or just fear and despair? The Peshmerga aren’t being careless; their actions are calculated and deliberate.”

“What kind of calculation?” Kizhan inquired.

“They're following a political strategy, as instructed,” Baram explained.

“Instructed by whom?” Kizhan pressed.

“By the leaders of their parties,” Baram answered.

“And which are these parties?” Kizhan continued.

“Those involved in the strategy to liberate this town,” Baram said.

“Why such a strategy?” asked Aram.

“They have insights into future developments,” Baram stated.

Aram, surprised, exclaimed, “What?!”

Baram replied, “They possess a deep understanding of both regional and global dynamics.”

“And what's at stake for us today due to this understanding?” Aram questioned.

“The stakes are significant,” Baram affirmed confidently.

“I'm aware of the stakes. Today, every young and old person might be rejoicing over the benefits of this so-called victory,” Aram responded, his tone laced with irony.

Baram inquired, “What's troubling you, then?”

“I'm not exactly troubled, but...” Aram trailed off.

“What is it?” Baram pressed.

“What I mean is, if what they call 'knowledge' might actually be folly,” Aram pointed out.

“And what about you? What knowledge do you bring?” Baram challenged.

“None,” Kizhan admitted.

“Then why speak at all?” Baram retorted.

“We may not have tangible supplies like bread, water, or milk for children, nor can we halt the bombings,” Kizhan explained.

“So, what can you do?” Baram probed.

“We can provide insight, help make sense of the unfolding events,” Kizhan offered.

Baram, with a hint of sarcasm, looked around at those gathered and remarked, “Hear that? They think they can rival our leaders.”

Aram, undeterred, asked, “And who are these leaders that we can't challenge? What makes them so invincible?”

Baram asked incredulously, “What do you mean 'who are they'? Have you ever encountered someone who can simultaneously speak to a person, read a newspaper, and listen to a radio in a foreign language?”

The cellar's inhabitants exchanged puzzled looks, but only Mam Wali spoke up, “I've never seen such a man, only heard of such characters in stories.”

Baram, frowning at Mam Wali, insisted, “It's not mere fiction; it's a reality beyond doubt. We have such a clever, charismatic leader, but unfortunately, we fail to appreciate him.”

Mam Wali scanned the faces around him and proposed, “The person Baram describes sounds like a futuristic device capable of listening, speaking, and reading all at once.”

“It's a human, not a device,” Baram asserted.

Mam Wali countered, “I'm certain it's neither.”

Baram, perplexed, asked, “What do you mean?”

Mam Wali replied, “It's a joke, as if it's normal to be both a revolutionary and a mercenary simultaneously.”

“Why so?” Baram queried.

“Because it's impossible to be a liberator and an oppressor, responsible and irresponsible, dead and a Talqin Reciter at the same time,” Mam Wali explained. His words evoked the solemnity of the Talqin, the prayers recited for the departed, underscoring life's irrevocable contrasts.

Baffled, Baram pressed, “Why do you say that?”

Mam Wali answered, “We should seize the opportunity while we can. Our biggest issue now is our fate, which remains uncertain for all of us.”

Failing to grasp the implication, Baram admitted, “I don’t understand.”

Mam Wali responded, “Who would listen to us? Who, except ourselves, worries about children and families?”

“I don’t know,” Baram responded.

Mam Wali elaborated, “Those supposed to care for us have put our lives in this dark day. We're caught between a rock and a hard place, with both options being unfavourable.”

“What should we do?” Baram asked.

Mam Wali answered with a hint of irony, “We can listen to both the martial music of occupation and our own national anthem simultaneously, distinguishing between freedom fighters and occupiers has become a musical challenge. We hold the ID of free men and the spoils of war. Do you even know who we are?”

“Who are we?” Baram echoed the question.

Mam Wali sighed, “We are helpless, abandoned, with no one to lend a hand, and no one to turn to.” He then slowly walked and took his seat.

“We are approximately 50 people in this cellar,” Aram said, then scanned the faces around him and added, “We need to ask ourselves a question.”

Baram asked, “What question?”

“Why have we crammed ourselves into this cellar?” Aram responded.

Baram asked, “What's wrong with it?”

“Although its dimensions are no more than 20-25 meters in length and width, there's nothing inherently wrong with it!” Aram explained.

Kafee commented, “We used to be more; those who had families and relatives were helped out earlier. Imagine how many others like us, helpless and unfortunate, might be hiding in cellars and other places throughout this town.” Mina's head still rested on her lap, slumbering peacefully; Kafee gently shifted it to a pile of clothes beside her, and she began to sob. With shaky hands, she used the edge of her shawl to wipe away her tears.

“Our questions should also be directed towards foreign powers. We should ask them: Do you know the dire conditions in which we currently exist? How many of us have lost their lives? How many have been injured? How many are now homeless? How many of us live in constant fear? How many of us, if lucky, go to bed hungry? How many of our neighbourhoods have been reduced to rubble?” proposed Kizhan.

Mam Wali responded, “What can questioning change?”

“I understand that asking these questions won't immediately change our situation. It's just a way to make the superpowers aware that we know they are tolerating the brutality of the Iraqi Ba’ath Party against us, and I have evidence to support my statement,” Kizhan responded.

Baram asked, “What evidence?”

“The methods they employ to communicate their silence and the extent of the killing, which are questions that may only be answered by future generations,” Kizan explained.

One of Samya's toddler sons woke up and began crying. She quickly placed him on her lap, turned her face toward the wall to avoid being seen by others, and started feeding him. Suddenly, her other toddler son also woke up, but she had no choice but to make him wait until the first one had enough milk.

Omar expressed his concern, “It seems like we've been condemned to die a long time ago. My primary worry is for my five-month-old twin sons; the stagnant tobacco smell in this cellar could suffocate them.”

“What I wanted to say is, before we point fingers at anyone, we should ask ourselves some questions,” Aram stated.

“What are those questions?” Omar asked.

Aram replied, “Do we and the Kurds from the East of Kurdistan (Iran) not share the same ethnicity? Isn't our country called Kurdistan? Isn't the language they speak, like ours, called Kurdish? Do their children read, write, and study in their mother tongue, learning their nation's history? Do they govern themselves, or are they ruled by others? Is the money they use printed in Kurdish? Can their cities, towns, villages, alleys, streets, mountains, valleys, and plains be referred to by their Kurdish names? Are there offices, organisations, and clubs that support the Kurdish cause? Do they have their own MPs and ministers, or have they been assigned to implement the oppressive plans of the occupiers? Is the content of their TVs, radios, newspapers, and magazines written and published in Kurdish to promote and preserve the Kurdish language and culture? Are their national resources used to improve their well-being and quality of life? As a nation with its distinct characteristics, is their right to self-determination recognized? Do they have their own Kurdish army, police, and security forces to protect the Kurds? Are the prisons free of Kurdish women, men, and children who have been detained solely for defending their nation? Is the 15-year history of the Islamic Republic of Iran not marked by the killing of Kurds, the destruction of Kurdistan's landscapes, and the assimilation of their cultures? Is it as if…”

Omar adjusted his hands on his hips, tightened his loose pştwên (Kurdish belt), and spoke, “The Kurds in the east of Kurdistan have nothing; take this relative of mine, for example.” He signalled to a young man, “His name is Mouloud, and he's from the East. He fled in fear for his life, mistreated by the Islamic Republic of Iran.” All eyes turned towards Mouloud. Omar continued, “I'm worried that the IRGC might discover him here.”

Mouloud appeared visibly tense, worry etched into every line of his slim body. He was pale and couldn't stand still, his body swaying in all directions. He alternated between moving his right and left foot forward and back and occasionally ran his long fingers through his black, curly hair.

As Omar mentioned Mouloud's name, the latter's face flushed red. He scanned the people around him with suspicion and began mumbling inaudibly before finally nodding to Omar’s explanation.

“We Kurds always seem to be perpetually ill-fated, as if misfortune is woven into the very fabric of our destiny,” Mam Wali expressed.

Omar, clearly disoriented, responded, “I'm struggling to understand—why would the Peshmerga bring the IRGC forces here? What could the IRGC possibly have to offer to this town?”

Mam Wali smiled, closed his eyes, and shook his head.

“Kill it, kill it, be quick!” were the sudden, roaring voices of the inhabitants that created a state of chaos.

A man said, “I saw it, it went into that hole.”

“They were two, what happened to the other one?” A woman inquired.

Another man pointed towards a corner and responded, “They went into that hole. We'll wait for them to come out one by one.”

“Who were they? What are you going to kill?” Mam Wali asked them loudly.

One of the men responded, “They were mice.”

Mam Wali replied, “Leave them alone. We can't outsmart them, even if we bring a handful of wheat seeds, a plate of cheese, twenty mouse traps, and a clowder of cats. We won't be able to either kill or catch them.”

“Why?” One of the men asked.

Mam Wali responded, “As long as we're here, even if they die of hunger in that hole, they won't abandon it.”

“Why?” Another man asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Because that hole is the homeland of those mice.”

A moment of silence hung in the air.

Kafee sat with her recently awakened daughter, Mina. She muttered, “As if our only problem is the mice,” then turned to Aram and Kizhan, asking, “You didn’t tell us…?”

“What?” Kizhan asked.

Kafee inquired, “Can we withdraw our money from the bank?”

“All the valuable equipment from the town’s offices, schools, and other departments, everything was confiscated,” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “By whom?”

“The IRGC,” Kizhan replied.

Kafee pressed, “What did they do with them?”

“They transferred them to Iran,” Kizan explained.

Kafee gathered her strength, slowly rising. She approached Aram and Kizhan, her face etched with worry and sorrow. She hesitantly asked Kizhan the dreaded question, “What about the bank?”

“The bank is no different,” Kizhan admitted.

Kafee's shock was palpable. She asked with tearful eyes, “What…?”

“They looted the bank as well,” Kizhan confirmed.

Kafee, her voice trembling with emotion, asked, “How did the Peshmerga allow that to happen?”

Mam Wali approached Kafee and comforted her, saying, “Don’t be upset, you're not alone,” Then, he turned his head toward a corner and pointed, asking Kafee, “Do you see that woman?”

Kafee looked around and inquired, “Which one?”

“The lady sitting with her young child,” Mam Wali replied.

Kafee asked again, “Which one?”

“The one with the black headdress,” Mam Wali responded.

Kafee asked, “Is she mourning?”

“Not just mourning,” Mam Wali replied.

Kafee inquired, “What else?”

“Her deceased husband's retirement money was in the bank,” Mam Wali explained.

Kafee sought clarification, “So, her deceased husband's retirement money was also stolen?”

Mam Wali confirmed, “According to Aram and Kizhan, what happened to you has happened to her as well.”

Kafee asked, “What was her husband's profession?”

Mam Wali responded, “He was a civil servant, and he passed away from natural causes.”

Kafee pressed further, “How much money had he deposited in the bank?”

“I don't have all the details, but he regularly deposited a portion of his earnings into the bank for his child's future, hoping it would be of help when the child grew up,” Mam Wali explained.

Kafee looked up towards the ceiling and said, “May God deal with them as they have dealt with us.”

“We knew that many people in the town and surrounding areas had kept their jewellery and money in the bank,” Kizhan clarified.

Kafee questioned, “So, why didn't you help us earlier?”

“We did attempt to approach the bank,” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “What did you do?”

“The IRGC prevented us from getting close; they wouldn't allow us near it,” Kizhan explained.

Kafee inquired, “Why didn't you try again?”

“We went the day after, but I wish we hadn't,” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “Why?”

“Just didn't want to witness it,” Kizhan replied.

Kafee questioned, “What did you see?”

“It had been completely demolished by TNT; there was nothing left inside,” Kizhan explained.

Kafee exclaimed, “Nothing at all?!”

“Absolutely nothing, except heaps of folders, burnt papers mixed with bits of bricks and shattered glass scattered everywhere amid the wreckage caused by the explosion,” Kizhan replied.

Kafee, with a numb voice, asked, “Were there any people?”

“We didn't come across anyone except for an elderly woman,” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “What was she doing?”

“She was walking amidst the debris,” Kizhan replied.

Kafee inquired, “Why?”

“She was moving around, picking up single dusty 5 and 10 fils coins that were left behind,” Kizhan explained.

Kafee, while wiping away her tears, said, “Now they should come to us, now that we are here.”

“Who?” Kizhan asked.

Kafee replied, “Those who brought us to this point.”

“What can we do?” Kizhan inquired.

Kafee responded bitterly, “Why don't they just take the clothes off our backs as well? Everything I had was in that bank, saved for a rainy day. I worked as a baker for nine years, scrimping and saving every dinar, hoping it would secure Mina's future without dependency or desperation after I retired or passed away. Little did I know, I was just amassing it for the looters.”

“Collaborating with the enemy's forces, ushering them into our midst, brings not only defeat but also the pillaging of our people's hard-earned wealth. I have long believed that while lost money may find its way back, the stain on a nation's honour and the plunder of its treasures and resources are irreparable. They leave scars that neither time nor fortune can heal,” Mam Wali said solemnly.

Kizhan replied, “The very things you've mentioned have wounded us deeply. We must ensure that future generations are not shielded from the truth of these disgraces.”

“What should we do?” Mam Wali asked.

Kizhan responded, “We should make them aware.”

“Of what?” Mam Wali asked.

Kizhan replied, “Of the humiliations that are being inflicted upon our honour and our homeland.”

Mam Wali questioned, “So, what is the benefit of making them aware?”

“It could serve as a valuable historical lesson,” Kizhan suggested thoughtfully.

Mali Wali, with a hint of irony, asked, “And what benefit would history offer them?”

“It might challenge their perspectives and provoke insightful questions,” Kizhan elaborated.

Mam Wali curled his lips and responded, “Questions about what?”

“Questions about the Kurdish forces that are currently in the town,” Kizhan explained.

Mam Wali asked, “Who are they?”

“They represent different political parties, each with distinct ideologies, thoughts, and beliefs,” Kizhan responded.

Mam Wali asked, “Ideologies, thoughts, and beliefs?!”

“From nationalists to socialists, democrats to Islamists,” Aram explained.

Mam Wali asked ironically, “Which of these ideologies, thoughts, and beliefs deems it normal to enable and guide foreign forces in endangering the lives of thousands of women, men, and children in this town?”

“I don't understand it either!” Aram expressed with frustration. “Why are they allowing foreign military forces to turn this town into a battleground for their political and military conflicts? This place shouldn't be a sanctuary for foreign armies, nor should it bear the burden of Iran's urban, rural, and agricultural devastation, or the casualties and displacement of soldiers and civilians from that country, caused by the Iraqi army?”

Mam Wali inquired, “Then what motivates the IRGC to attack us?”

“There is an interest in occupation,” Aram replied.

Mam Wali questioned, “Why does the Peshmerga support the Iranian government?”

“They not only brought devastation upon us…” Aram started to explain.

Mam Wali interrupted him and asked, “What happened?”

“The IRGC attacked the political parties of the East of Kurdistan yesterday,” Aram responded.

Mam Wali asked, “Which ones?”

“Kurdistan Democratic Party and Komala,” Aram replied.

Mam Wali inquired, “What happened to them?”

“They martyred 72 members of Komala’s Shwan Battalion,” Aram explained.

Mam Wali asked, “Where?”

“In the Horaman mountains, between the South and the East of Kurdistan,” Aram responded.

Kafee wailed, “I wonder what sorrow their mothers endure now.” She turned to Aram and asked, “Why didn't our Peshmerga and leaders warn them in advance? Why didn't they consult with them?”

“Our leaders are just like me,” Mam Wali said.

Aram asked, “Who are they?”

“They don’t seem to value history,” Mam Wali responded.

Baram asked, “What's your proof?”

“The proof is evident in these sobering examples I'm witnessing right now with my own eyes. If our leaders had learned from both recent and distant history, our current situation would be different. To them, history appears to be nothing more than a collection of meaningless, worthless, and trivial books,” Mam Wali commented.

Kizhan scanned the inhabitants of the cellar and said, “We wish we could stay with you longer, but unfortunately, we have to leave. We need to visit the town's other neighbourhoods, just as we brought you news, to convey your news to them…” As she spoke, the others gradually stood up and gathered around her and Aram.

Omar pleaded, “Why are you leaving us? Don't leave us without a solution.”

“Unfortunately, we don't have any solution. We are in the same desperate situation as you,” Aram responded.

Omar asked, “So, what should we do?”

“Follow your own intuition and plan, shape your destiny through your personal choices,” Aram proposed.

Omar replied, “My problem isn't something I can solve simply through my own decision-making. Where could I possibly go with all these little children in tow?” Several of his children, sensing the tension, gathered around their parents, offering silent support.

Aram and Kizhan exchanged empathetic glances.

“I wish we could find a solution for you, not just for you and your family, but for all the inhabitants of this cellar and everyone in the town and its surrounding areas, and move them to a safe place,” Kizhan expressed.

Aram added, “I wish we could relocate our entire country to another star!”

“So that its people, birds, mountains, seas, rivers, lakes, ponds, furrows, canals, trees, grasses, hay, clouds, snow, rain, its tropical and gentle polar breezes, and the scents of its newly blossomed flowers on the brink of the upcoming spring, could be spared from the devastation of napalm, rockets, and bullets from this destructive war,” Kizhan added.

Kafee moved closer to Kizhan and Aram. She grasped Aram's belt firmly, then let go and approached Kizhan. Standing between them, she alternated her gaze between the two and said, “Kizhan, my love for you is as deep as my love for Mina; Aram, you are like a son to me. Please, think of us as your mother and sister. Take us with you. We have no one else. Don’t leave us alone.”

Aram placed one hand on Mina's shoulder and the other on Kafee's, and reassured them, “My dear mother, we are leaving this cellar, but we will never leave the town behind. We will search neighbourhood by neighbourhood, alley by alley, entering every cellar we find. We will listen to the pain and wishes of the citizens, inform them of what we know and understand.”

“What should we do?” Kafee asked.

Kizhan responded, “At the moment, you won't find a better cellar than this. The aircraft bombardment has been silent for a while, but their timing is uncertain; it could happen at any moment and start pounding the town. Therefore, it's better for you and Mina to remain here.”

“Don't worry, we won't leave you alone. Wherever we go, we will take you with us,” Omar reassured Kafee.

The cellar was gradually getting darker. One of the kerosene lamps rested in a wall niche by the window. Samya picked it up, lit it, and carried it over to Aram and Kizhan. The lamp cast a soft, warm glow, bathing their faces in a gentle, yellowish light. This warm illumination contrasted starkly with the uneasy tension etched in their expressions.

The cellar's door remained slightly ajar, and peering outside through its opening, all that was visible was the murky veil of an algae bloom evening and the dark silhouettes of the pine trees in the open yard.

Kizhan and Aram bid farewell to everyone. Samya, still holding her lamp, guided them to the door. After seeing them off, she returned and set the lamp in the centre of the cellar, casting light upon the anxious faces gathered around.

Apart from the distant sound of children playing, a heavy silence enveloped the room.

A woman with two children, around the ages of 6 and 4, approached Baram, her voice filled with worry. She said, “I'm very anxious.”

“Why?” Baram inquired.

The woman responded, “My husband left for Slemani four days ago and hasn't returned yet. I don't know what to do.”

“Give me his name; I'll try to reach out to the Peshmerga. He might have returned and joined them,” Baram offered.

The woman responded with certainty, “I don't think so.”

“Why not?” Baram asked.

The woman explained, “He's not one of those indifferent men who would abandon their children for other things. The bombardments haven't stopped, so how could he return? There's no remaining connection between here and Slemani; what driver would risk their life to drive in these conditions? The Zam bridge has been destroyed; how can he come back? He can't just fly over it! I don't know what to do with these little children.”

“Don't be upset; God is great,” Baram tried to comfort her.

The woman responded, “How can I not be? Last spring, the Ba’ath Party buried two of my brothers alive, along with others.”

“Why?” Baram asked.

The woman replied, “They took part in a demonstration.”

“Where?” Baram inquired.

The woman responded, “In our town.”

“Don't be scared,” Baram offered reassurance.

The woman responded, “How can I not be scared? I'm afraid I may lose my husband too.”

“We've understood that the Peshmerga aren't capable of doing anything for us. What about the tribal leaders and religious preachers? Why can't they come together?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali inquired, “What should they do?”

“To make a decision,” Kafee responded.

Mam Wali asked, “A decision about what?”

“About our lives,” Kafee responded.

Mam Wali replied, “Some of the Peshmergas are related to the tribes and have already informed them about what actions to take. As for the preachers, only a few are members of Islamic movements. Those who aren't affiliated with any group are just like us – confused, helpless, and powerless.”

“I knew from the very beginning that Aram and Kizhan’s trivial philosophy would only serve to sow feelings of hopelessness in us,” Baram reacted.

Omar asked, “Baram, how can we avoid feeling hopeless? How long can we hold on to hope? Can you instil hope in us? Can you find a solution for us? Tell us, where can we find a place that is safe and free from trouble to settle? Where is a peaceful refuge?”

The sound of a thunderstorm outside filled the cellar, accompanied by a steady downpour of rain. Strong winds, carrying raindrops, penetrated through the window. These droplets, drawn by the mesmerizing dance of the lamp's flame, touched the glass globe, momentarily clinging before eventually sliding down to the base of the lamp.

Samya and Omar, along with other parents, covered their children with blankets.

Mam Wali found an empty sack and covered the window with it.

“It might be better if we leave this cellar,” Omar told Samya.

Samya, perplexed, asked, “Why?”

“Our lives are in danger,” Omar explained.

Samya asked, “What's our plan?”

“To leave,” Omar responded.

Samya asked, “How?”

“I'll carry Mohammad and Ahmed,” Omar replied.

Samya asked, “What will you do with them?”

“Feed them tomorrow morning before I take them,” Omar explained.

Samya asked, “Where are you taking them?”

“Outside of the town,” Omar replied.

Samya asked, “What about us?”

“Sarkawt, our son-in-law with the tractor, should come back soon,” Omar responded.

Samya reminded him, “Sarkawt is not here yet.”

“He won't go anywhere; he should come back soon,” Omar assured her.

Samya asked, “Where should we meet?”

“Outside the town I said, in Chawg village,” Omar replied.

Kafee was on her prayer mat; she quickly stopped praying, turned her face toward Omar, and said, “May God bless you. Can you ask your son-in-law not to forget me and my daughter Mina?”

“Don't worry; he won't forget,” Omar responded.

Kafee looked up to the heavens with open palms and said, “God, for the sake of the Almighty, find us a solution.”

“You're right; we should have decided to leave here earlier,” Mam Wali said, agreeing with Omar's plan.

Omar silently gave Mam Wali a fleeting glance.

**(Chapter -25)**

It was dawn, the factory yard was still wet from rain. A light breeze blew now and then, lifting dust from under the rubble pile and carrying it through the cellar door. Inside, this dust mingled with the smells of tobacco leaves and breath, creating a unique scent in the air.

Nature followed its natural course. Yet it was the unnatural disposition of humanity that yearned to alter the season of blossoming buds, tulips, and the delicate dance of dew upon leaves, transforming the time of saplings' growth into an era of defoliation, breaking, and the descent of leaves. It was not quite winter yet – certainly not a period for being sequestered in cellars, nor a time for anxiety and melancholy.

As the days edged closer to spring, the number of buds flowering increased exponentially – one, two, three, hundreds, thousands, millions, and billions of blooms; the spring's flow strengthened, cascading, shedding tears of joy upon the earth. Ballambo and Shnrwe Mountains waited with bated breath, gradually shedding their snowy cloaks to be caressed by the warm sun's rays.

The women as if they didn’t sleep since last night guarding, were covering the children with blankets. In a distance, the crowing of a rooster heard, signalling the approach of a new day. Kafee stood up, raised the wick a bit to increase the light, removed the sack from the window, she saw the crack of dawn, a quick draft of cold wind hit her face before accessing the cellar and again making the wick’s flame dance, and it also revived the scent of tobacco leaves in a way that one could feel that is in a tobacco field.

Two butterflies were fluttering around the glass of the lamp with no hesitation, eagerly taking part in the flame's dance.

Kafee covered Mina with her blanket properly, glanced at those asleep around them and felt that the cellar’s door was open, she went and closed it, came back and sat, while looking at the butterflies, she nodded off as if she was lulled by their collective and calm dance. It doesn’t take her long to wake up, she went to the door, shuffled up its stairs, opened the door, went out and shut it behind. Outside, in the open yard, she looked at her surrounding, walked around, scanned the stones, bricks, metals, shredded tobacco sacks, papers pilled by the bombardments. She found two pieces of tobacco leaved in the rubble and laid them down on a big flat stone, and sat down on a concrete block near the cellar door. She took out her cigarette tin and rolling papers in her Salte (Kurdish short jacket), rolled a cigarette and place it on a metal rubble close by on her front, then unfolded her dress’s long sleeve that folded around her jacket cuff on her left hand, grab its end and tried a lot by her fingers to pen a knot she had made but couldn’t do it, she took it to her mouth to open it by her teeth, again couldn’t do it, then she became fully persuaded that denture-teeth cannot open a knot. She stood up and put the knot on a broken brick, beat it with a sharp piece of stone until it frayed, opened and took out her wick lighter, sat down again, lighted the cigarette and inhaled it deeply. Right in front of her shoes, on the ground, a line of foraging ants moved with urgency, each carrying a piece of wheat or hay, heading towards a hole near the cellar door, as if they had an emergency plan ahead to execute. The sunlight was raising bit by bit from the east behind the Shnrwe Mountain, hitting their shiny bodies, highlighting their scuttling movement.

The sound of footsteps heard, followed by the crick of opening the cellar’s front door. Kafee turned her face toward it and listened attentively and told herself, “Anyone that might be would have been awakened by my clack-clack,” head of Mina emerged from it crawling to get out, Kafee went towards her to help before saying, “my darling, why you came out,” she took her hand, guided her and made her sit beside herself.

Mina wore her hair in two braids, each twisted with a knot midway, framing her face and falling to her chest. The ends of the braids, frayed and tousled, added a playful contrast to their neatness, hinting at a carefree spirit. Her silhouette was subtle and elegant, a serene expression gracing her face. The narrow shape of her nose, her slender lips, and cheeks — a soft reddish hue, as if tenderly kissed by the sun, glowing with a warmth that seemed almost delicate to the touch. Lost in the vast ocean of her dreams, dreams still shapeless and unknown, she radiated a quiet determination, a promise that these visions could one day become her reality.

Kafee was in a quandary, too caught up in her thoughts.

Bit by bit, the sun's rays grew warmer, further drying the tobacco leaves she spread on the stone, their golden colour shining more brightly. Steam rose from the damp ground beneath the pine trees in the open yard. What steam? It was the steam of the earth, releasing moisture after having drunk its fill from the ceased rain.

Mina suddenly put her hand in her mother's hand and squeezed.

Kafee startled, looked at her cigarette and quickly placed on the ground, breathed deeply, put her index finger on Mina’s palm and wrote, “My darling, it’s not finished yet, we still have to be here.”

Mina shacked her head.

“I understand, my dear, that you are upset. You feel the sunrise and the warmth of its rays, but sadly, none of these bring news of an end to our misfortunes. They don't signal progress, nor do they heal the wounds or dispel the fears of the people in this town and its surrounding areas,” Kafee explained to her. She then picked up the cigarette from the floor, took a single inhale, and began to cough.

A group of people appeared in the distance, swiftly approaching Kafee and Mina. Kafee, noticing them, stubbed out her cigarette and attentively watched their approach, shading her eyes. She then stood up and moved toward them. Recognizing Aram and Kizhan, now accompanied by an armed man, she warmly hugged each of them in turn. Quickly, she grabbed Mina's hand, and they all headed towards the cellar door.

Upon entering the cellar, the inhabitants erupted with cheers and expressions of joy, relieved by their arrival. “Thank God they're here, the Peshmerga have come to help us,” they exclaimed.

Baram, lifting his gaze, surveyed the crowd and declared confidently, multiple times, “Didn't I tell you? In politics, patience is key.”

The inhabitants eagerly and swiftly surrounded the newcomers, welcoming them.

“Please, take your seats,” Kizhan politely requested of the inhabitants while standing with Aram and the armed man beside each other.

The inhabitants before sitting, they repeatedly asked Kizhan, “Please darling, what have you done for us…?” They were all gazing at the three.

The armed man removed the magazine pouches from his waist and set down his Kalashnikov against the wall behind him. He then turned to look at the inhabitants and said, “I am now an individual like you.”

The inhabitants looked at each other perplexedly without saying anything, except Baram who asked, “Are you a Peshmerga?”

“Yes, I am?” The armed man responded after gazing at him briefly, raised his head in pride and added, “Why?”

Baram responded, “Don’t take me wrong, the reason I asked you because you are the reliable sons of our nation’s hard days and its pillars of strength.”

“I would like to let you know that it’s not yet not known what your fate and that of other citizens would be. We have visited most of the town’s known cellars, people in there don’t know what to do, they are worried about their families and assets,” Kizhan explained to the inhabitants after interrupting Baram.

Baram with a frowned face expression said, “They are back gain, to demoralise people.”

The inhabitants' body language suggested they were not interested in taking Kizhan's words seriously. Their gazes and attention were primarily focused on the Peshmerga, indicating they were more eager to hear what he had to say.

“I don’t have any assets or wealth to be worried for, except these children, I don’t know what to do to protect them?” Omar expressed.

Kafee joined, “What I had was looted in the bank, I wonder if someone appears and helps me and my daughter for the sake of God,” she then looked at Kizhan and Aram and added, “God is the guide for destitute, my heart told me, I knew you and Peshmerga come and take us with you.”

It seemed that what Kafee said had given hope to the other inhabitants, as they neared more to the three, and asked, “Is it true, you will take us with you?”

“My dear sisters and brothers, please listen to me, I came here to ask for your forgiveness.” The Peshmerga told them.

The inhabitants became bewildered and looked at each other, “Asking forgiveness from whom?” they asked, then they all gazed at him sharply, “We have to ask for your forgiveness, we thank you very much for coming to rescue us from this dark day,” they said.

“No…No, your duty is not to thank me, is your sense of compassion, I beg you to forgive me,” the Peshmerga requested.

Kafee told him, “My son, we regard you as our own son, we are sure you be compassionate towards us, and worry about us, if you were not, you wouldn’t be here today.”

Baram while moving toward the Peshmerga’s Kalashnikov and pouch, said “Asking forgiveness from whom? If you are tired of struggling, I am ready to carry your weapon?” He was about to reach the Kalashnikov and the pouches, but Kizhan and Aram stopped him, and asked him to pull back.

The Peshmerga looked at Baram and said, “Don’t be offended, it would be better if that weapons and pouches lay down there, it’s paramount we throw-away our weapons.”

Baram turned his face toward Aram and Kizhan and told them, “You are undermining people's morale. When you first came and I listened to you, I realized straightaway that your aim is to dishearten us. My anticipation was not wrong, as during these days of struggle, you have managed to sap the spirit of this Peshmerga.”

"There is no more a thing to be called struggle, no one has disheartened me, I personally didn't want to lose my morale. I am a Peshmerga and don't want my reputation to be tarnished, to be embarrassed in front of you, to betray the memory of the martyrs, and to deceive my comrades who are still in prison," the Peshmerga expressed.

Baram asked, “Do you want to show your stand?”

“Not only for myself,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “For who else?”

“For your powerlessness, innocence and loneliness,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram, “Why?”

“For the sake of truth,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram inquired, “Which truth?”

“Selfishness and irresponsible behaviour of those responsible,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “Who are they?”

“Those who led this town’s people into these dark days,” the peshmerga confirmed.

Baram asked, “If that's the case, why did you become a Peshmerga?”

The Peshmerga responded firmly, “To lift the oppression from your shoulders. My holy objective is to ensure a good fate for you, for all of us. We must not simply replace one enemy with another.” He paused briefly, his gaze sweeping over the inhabitants, then continued, “You’ve witnessed the downfall of the Ba’ath Party in this town and the surrounding areas, haven't you? This party, which decimated and scorched our villages and towns, and continues to kill our people in other Kurdish regions under its control, is now being routed. Have you seen how they have fled from this area?”

Baram nodded thoughtfully and said, “I know, but what is better than that?” His question lingered in the air, suggesting a deeper contemplation of the situation beyond the immediate consequences.

“OK, but…” the Peshmerga tried to respond.

Baram interrupted and asked him, “But what?”

“Another enemy replaced the Ba’ath Party now,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “Which enemy?”

“The one that toppled the Ba’ath Party,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “Why it didn’t do a good thing?”

“It did good or bad? is not our question,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram inquired, “What is our question?”

“Our question is that what it did it for?” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram responded, “For us.”

“No,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “So, what it did it for?”

“For itself,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “What it did?”

“Achieved a big success for itself,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram responded, “It’s our success too.”

“No, it’s not mine, not yours, and not that of any Kurds,” the Peshmerga reacted.

Baram said, “How come! So, what we have obtained?”

“Shedding our blood and destruction of our town,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram responded, “No achievement can be obtained without scarification.”

“It’s not an achievement,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “What is that?”

“An abuse,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “What abuse?”

“Belittling,” the Peshmerga responded.

Baram asked, “What belittling?”

The Peshmerga explained, “It was belittling, and I didn't want to be counted among those who engaged in it,” he then stretched out his hand, grasped the edge of his Kurdish belt, and used it to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

Silence dominated the cellar briefly.

Breaking the silence with their cries, Samya's children prompted her to gently turn back, face the wall, and begin breastfeeding them.

Mam Wali approached the Peshmerga, placed his hands on his shoulders, and looked deeply into his eyes. With his throat choked by impending cries and his voice heavy with unspoken sorrow, he said, “You've reawakened the wounds of my son in my heart,” he then kissed the Peshmerga's forehead and stepped back.

Overcome with anxiety and a sense of powerlessness, Mouloud sat with his knees drawn up, his hands resting on them, and his head buried in his palms, embodying the very image of despair.

Mina reached out for her mother's hands several times, but couldn't find them, unaware that her mother was silently crying and wiping away her tears.

While feeding her babies, Samya's tears fell onto them, as if inviting them to join in her sobbing.

Omar glanced briefly at Samya before approaching the Peshmerga. He firmly grasped the Peshmerga's wrists and asked, “My brother, what is our solution?”

The Peshmerga replied, “There is no solution. The forces that replaced the Ba’ath Party has shown no mercy. They're not here to improve things, develop our town, or create a better life for us and our children, now or in the future.”

“Why they don’t want to stay?” Kafee asked.

The Peshmerga responded, “No.”

“Why?” Kafee asked.

The Peshmerga responded, “If they had the plan to stay, they wouldn’t dissemble our town’s central electricity power station and its equipment, they wouldn’t extract the electricity poles one by one, they wouldn’t collect their wires and transfer them.”

Kafee asked, “To where?”

The Peshmerga replied, “To Iran. You are welcome to witness it firsthand. Observe how they empty the contents of schools and offices, claiming them as their own. See how every book in the public library is taken, a clear intent to erase all traces of the amenities and infrastructure connected to this town.”

“Can you hear how they became Hulagu Khan of the 20th century, where are they taking 13, 000 books to? How they understand them? What they will do with them?” Mam Wali commented ironically.

Omar looked at Baram, with a frowned face put his head down.

Kafee asked, “What is wrong with the clans and tribes of this town? They cannot stop them?”

Kizhan responded, “The decimation and the looting that the Iranian government’s forces are engaged in doing here cannot be stopped by clans and tribes.”

Kafee asked ironically, “Why can't they stop it? Why are they ready to wipe out each other for cutting the tail of a donkey?”

“Because the donkey is valuable,” Kizhan replied, laughing.

Kafee affirmed her response, saying, “You're right, my daughter. Thousands of lives have been lost in retaliation for such acts.”

“I know. As I've said, the donkey is valuable,” Kizhan reiterated with emphasis.

Mam Wali asked, “So why they regard donkeys as idiot, stubborn, unintelligent, low status, foolish and inferior animal?!”

“There is a reason?” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “What is that?”

“A lack of understanding,” Kizhan responded.

Kafee asked, “Of what?”

“The innocence and tonelessness of donkeys,” Kizhan replied.

Kafee asked, “What about us?”

“The capabilities of clans and tribes,” Kizhan answered.

Mam Wali asked Kizhan, “My daughter, Kafee doesn’t understand it well. Could you explain it to her?”

Kizhan replied, “I mean that the clans and the tribes, at best, can only represent themselves. However, the entire populace of the town is now under threat, regardless of their religion, class, and background. It's the duty of the Kurdish forces to safeguard all of us without any exceptions, in line with patriotic principles. This includes protecting our inhabitants and national resources, as well as all Kurds and other ethnic groups, not just here but in all parts of our divided and occupied homeland.” Kizhan’s explanation was meant for everyone, but she directed her gaze towards Kafee.

“Is this a liberation or an occupation? Why don’t they clarify it to us?” Omar asked, not directing the question to anyone in particular.

Mam Wali responded, “Who should clarify it to you?”

“My son, you know better than any of us. We need to know whether they have occupied our town or not. Do you know when they will return the money and jewellery of the people back?” Kafee asked the Peshmerga.

Mam Wali replied, “They will not return it. They will take all that remains with us too. An occupation has one name but manifests in thousands and one deplorable acts.”

“It’s not their assets to take them without permission,” Kafee interjected.

Mam Wali responded, “The IRGC has asked! But they didn’t ask you, me, or the other people of the town.”

“Why?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “The answer is simple.”

“What is it?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “They treat us as if we’re non-existent.”

“What about our forces?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “co-operators.”

“Why?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Because they help them.”

“What they do for them?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “They protect their interests; there is a proverb that says, ‘Even a small weakness will open the door for a bigger problem.’ If the Kurdish forces had not promised them in advance, they wouldn’t be with them today.”

“Do you think they have asked every single Peshmergas? I don’t think so,” Kafee said.

Mam Wali responded, “Why you don’t think so?”

“Which boy? Which girl? How could they be so treacherous and ingrate as to bring looters to their own homeland, homes, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, and children?” Kafee responded.

Mam Wali explained, “They haven’t asked every single Peshmergas.”

“Are you sure?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “If I were not sure, this Peshmerga wouldn’t be here with us now.”

“So, who did they ask?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “The heads of the Kurdish forces.”

“Why the Peshmergas listen to them?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Because they are followers.”

“What do you mean?” Kafee inquired.

Mam Wali responded, “If you choose to follow someone, you must also be obedient to them.”

“Were the Peshmerga also following and obeying them in dragging this looting and destructive army?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Undoubtedly.”

“How?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “If they hadn’t been following and obeying them, we would have more than this single Peshmerga with us.”

“The Peshmergas are sons of this homeland, what power do they have?” Kafee inquired.

Mam Wali responded, “They have the power.”

“Which power,” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “It's the power of being not naive but rebellious and disobedient towards the irresponsible orders of their leaders.”

“What they should do?” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Not to listen to their leaders.”

“What would happen, if they do,” Kafee asked.

Mam Wali responded, “Let me give you an example, if my sone didn’t listen to them, I wouldn’t be a lonely grievous father today,” He sighed deeply and became quiet.

“What shall we do brother? What is our option? may God bless you and we, too,” Kafee said trying to console him.

Kizhan responded, “When a leader doesn’t listen to his citizen, how to expect him to listen to his Peshmergas.”

“Why he doesn’t listen to his Peshmergas?” Kafee asked.

Kizhan responded, “Never regard that as a strange act.”

“Why?” Kafee asked.

Kizan responded, “In this context, the Peshmergas are more the executors of their leader's desires than the people's will.”

Omar, intrigued, followed up, “But why has it been like this?”

Kizhan explained, “That's how it's been up to this very moment.”

Omar asked, “Why?”

“Thirteen years ago, before the unilateral decision to capitulate in 1975, ending the Kurdish revolution, was there any consultation with the Peshmergas? Following this capitulation, did any leader publicly explain or justify the reasons for this decision in a letter, a recorded video statement, or another form of communication to the Peshmergas and the public? Was there ever an apology issued to us, possibly through a video or another medium?”

The inhabitants exchanged brief glances. Among them, a lady spoke up, “No, and that's exactly why they still don't value us today.”

“Why is that?” Omar inquired.

Mam Wali answered, “Because neither they nor we have changed.”

A man among them raised a question with a hint of irony, “Has any low-ranking official ever bothered to stoop to our level, let alone a leader taking the time to respond to us?”

Baram sharply retorted, “A leader is big.”

Mam Wali quickly countered, “No one is truly big.”

“What about those so-called big leaders?” Baram prodded.

Mam Wali replied, “They are the same kind of human beings as you and me.”

“Then why are they considered big?” Baram pressed on.

Mam Wali explained, “They aren't inherently big; they've been made to seem big.”

“Who made them seem big?” Baram inquired.

Mam Wali replied, “Narrow-minded human beings.”

“Who are they?” asked Baram.

“Mercenary writers,” Mam Wali explained.

“But why do they do it?” inquired Omar.

“For money. They inflate people's importance to the public,” Mam Wali said.

“How do they achieve this?” Omar pressed.

“Through the manipulation of money,” responded Mam Wali.

“But why?” Omar continued.

Mam Wali answered, “To afford better food, drink, and clothing.”

“Is that the sole purpose of life?” Omar wondered.

“It's the extent of their vision. Our ancestors were wise to say: A mercenary's nature is inherently non-patriotic.”

Omar asked, “Is it possible for them to change their ways?”

Mam Wali responded firmly, “No, they cannot.”

“Why not?” Omar pressed for an explanation.

Mam Wali elaborated, “They are akin to air pumps, essential only if there are tires and balloons to inflate. Without tires, pumps serve no purpose. Similarly, these writers are important in their own area, but their relevance is solely when there's profit to be made, disregarding the true essence of writing.”

“The leaders are not in need of anyone to praise them,” Baram reacted.

Mam Wali responded, “They may not need anyone, but they definitely need those pumps.”

“What did they need them for?” Baram asked unhappily.

Mam Wali demonstrated with his hands and answered, “For pumping.”

“I don’t understand,” Baram inquired, puzzled.

Mam Wali replied with a hint of irony, “How many more examples do I need to give? If our leaders were open-minded, you, I, and everyone here wouldn’t be stuck in this cellar.”

“Let’s encourage people to raise their own awareness, to make decisions independently, not relying on others for help or blaming the leaders!” Baram suggested.

Mam Wali agreed, “You’ve expressed what’s in my heart and the hearts of those who think like us.”

“Therefore, it's now clear to all of us,” Kizhan interjected.

Baram was confused. “What is clear?”

“Our leaders, instead of helping, have only harmed and devalued us,” Kizhan clarified.

Baram objected, “They have helped, what do you mean?”

“Let me rephrase it. Kurds and Kurdistan, our people and our land, if valued by them, would mean they’d care for us, or at least inform us. If they respected our homeland, they wouldn’t have allowed our enemies to come here to kill, loot, and destroy,” Mam Wali elaborated.

“That’s not true, they have always respected us,” Baram argued.

“That is true, but…” Mam Wali started.

“But what?” Baram pressed.

“It's like using us as tools,” Mam Wali explained.

Baram retorted, “No one respects anyone without reason. Why should they?”

“That's true, but…” Mam Wali responded.

“But what?” Baram interrupted again.

“To protect their tribal interests and their families’,” Mam Wali revealed.

“Why?” Baram probed further.

“To maintain their power and fulfil their desires,” Mam Wali concluded.

“They’re still our leaders,” Baram stated firmly.

“Leaders? Responsible for the people and the homeland?!” Mam Wali questioned sarcastically.

“Yes,” Baram affirmed.

“Responsibility means nurturing like a parent. In other words, its fatherhood, motherhood, and genuine care. Tell me, what kind of parents would endanger their children by entrusting their fate to a malevolent person?”

Baram replied, “The leaders have privileges.”

“Who gave them these privileges?” several inhabitants questioned one after another.

Mam Wali answered solemnly, “We did!”

“In what way?” Kafee inquired.

Mam Wali replied metaphorically, “Through the sacrifice of our lives, enduring injuries, witnessing the destruction of our habitat, suffering from hunger, experiencing torture, and enduring all kinds of hardships!”

“What's our solution? It’s the second time we’ve been ignored,” Omar said, frustration evident in his voice.

Mam Wali replied, “It won’t be just twice. Let me explain our solution.”

“What is the solution? … What is the solution? …” An inhabitant echoed, his curiosity growing.

Mam Wali answered, “It’s the Hoş (Intelligence in Kurdish).”

“Hoş?!” Omar repeated, puzzled by Mam Wali's answer.

Kafee, subtly amused, lifted the edge of her headscarf, veiling her mouth and nose, and began to chuckle quietly.

“What's so funny?” Mam Wali asked, glancing at her with confusion.

Still chuckling, Kafee lowered her scarf and said, “Your hoş…hoş, it’s amusing.”

“Why?” Mam Wali inquired.

“It reminds me of something peculiar,” Kafee explained.

“What’s that?” Mam Wali prodded.

“A long time ago, before our village was devastated by the Iraqi government, we had a donkey we called the ‘obedient donkey’.”

“Really? There are obedient donkeys?” Mam Wali asked, perplexed, interrupting her.

“Yes, absolutely. He was so instinctive that if you told him ‘hoş’ just once, he would stop immediately, as still as a statue,” Kafee said confidently.

“Are you comparing the use of ‘hoş’ for humans to telling it to a donkey?” Mam Wali asked.

“There’s no difference between the two ‘hoşes,’” Kafee quipped.

“There is a difference,” Mam Wali insisted.

“There really isn’t,” Kafee countered.

“In what way isn’t there?” Mam Wali pressed.

“In the way ‘hoş’ is used,” Kafee explained. “For both humans and donkeys, ‘hoş’ comes from the same principle,” Kafee added.

“And what’s that?” Mam Wali asked, curiosity piqued.

“Kafee, unable to hold back her amusement, burst into laughter again. 'It’s to pause, reflect, and act wisely in our daily lives.”

Hearing this, Mam Wali and the other inhabitants couldn’t help but join in the laughter.

**(Chapter -26)**

Something was irritating Mina. She shook her head, stood up, faced the cellar's wall behind her, and began trailing bit by bit towards the cellar door. She then ascended the stairs and left.

The inhabitants, both individually and collectively, approached the Peshmerga one after another, asking, “What should I do? What should we do? What do you think we ought to do?”

“I don’t know. If we manage to reach Slemani, we'll fall back under the control of our previous oppressor. If we head to the East of Kurdistan, we'll still be oppressed. And if we stay here, we'll die. So, we're in a no-win situation,” the Peshmerga explained.

A group of inhabitants asked, “Why?”

“Because it won’t change anything,” the Peshmerga responded.

The group persisted, “Why?”

“Because all our available options amount to surrendering to subjugation,” the Peshmerga replied.

“Why?” the group asked again.

“The occupier, wherever they are, will be an oppressor, killer, looter, and destructor,” the Peshmerga elaborated.

Mam Wali interjected, “Are you as perplexed as I am?”

The inhabitants inquired, “By what?”

“By the stance of these Kurdish political parties,” Mam Wali clarified.

An inhabitant asked, “In relation to what?”

“The occupier,” Mam Wali responded.

“What have they done?” inquired the inhabitant.

Mam Wali replied, “They’ve been apathetic.”

“In what way?” the inhabitant pressed.

Mam Wali responded, “Thousands of times, they fight each other with arms, over a mountain, a hill, a valley or a trivial issue and shed each other’s blood. Today, one of their towns is being occupied by foreign forces, but they act as if they don't have a fly as a guest.”

“It shows that they have an excuse or an ulterior motive,” Kafee commented.

Mam Wali responded, “What excuse? What ulterior motive?”

“I don't know, perhaps they outmatch the Iranian government’s forces,” Kafee guessed.

Mam Wali replied, “The problem isn't about matching or outmatching.”

“So, what is it?” Kafee inquired.

Mam Wali answered, “It's voluntarily walking into a trap set by the enemy.”

“They've inflicted destruction and extinction upon us, leaving us in tears,” Kafee lamented.

The Peshmerga reacted, “This isn't an extinction, but…”

“But what?” pressed Mam Wali.

The Peshmerga said, “A situation from which we can learn a great deal.”

“What have you learnt?” Mam Wali enquired.

The Peshmerga responded, “A lesson.”

“What lesson?” Mam Wali probed.

The Peshmerga replied, “The lesson of the rudderlessness of this revolution.”

“Would you allow me to express my thoughts about your conversation?” interjected San, who, until that moment, had been only an observer. Upon hearing him, the surrounding individuals redirected their attention towards him, indicating their readiness to listen.

San said, “They say the aims of Napoleon taking his army to the Middle East were to occupy Egypt, intimidating the English force, and showcasing the French force’s prowess. The writers and experts accompanying his army were tasked with introducing European people to the lifestyles and norms of the region.”

‌Mam Wali asked, “What do you mean?”

“The Iranian government forces occupying our town aims to intimidate Iraq and analyse our norms and stance,” San clarified.

Mam Wali responded, “Our stance is clear, unwavering, and against all forms of occupation.”

“I share the same stance,” San agreed.

Mam Wali inquired, “What else does Iranian government wants from us?”

“They want to use our suffering to expose the brutality of the Iraqi Ba’ath Party to the world,” San elaborated.

Mam Wali, “So, they’re making our suffering a showcase of the Ba’ath Party’s crimes?”

“Precisely, that's their goal,” San confirmed.

Mam Wali asked sarcastically, “And who will spotlight their crimes?”

“Whoever does it, it won’t change the status quo,” San replied.

Mam Wali probed, “Why not?”

“Because global power is driven by wealth and might, held by those we’ve already discussed as selfish and money-oriented,” San explained.

Mam Wali questioned further, “What more can the Iranian government extract from us?”

“It seeks to divert global attention from its own misdeeds by highlighting the Ba’ath Party’s crimes. It's also a warning to its own people: See, I stand against such a brutal regime in Iraq,” San detailed.

Mam Wali explained, “The Kurds are victims of both countries' governments.”

“Certainly,” San confirmed.

Mam Wali said ironically, “Well done to the Kurdish forces for the consciousness and intelligence that you possess!”

“Intelligence and thoughts!” San exclaimed.

“Yes,” Mam Wali responded.

“Earlier, you mentioned something about intelligence and a donkey,” San reminded them.

“Do you think we said something incorrect?” Mam Wali interjected.

“No, but…” San began.

“But what?” Mam Wali pressed.

“Causing trouble for the donkey,” San explained.

“When have we ever troubled him?” Mam Wali questioned.

“I know, but…” San tried to explain.

“But what?” Mam Wali interrupted again.

“You are meddling in his affairs,” San pointed out.

“Where have we interfered?” Mam Wali inquired.

“I know, but…” San hesitated.

“But what?” Mam Wali pressed again.

“You can’t compare a donkey to a human being,” San stated.

“Why not?” Mam Wali asked.

“Because none of their behaviours are like ours,” San replied.

“Why?” Mam Wali probed further.

“Their principles are steadfast, they are grateful, and peaceful,” San explained.

“Are those the only characteristics?” Mam Wali questioned.

“He's also a herald,” San added.

“A herald of what?” Baram interjected.

“The herald that brings one back to consciousness, to intelligence, to hoş,” San clarified.

“Whom will he bring back to hoş?” Baram inquired.

“Us,” San answered.

“It seems you've been influenced by mother-Kafee’s favourable description of the donkey?” Baram suggested.

“Why not, my son? Do you think I’m mistaken? What is the donkey lacking? Since God created them, they’ve been aiding us, bearing our burdens and bodies, while also taking care of their own lives. Have you ever seen a donkey jump into a river, a fire, or off a mountain?” Kafee joined the conversation.

“Why would anyone say the donkeys are intelligent?” Baram questioned.

“What are they lacking in intelligence?” Kafee countered.

“If they were intelligent, they’d need to be told ‘hoş... hoş...’ to make them stop,” Baram argued.

“What is hoş... hoş...?” San asked.

Baram responded, “What do you mean?”

“It’s just a term humans coined for donkeys,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because of human limitations,” San responded.

Baram asked again, “Why?”

“To get donkeys to listen to them,” San answered.

Baram inquired further, “Why?”

“To carry out orders,” San replied.

Baram asked ironically, “Do you think they will obey the orders?”

“They will, but only under certain conditions,” San responded.

Baram queried, “Which conditions?”

“The orders given must not result in harm to themselves, other animals, or humans,” San clarified.

Baram asked, “How can they ensure that?”

“Because they are intelligent,” San stated.

Mam Wali interjected, “Only intelligent?”

“As I mentioned earlier, they are also heralds,” San elaborated.

Baram asked, “Can you give an example of their intelligence or their role as heralds being greater than that of humans?”

“There are many examples, but…” San began.

Baram interrupted, “But what?”

“You haven’t heart of them.” San responded.

Baram probed, “Why haven’t I?”

“Because you've only read political publications,” San responded.

Baram reacted, “What’s wrong with political publications?”

“They make you believe in them,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What’s the sin in believing them?”

“What do you mean?” San asked, perplexed.

Baram clarified, “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s self-deception,” San responded.

Baram demanded, “Let's stay on topic. Answer my main question.”

“I haven’t strayed. I’ve clearly and wholeheartedly said that it’s not only humans who possess intelligence,” San confirmed.

Baram stepped closer and asked, “Tell me, who else possesses intelligence?”

“Donkeys,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “How do you see donkeys?”

“What do you mean? I see them as the best friends,” San responded.

Baram inquired, “Why?”

“Because they possess intelligence and can choose,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Choose what?”

“Choose their best friends,” San elaborated.

Baram queried, “What do they do with their best friends?”

“They spend quality time with them,” San said.

Baram asked, “What kind of time?”

“Time filled with love and mutual support,” San explained.

Baram questioned, “Until when?”

“Until they are separated,” San responded.

Baram asked, “If they’re best friends, why do they separate?”

“They don’t choose to separate,” San replied.

Baram asked, “Who separates them?”

“Who else but humans?” San said.

Baram inquired, “What happens to them after they’re separated?”

“They become anxious and depressed,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they have feelings,” San said.

Baram, looking perplexed, repeated, “Feelings!”

“Not just feelings, they have principles too,” San added.

Baram commented, “You make donkeys sound very important.”

“They’re not just important,” San said.

Baram probed, “What else are they?”

“They’re a source of solutions,” San responded.

Baram asked, “For whom?”

“For humans,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “What do they do for humans?”

“They treat them,” San replied.

Baram inquired, “Without medication?”

“Yes, without medication,” San confirmed.

“And how do they do that?” Baram pressed.

“They address bad behaviours and hatred,” San explained.

“Whose bad behaviours and hatred?” Baram prodded.

“That of humans,” San responded.

“Why?” Baram wondered.

“To relieve them of their burdens,” San said.

Puzzled, Baram asked, “Do you truly believe in such abilities, donkey?"

San burst into laughter, “Ha…ha…ha. How can I not laugh?”

Perplexed, Baram asked, “Why are you laughing?”

San, still chuckling, replied, “You just called me a donkey!”

Baram was quick to deny, “I did not say that.”

San insisted, “You certainly did.”

“And how do you figure that?” Baram asked.

San explained, “If you meant otherwise, you would have asked, ‘Do donkeys have these capabilities?”

Baram retorted, “There’s no difference in the two questions.”

San disagreed, “There is. If donkeys are treated well, they will reciprocate.”

Baram, now laughing himself, said, “Ha…ha… You mean, ‘If you treat donkeys well, they will treat you well too.”

“There’s no difference in those statements,” San countered.

Baram insisted, “There is. Humans should always be ahead of donkeys.”

San disagreed, “That's not right.”

“Why?” Baram challenged.

“Donkeys are naturally independent and possess a strong-willed temperament, demonstrating a resistance to subjugation. Their stubbornness and assertiveness stem from their independent thinking. Have you ever observed a donkey permitting its owner to walk ahead?” San asked.

“And why wouldn’t it?” Baram queried.

“Because a donkey is a humble, modest, and clean friend,” San replied.

“In which way is it clean?” Baram probed.

“In its inner feelings,” San asserted.

“Only inwardly?” Baram pushed.

“Physically as well,” San added.

“How so?” Baram continued.

“It doesn’t smell,” San stated.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“As I said, it's clean,” San repeated.

“Just clean?” Baram asked.

“Intelligent too,” San affirmed.

Baram inquired, “And how is that?”

“He is curious, his desire to discover new things is high, if he manages, he would check your hair, too,” San explained.

Baram, with a bitter smile, asked, “Why?”

“To know what is in there!” San explained.

Baram asked, “How?”

“He senses strange things using his sensitive nose and ears,” San informed.

Baram asked, “What does he do?”

“He goes and watches it,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“To implement his sense of duty,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What sense?”

“The sense of his environment,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“To know what is going on? What’s passing?” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because he is sociable, doesn’t like to be alone,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because he adores nature and freedom,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What freedom?”

“His stripped freedom,” San confirmed.

Bram inquired, “Who stripped him?”

“Humans,” San replied.

Baram probed, “You're saying donkeys are happy and free with each other, if this is the case, what freedom do they expect from humans?”

“How not to expect!” San reacted.

Baram probed, “Why?”

“Because to him, freedom is equal and public,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Just freedom?”

“Rights also,” San replied.

Baram asked, “How do you prove that?”

“With the fact that they don’t discriminate, the way they make friends with each other, is the way they do it with humans,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they are self and human lovers at the same time,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“How why! Because they are donkeys, they don’t see themselves as superior, and they view everyone as equal,” San explained.

Baram probed, “Are you saying they treat everyone equally?”

“No,” San responded.

Baram asked, “With whom are they not?”

“Someone who doesn’t respect their friendships,” San clarified.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they possess the ability to think,” San responded.

Baram asked, “How?”

“They think before making any decision,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Thinking of what?”

“Of peace and safety,” San responded.

Baram reacted, “How can a stubborn think?”

“Humans are stubborn,” San reacted.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they are not capable of understanding the thinking of donkeys,” San explained.

Baram asked, “How?”

“Humans misunderstand actions that donkeys perform for safety reasons,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because donkeys are different,” San replied.

Baram asked, “In what?”

“In thinking,” San responded.

Baram asked, “What is thinking?”

“Stable,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “What about humans' thinking?”

“Unstable,” San responded.

Baram asked, “In what?”

“In that they cannot protect themselves and other beings around them,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because their thinking is weak,” San highlighted.

Baram asked, “Why are donkeys like that?”

“Because they have the quality of helping and the sense of responsibility,” San explained.

Baram inquired, “What do you mean?”

“They never forget anything,” San elucidated.

Baram questioned, “How so?”

“Even after 25 years away from their birthplace, they will still recognize the locale and their acquaintances,” San elaborated.

Baram queried again, “How?”

“Due to their intelligence,” San affirmed.

Baram asked, perplexed, “How...how...?”

San clarified, “What do you mean by 'how...how...?' They've always been that way, irrespective of being male or female.”

Baram expressed disbelief, “I can't believe it.”

“In what exactly?” San enquired, baffled.

Baram elaborated, “I find it hard to believe that donkeys are more intelligent than humans.”

San probed, “Why so?”

Baram retorted, “Why? I implore you again to provide an example demonstrating that donkeys surpass humans in intelligence.”

“Do you recognise Dostoevsky?” San asked.

Baram replied, “Who doesn't know Fyodor Dostoevsky, the esteemed Russian novelist, short story writer, essayist, journalist, and philosopher?”

“The very same,” San said. “He acknowledged the intelligence of donkeys.”

Baram enquired, “How? When? And in what context?”

San related, “Once, on his train journey from Russia to Switzerland, as he arrived at a market in Basel around evening, a donkey's bray not only revived him but also cleared his vision and uplifted his spirits.”

Baram acknowledged, “I recall that; he mentioned it in Chapter 5 of 'The Idiot', but...”

San interjected, “But what?”

Baram clarified, “He wasn't referring to himself in that instance.”

“To whom, then?” San pressed.

Baram explained, “It was a character he created in his novel.”

“And who might that character be?” San enquired.

Baram responded, “A figure brought to life through his writing.”

“If Dostoevsky wasn't convinced...” San began.

Baram interrupted, “Convinced of what?”

“That donkeys are honest, earnest, robust, and peaceful; if he hadn't believed so...” San argued.

Baram cut in again, “Then what?”

“Dostoevsky wouldn't have assigned the donkey such a wise and steadfast role in the novel,” San contended.

Baram questioned, “Why do you say that?”

“Because it was the donkey that brought Dostoevsky to his senses, clearing his vision and endearing him to the entirety of Switzerland,” San insisted.

Baram queried, “Are you certain it was the donkey's influence?”

“Yes, it was the donkey that helped him forget all his worries and sorrows,” San stated.

Baram objected, “You've misunderstood.”

“Why so?” San enquired.

Baram clarified, “Dostoevsky was expressing his character's feelings, not his own.”

San countered, “You're only seeing the surface. Through his character, Dostoevsky was voicing his own emotions. How are you unaware?”

Baram interjected, “Of what?”

“Dostoevsky suffered from epilepsy,” San revealed.

“Who?” Baram asked, seeking clarification.

“Dostoevsky,” San confirmed.

Baram pressed, “How does that relate?”

“On the train, Dostoevsky observed the breathtaking vistas of cities, towns, villages, forests, and plains of Germany en route to Switzerland, but...” San described.

Baram interrupted, “But what?”

“Everything seemed alien to him! Nothing could cheer him up. He was either bogged down by depression or lost in unconsciousness; he couldn't perceive anything else,” San concluded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because of the seizure,” San responded.

Baram asked, “And then?”

“May God bless the donkey,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“By braying, it made Dostoevsky happy,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What connection does the donkey have with Dostoyevsky and happiness?”

“It has one,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “In what way?”

“In changing his consciousness and thinking,” San explained.

Baram asked, “How so?”

“Through love and friendship,” San responded.

Mam Wali interjected, “I hope God has been of assistance, and we, in our dire condition in this dark cellar with an unknown fate, could hear it.”

“Hear what?” San asked.

Mam Wali responded, “The bray of a donkey.”

“Ha… ha…” The inhabitants all started laughing.

Baram, with a blushed face, turned to San and said, “Do you know?”

“What?” responded San.

Baram explained, “What you said were all expressions of a character invented by Dostoevsky’s imagination for his novel.”

“According to your logic, all our feelings now are created by our imaginative fantasies,” San responded ironically.

Baram said, “Novels are born in the womb of imagination.”

“Not all novels are purely products of the imagination. Many are deeply rooted in real experiences and events,” commented San.

Baram asked, “Are you suggesting that the novel isn’t a creative work?”

“No, the novel is creative, but its creativity comes from how the author interprets and weaves reality into a narrative. The imagination plays a role not in inventing the events, but in transforming them into a compelling story,” San explained.

Baram asked, “So, even when based on real events, a novel still requires imaginative effort?”

“Exactly. The imagination is in how the author connects the dots, fills in gaps, and perhaps adds elements that might not have happened but that enrich the story. Every novel blends reality and imagination in its own unique way,” San explained.

Baram perplexedly asked, “I still don’t understand.”

“Imagination is key to invention. It aids in gathering and arranging information, enables writers to creatively portray ideas, and is essential in storytelling,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What is imagination on its own?”

“It’s a wing,” responded San.

Baram asked, “Wings of what?”

“Of a hidden soul that God gifted to humans on this planet,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“For self-rescue,” San replied.

Baram asked, “For what reason?”

“For not having, for not being able,” San replied.

Baram asked, “Not having and unable to do what?”

“Like the condition we're currently living in,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Can we escape it through imagination?”

“No,” responded San.

Baram asked, “Then how?”

“Through self-reflection and direct action,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “So, our condition isn't related to imagination?”

“No,” San responded.

Baram asked, “What is it related to?”

“Recognising the truth that is both sensible and tangible,” San explained.

Baram, perplexed, said, “I don’t understand!”

“If one of us were to write a novel about our arduous lives, saying, 'We were waiting for a donkey's bray to herald the end of our pains and the start of our salvation,' would they be wrong? Would it be mere imagining, or a true representation of our hopes?” San explained.

Bram probed, “What would they do?”

“Tell the truth,” San responded.

Baram asked, “In what way?”

“In narrating,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Narrating what?”

“The political and social ways of thinking,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “What are they?”

“The social and political problems in which we are currently entrenched, which have caused us harm and suffering,” San explained.

Baram asked again, “What are they?”

“Obscured,” replied San.

Baram asked, “In what way?”

“In our consciousness,” San responded.

Baram inquired, “The consciousness of whom?”

“Who’s else? Ours,” San confirmed.

Baram, with an annoyed tone, said, “Again, consciousness, intelligence… hoş!”

“Yes, consciousness, intelligence, hoş,” San reaffirmed.

Baram asked ironically, “According to your personal measure?”

“No,” San responded.

Baram asked, “According to whom, then?”

“Auguste Comte.” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “Who’s Auguste Comte? Who is he? Where does he come from? Where does he live?”

“He was a French philosopher. As far as I know, he doesn't live anywhere,” San responded.

Baram, perplexed, asked, “How can someone exist but not live anywhere?”

“He doesn’t exist anymore,” San responded.

“Who doesn’t?” Baram asked.

“Auguste Comte,” San confirmed.

Baram remarked, “We shouldn't speak ill of the dead.”

“I’m not, but we mustn't forget about him,” San responded.

“Why not?” Baram asked.

“Because his literature is still valid and influences our lives,” San explained.

“What did he write about?” Baram inquired.

“Intelligence, consciousness... hoş,” San replied.

Baram turned away and muttered to himself, “Our views don’t match.”

“I know,” San agreed.

Baram turned back to San and asked, “How do you know?”

“From how we perceive consciousness differently,” San explained.

Baram, still perplexed, asked, “Aren’t we both human beings?”

“We are, but…” San started.

“But what?” Baram interjected.

“Our consciousness isn't the same,” San explained.

“In what way?” Baram queried.

“In understanding and feeling each other’s pain,” San replied.

“Why is that?” Baram pressed.

“Because we are humans, our consciousness is limited, just as it is for animals. This means that in one aspect, to an extent, we are more conscious, and in another, they are more conscious than us, and vice versa,” San elaborated.

Astonished, Baram asked, “My God…! How can human consciousness be compared to that of animals?”

“Don’t panic; it’s possible,” San reassured.

“How so?” Baram wondered.

“Through donkeys,” San suggested.

“But donkeys don’t talk, you know that,” Baram pointed out.

“True, they don’t, but...” San began.

“But what?” Baram interjected.

“If donkeys could talk one day...” San started.

“What would happen then?” Baram interrupted, intrigued.

“Donkeys, before any other animals, would have something to say,” San responded.

Baram asked, “What would that be?”

“Shame on us humans,” San replied.

Baram reacted, “Neither donkeys nor any other animals will ever be able to speak.”

“What do they need language for? I hope God never enables them to speak,” Mam Wali interjected.

Baram, perplexed, asked, “Why?”

“If they speak, they will start talking to us,” Mam Wali replied.

Bram asked, “What would happen if they start talking?”

“They will become like us,” Mam Wali said.

Baram inquired, “How so?”

“We, on this planet, are the children of Adam and Eve. We know each other's languages and understand each other in one way or another. Despite that, why are we who we are now? Why do we live in these dark days? If we couldn't speak to each other, what worth would we bring to each other? Imagine if we understood all animals. What could we teach them? What problems could we solve for them? Don't you think it's better to leave them alone so they can be who they are and not copy us?” Mam Wali explained.

Baram responded, “Why do you equate humans with animals?”

“I don't, but I pray they never gain our ability to speak,” Mam Wali replied.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because the longer they remain speechless, the fewer problems they have,” Mam Wali said.

Baram inquired, “What do you mean?”

“Have we solved any of our problems using language? Maybe…” Mam Wali began.

Baram interjected, “Maybe what?”

“Maybe they understand us but choose not to speak to us,” San answered instead of Mam Wali.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they are intelligent, conscious, possess wisdom,” San replied.

Baram probed, “Do they?”

“Yes, they are so intelligent that even though they are donkeys, they can demonstrate human folly,” San asserted.

Baram inquired, “How?”

“Through us, humans,” San replied.

Baram asked, “In what way?”

“By the harsh treatments we inflict on them, like the needles and sticks we use to cause them pain and suffering. That's not all we do to them,” San explained.

Baram inquired, “What else?”

“We belittle them, using them to demean others,” San replied.

Baram asked, “Who?”

“Ourselves,” San said.

Baram asked, “How?”

“Don't you see? We humans belittle each other daily and nightly through donkeys,” San explained.

Baram inquired, “Where?”

“How? Everywhere. Don't we often call each other 'Donkey' both to our faces and behind our backs? The perplexing thing is that…” San said.

Baram interjected, “Who is perplexed?”

“The donkeys,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “About what?”

“About hearing their names being used behind their backs,” San explained.

Baram inquired, “How?”

“Their names are used for others who bear no resemblance to donkeys,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Who's using it?”

“We, humans, amongst ourselves,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“I find it very strange,” San expressed.

Baram inquired, “What?”

“None of our body parts - not our heads, eyes, necks, chests, hands, legs - nothing resembles them. The only thing connecting us is one word,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What is that?”

“Donkey. Who knows, you might not even realise it...” San speculated.

Baram interrupted, “What?”

“During this conversation, have you not silently called me 'donkey' in your heart?” San posed.

Baram smiled and replied, “No.”

“Why not? Thank God, at least we have them to resort to,” San said.

Baram asked, “Who?”

“The doctor,” San replied.

Baram inquired, “Who is the doctor?”

“Have you forgotten? Or haven't you noticed them?” San responded.

Baram asked, “Who are they?”

“Those who have saved you thousands of times in your life,” San replied.

Baram inquired, “Who are they?”

“Donkeys,” San said.

Baram asked ironically, “You present them to us as doctors?”

“There are no doctors like them, and none can do better than them,” San explained.

Baram inquired, “How?”

“Day or night, in your dreams and everywhere, openly and secretly, they will not forget you and will come to your aid without charging an Iraqi fils,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What will they do?”

“They will help you out,” San replied.

Baram enquired, “From what?”

“From psychological problems,” San answered.

Baram queried, “Why?”

“Because they are intelligent,” San responded.

Baram retorted, “Donkeys don't possess anything called intelligence.”

“Do you know?” San asked.

Baram responded, “What do I need to know?”

“We think this way; that's why...” San said.

Baram interjected again, “What?”

“Donkeys no longer bother trying to understand us,” San replied.

Baram turned his back to San and maintained a short distance.

San faced the onlookers and declared, “It's now essential for us all to understand that donkeys are cognitively intelligent, physically strong, morally upright, vocally expressive, and generous givers.”

Baram admitted, “I have doubts.”

“If there were a shred of doubt in donkeys' minds, they would never have managed to perceive our folly,” San explained.

“The problem is that humans still don't comprehend the donkey's significance,” Kizhan interjected.

Baram asked, “What is their significance?”

“It's significant,” San affirmed.

Baram enquired, “Who says?”

“God,” San confirmed.

Baram reacted, “God is all that's left, and you want to involve Him too.”

“I'm not involving Him; it's humans who refuse to heed God's desires,” San replied.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they are in limbo,” San explained.

Baram queried, “What should we do?”

“What can we do but respect donkeys,” San stated.

Baram began to laugh, "Ha... ha... ha..."

“Why are you laughing? Don't mock God's boundless capabilities, wishes, and divine creativity,” San remarked.

Baram stepped back, frowned, and asked, “When did I laugh? Aside from creation, what does God have to do with donkeys?”

“If God didn't regard them among horses, mares, mules, camels, and other animals, He wouldn't have chosen them,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Who?”

“The donkey,” San replied.

Baram enquired, “Why?”

“For Jesus Christ to ride on it,” San explained.

Baram questioned, “Why?”

“To go with it to Jerusalem,” San replied.

Baram asked, “Did Jesus choose the donkey Himself?”

“Jesus is a prophet Himself,” San replied.

Baram acknowledged, “I know.”

“You don't know,” San asserted.

Baram queried, “Why?”

“If you did, you would understand now that any acts of the prophets were God's aims and desires communicated to them through revelations,” San explained.

Baram enquired, “What do you mean?”

“If God didn't see the donkey as humble, peaceful, and noble, He wouldn't have placed it in the heart of Jesus, His only son,” San explained.

Baram asked, “What has Jesus to do with the donkey?”

“To ride it and go to the Mount of Olives,” San replied.

Baram enquired, “Where is that?”

“In Jerusalem,” San confirmed.

Baram asked, “Did He reach there?”

“Yes, He did, and His arrival is marked in Christianity as the 'Triumphant Entry' on the Sunday before Easter, known as Palm Sunday. Do you know?”

Baram interjected, “What?”

“The donkey as a being was part of that Holy Week when people spread palm branches and cloaks as a sign of honour and respect for Jesus and the donkey to walk on,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why did Jesus want to go there?”

“To sacrifice Himself,” San replied.

Baram enquired, “For whom?”

“For humans,” San answered.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“To atone for sins,” San said.

Baram queried, “The sins of whom?”

“Whom but humans,” San clarified.

Baram enquired, “Which of their sins?”

“Murder, persecution, starvation... looting and destruction, and so on,” San explained.

Baram asked, “By what means?”

“Armies, aircraft, rockets, gas, bullets, and any way they can,” San responded.

Baram questioned, “In Jesus' time, those things didn't exist, did they?”

“They didn’t, but...” San began.

Baram interjected again, “But what?”

“There were trebuchets, spears, swords, daggers, bows and arrows, slings, clubs and maces, staffs and javelins, and so on, but...” San explained.

Baram interjected once again, “But what?”

“One thing hasn't changed,” San stated.

Baram eagerly asked, “What?”

“The sins of humans,” San confirmed.

**(Chapter -27)**

Baram, with his frowned face, seemed to be irritated. In a self-talk, he said, “People are hoping to have enough space in the cellar for their essential items…”

San interjected, “What is wrong?”

“That man,” Baram said, nodding towards a man a few metres to his right.

San glanced at the man but didn't notice anything odd. “What has he done?” he asked Baram.

“You don’t see him? He has a bunch of files with him.”

Those who heard them looked at the man.

San asked Baram, “Do you hate yourself?”

“What sort of question is that? Who hates oneself? Why should I?” Baram responded, confused.

San suggested, “Then you should show some gratitude.”

“Towards whom?” Baram enquired.

San replied, “That man.”

“Why?” Baram asked.

San said, “He may have you.”

“Me?!” Baram responded, perplexed.

“Yes, you,” San said.

“I don’t understand. Why me?” Baram asked.

San explained, “To save you, in one way or another, I mean physically or metaphysically.”

“I still don’t understand you,” Baram said.

San clarified, “I mean, if you disappear physically, you will remain metaphysically. That's what that man, whom you find odd, will ensure.”

“Do you have parasomnia?” Baram asked sarcastically.

San replied, “Why? Am I asleep?”

“No,” said Baram.

“Then you understand that parasomnia happens when one is asleep. So, I am telling you face-to-face that you are not asleep, and that man has your back,” San explained.

The onlookers started laughing loudly.

“Are you kidding me?” Baram reacted angrily.

“I’m not kidding. I'm sure you don't want to deceive yourself. Neither are the contents of that man's files humorous enough to make anyone laugh,” San said.

“What do the files contain?” Baram asked.

“One of them has me,” San replied.

“How?” asked Baram.

“By name,” San said.

“You?!” Baram inquired.

“Yes, me, but...” San started.

“But what?” Baram interjected.

“With nothing in my possession,” San clarified.

“Who else is in there?” Baram asked.

“Some residents of this town and its surroundings,” San confirmed.

“Who are they?” Baram pressed.

“I am sure Kafee’s daughter and the child of that woman with the black headdress are included,” San said.

Kafee and the woman with the black headdress eagerly approached the man. “Dear brother, what of ours is there? What do you have of us?” they asked the man, pleadingly.

“Only your names,” the man confirmed.

“What else do you have?” Kafee and the woman with the black headdress asked.

“Nothing else, except these files and this bunch of keys,” the man replied.

“Where are we in there?” they asked one after another.

“In one of the file’s pages,” the man responded.

“What are our names doing with you?!” Kafee asked.

“It’s not only your names that I have,” the man replied.

“What else?” Kafee and the woman with the black headdress quickly asked.

“Your registered savings and deposits,” the man said.

“Which ones?” Kafee enquired.

“Those in the bank?” San interjected.

“Our money?” Kafee and the woman with the black headdress asked zealously.

“I heard…” the man began.

“Of what?” they interrupted.

“Of Kizhan and Aram’s previous response,” the man said.

“What response?” Kafee and the woman with the black headdress asked together.

“About the fate of your money in the bank,” the man clarified.

“Then, what shall we do with an unvalued paper record?” Kafee reacted.

“That was all I could do. I said, at least I will protect their names,” the man explained.

“Who are you?” Kafee asked.

The man cautiously checked his surroundings and, in a low tone, said, “I am the bank’s director.”

“What can they do with a neglected record,” Baram asked sarcastically in a self-talk.

San looked at Baram and replied, “What should he have done? Looked out for himself? The bank robbers are probably watching to see where he is now.”

“Who?” Baram inquired.

“That man,” San answered.

“Why?” Baram pressed.

“They'll come to take him, along with his files and keys, to an unknown place, essentially destroying him,” San explained.

“Why?” Baram repeated.

“To eliminate all key individuals and documents, ensuring no traces are left to uncover the details of their theft,” San elaborated.

“If he knew it would be a threat to himself, why did he bring those files here?” Baram pondered.

“He hoped there would come a day when citizens could use the documents,” San suggested.

“Why?” Baram asked again.

“To claim their looted assets,” San replied.

“That's not his business,” Baram remarked.

“It is,” countered San.

“Why?” Baram persisted.

“Because he's responsible,” San stated.

“Responsible for the bank or the citizens?” Baram questioned.

“The citizens,” San asserted.

“We have our responsible people, why did he appoint himself as a leader?” Baram inquired.

San asked rhetorically, “Where are your responsible people? He is our responsible person, one of us. What he could do, he did with his head held high.”

“What did he do?” Baram asked.

“He protected the files,” San responded.

“Why? He wasn’t the only responsible one,” Baram argued.

“Everyone has their responsibility; he was responsible for the bank. You need to know that as well…” San said.

“What,” Baram interjected.

“He’s not the only brave man in this town,” San added.

“Who else?” Baram inquired.

“A registrar, working for the town’s registry office,” San revealed.

“What did he do?” Baram asked.

“He saved the records of the town’s citizens and its surroundings,” San answered.

“Both individuals have created trouble for themselves,” Baram commented.

“That's true, but…” San began.

“But what?” Baram interrupted.

“They respected themselves, us, and their homeland,” San explained.

“Respect won't get you out of trouble,” Baram pointed out.

“They are honest and responsible, valuing their integrity. Since when has an honest person been deterred by fear and trouble?” San argued.

“Honest!” Baram questioned.

“Yes, honest, well-behaved, and respectful. Despite personal and family responsibilities, they’ve taken on our burdens too. You’ve been here for several days. Apart from this one Peshmerga, has any other responsible person shown you respect or care?” San defended.

Mam Wali interjected, “Enough. If you can, try to find a solution for the citizens of this town.”

“We can’t do anything unless we self-organise,” San remarked.

“That's true, my son, nothing,” Mam Wali agreed.

“How nothing?” Baram reacted.

“Nothing,” San repeated.

“Why nothing?” Baram asked.

“Because we still have a long way to understand,” San responded.

“Understand what?” Baram queried.

“How! Of donkeys,” San exclaimed.

“Why do we need to understand donkeys?” Baram questioned.

“They need to be understood,” San insisted.

“Why?” Baram probed.

“To know what's in their hearts,” San explained.

“There’s nothing in their hearts,” Baram claimed.

“They have something,” San countered.

“What?” Baram asked.

“The sorrow in their hearts,” San clarified.

Baram asked, “What is that?”

“It's that we see them as stubborn, stupid, lazy, foolish, dull, clumsy, etc., and we unfairly label them with these stereotypical names,” San explained.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because those names don’t suit them at all,” San responded.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“Because they are human traits, not theirs,” San responded.

Baram asked, “What’s your proof?”

“The proof is that these names were invented by humans,” San confirmed.

Mam Wali interjected again, this time with a worried tone, “My sons, I've said enough. What can you do with the intelligence of humans and donkeys?”

An ambient voice was heard outside the cellar. They all listened until it became clear that people were speaking in Farsi.

“How they detached us from our homes, how they made the world as small as this cellar; it seems they think we don’t even deserve to be here too,” Mam Wali said, lamenting to himself.

Baram said, “We will run away.”

“Where to?” Mam Wali responded with an incredulous smile.

“To wherever we can,” Baram responded.

“Running away doesn't equate to salvation,” Mam Wali responded.

Baram asked, “What does it mean?”

“It means cowardice, but...” Mam Wali responded.

Baram interjected, “But what?”

“With bare hands and no support, what can we do against aircraft, heavy weapons, and the armies of two countries?” Mam Wali expressed.

“Therefore, running away is our only option,” Baram responded.

“There is no solution,” Mam Wali said.

Baram asked, “Why?”

“If, hypothetically, we manage to run away, what about our souls? Since when can souls rest without a homeland?” Mam Wali said. He then took a deep breath, sat down, tuned his radio, and turned it on. Martial music mixed with the bombastic voice of a news anchor blared out, “Good tidings…good tidings…good tidings: Our courageous IRGC forces have taken control of the town of Halabja, its sub-districts, villages, and strategic mountains in the area, clearing them of the Iraqi army. Our brave men have raised the flag of the Islamic Republic of Iran on all buildings in the town. God willing, the remaining cities and towns of Iraq will soon be liberated from the Ba’ath Party's despots.”

A silence briefly dominated the cellar before the howling sound of aircraft drowned out the radio.

Samya and Omar plugged their fingers in their two babies’ ears.

Kafee looked around anxiously and frantically called, “Mina… my daughter Mina…” Then she hastily moved towards the cellar door. San, Kizhan, and Aram called after her, “Don’t go out,” trying to persuade her, but she didn’t listen and left, calling, “Mina… my daughter Mina.” The howling of the aircraft grew louder, followed by a rocket hitting somewhere outside the cellar, overwhelming Kafee’s calls.

Another heavy rocket struck near the cellar, alarmingly close this time. Its impact sent a choking cloud of black smoke and dust swirling through the door and window. The space quickly filled with a layer of dark smoke, muffling the voices of the inhabitants. The only sounds that pierced this smoky veil were the repetitive message of “Good tidings…” from the radio, and the distressing cries of children responding to the tumult.

In this chaos, the coughing began among those seeking refuge in the cellar. Omar, reacting swiftly, pulled out his handkerchief from under his belt. He dampened it with water from a kettle, now covered in dust and centrally placed in the cellar, and gently wiped his crying babies' faces.

The menacing howl and thunder of the aircrafts had stopped, yet their ominous presence lingered in the air, leaving the inhabitants enveloped in an atmosphere of anxiety and fear. The cellar, a refuge now turned into a canvas of despair, bore the markings of the assault. Every object and being within its walls – men's hair, hats, headwear, trousers, jackets, shirts, bows, belts, shoes, socks; women's braids, headscarves, jackets, capes, vests, clack shoes, sandals, socks; along with rugs, mattresses, pillows, blankets, pouch bags; and kitchenware like pots, saucepans, plates, spoons, jars, kettles, teapots, pitchers – lost their original appearances. Everything was indiscriminately coated in a thick layer of dust and black smoke, unifying them in a grim palette of devastation.

Two visibly distressed women quickly gathered their money and jewelry, hurriedly placing them in a pouch bag. One woman slipped the bag into the large pocket of her cloak. The other, speaking in Horami, a Kurdish dialect, implored her companion, “Qurbanetbû, agat ça amanateyebû, herçîm henmu nîyam her anenî,” expressing her deep trust and the significance of the belongings: “I would do anything for you, but please look after this deposit, it’s all I have.”

Omar, his voice firm with resolve, declared, “I will no longer listen or wait for anyone.” He turned to Samya, instructing her, “Wrap up the babies’ formula, thermos, and their essentials for me. I will go ahead, and you can follow me in the tractor.”

Samya, her confusion evident, questioned, “Where are you going?”

“To the outskirts of the town. I'll wait for you in Chawg village,” Omar replied with a sense of urgency.

Concerned, Samya inquired, “Do you think the tractor survived the bombardment and is still intact?”

Omar, unable to provide certainty, responded, “How could I know? Maybe it's still okay. Hopefully, there will be someone to drive it. If not, do your best to come on foot.”

Mouloud, his face pale and expression one of worry, approached Omar and hesitantly asked, “What shall I do?”

“You can go with them,” Omar said, including Mouloud in the plan.

Seeking further reassurance and coughing, Mouloud probed, “Me too?”

“Yes, you too,” Omar confirmed, offering a measure of comfort.

The cellar was now filled with increased coughing, intermingled with cries, lamentations, and prayers. Restlessness permeated the air as the inhabitants moved aimlessly, uncertain of their next steps, all except for Omar, who seemed to have a clear plan.

Kizhan and Aram, sensing the growing despair, assured the group, “Don’t worry, we will not leave you alone. We will stay here until the last one of you has left.”

Mal Wali, addressing Kizhan and Aram with affection, shared his feelings, “My sweet daughter and son, being alone for so long, your presence brings me great happiness and security. I can’t bear the thought of being separated from you.” His words reflected the deep bond they shared and his reluctance to part ways in these trying times.

Baram, attempting to lift the spirits of those around him, asserted, “Don’t be hopeless, have courage.”

San, with a hint of sarcasm in his voice, retorted, “You’ve read a lot, Baram! How about teaching us how to actually be hopeful and courageous in practice? It seems you’ve memorized everything from your books, yet you don’t have a single useful sentence for these dark times.”

Baram, taken aback and slightly angered, asked, “How do you know?”

“Your responses and reactions give it away,” San replied with a pointed tone.

Baram, seeking clarity, pressed on, “What was wrong with what I said?”

San, dismissive, responded, “Don’t ask me.”

Confused, Baram asked, “Then who should I ask?”

San, his words laced with a deeper critique, suggested, “Ask those who numbed your brain. When will you recover from your numbness? When will you wake from your deep sleep? When will you stop your sarcastic comments?”

Baram, momentarily silenced by San’s words, glanced at him and then bowed his head, a gesture of resignation.

At this point, Mam Wali, seeking to defuse the tension, intervened, “Leave him be.”

Puzzled, San asked, “Why?”

Mam Wali, his voice steady, explained, “He’s just like us, incapable of changing anything. His words, however impractical, won’t alter our situation.”

San, probing further, asked, “What’s wrong with him?”

Mam Wali, with a sigh, replied, “He’s powerless, like all of us here.”

San, observing Mam Wali’s demeanor, commented, “It seems life has worn you down, made you pessimistic.”

Mam Wali, with a hint of defiance in his voice, countered, “I’m weary, yes, but not pessimistic.”

San, seeking to understand, asked, “Isn’t life hard?”

Mam Wali, with a nuanced perspective, responded, “No, it’s not life that’s hard. It’s the humans who make it so.”

San, contemplating Mam Wali’s words, asked, “Humans are oppressors, aren’t they?”

Mam Wali, reflecting on the injustice he had experienced, responded, “If they weren't oppressors, they would have let us live in peace in our homes, homes we built with years of hard work and sweat.”

San, empathizing with the depth of Mam Wali's loss, asked, “It's painful, isn't it?”

“How could it not be?” Mam Wali replied, his voice heavy with emotion. “To watch your house, your birthplace, being looted and destroyed right before your eyes, and for what? For nothing.”

San solemnly agreed, “It's a tragedy.”

Mam Wali continued, his words laden with sorrow, “How could it not be a tragedy when the town where you lived, where your wife, children, friends, and fellow citizens lived, is turned into a cemetery?”

San, recognizing the harsh reality of their situation, asked, “It's awful, isn't it?”

Mam Wali, his voice a mix of despair and resignation, responded, “How could it not be? Living here in this cellar, which feels like a Tun, a mere source of warmth, is a constant reminder of our plight.”

San, noticing Mam Wali's troubled expression, inquired, “You seem worried?”

Mam Wali confirmed with a nod, “Yes, very much so. After my son was killed and my wife passed away, all I had left was my old mud house. It was my solace.”

San, seeking to understand Mam Wali's attachment to his home, asked, “That house made you happy?”

Mam Wali, with a faint smile, replied, “Yes, it did. It embraced my soul, offered me a sense of peace amidst all the turmoil.”

San, acknowledging Mam Wali's profound connection to his home, softly said, “It embraced your soul.”

“Under the shadow of my solitary mulberry tree in the open yard, I could still sense the presence of my wife and son,” Mam Wali recounted, his voice tinged with nostalgia. “The gentle breeze on those late summer afternoons carried to me the echoes of their laughter and jokes. The golden leaves fallen beneath the mulberry tree in autumn seemed to whisper consolation, urging me to look at its bare branches and twigs, reminding me that I am not alone in my grief. In winter, my soul felt like a snow-capped mountain, burying my sorrows beneath its frozen exterior. I had hoped, with the arrival of spring, to witness once again the blossoming of the flowers in my garden.”

San, speaking softly, reassured him, “You will see them again.”

Mam Wali, his voice laced with resignation, replied, “They won’t let me. I'll be too far away.”

San gently said, “You'll be far away.”

“I'll be far away and unable to connect with them in spirit,” Mam Wali sighed.

“You will still feel them,” San insisted.

“How can I, when I'll be homeless?” Mam Wali lamented.

San acknowledged the harsh reality, “You'll be without a home.”

Mam Wali, his voice breaking, said, “Yes, homeless. My home, it’s like a little homeland to me.”

San, understanding the depth of his attachment, remarked, “Being away from home is never easy.”

“It’s terrifying. I am filled with fear at the thought of leaving. I don't want to leave this town,” Mam Wali confessed.

“You don’t want to leave,” San echoed.

“No, certainly not. But they are forcing me to leave,” Mam Wali declared with a sense of helplessness.

“They are making you leave,” San acknowledged.

“It’s not just my house I'll be leaving,” Mam Wali continued.

“You're leaving more than just your house,” San understood.

“Yes, I’ll be leaving a part of my soul behind with it,” Mam Wali said, his voice heavy with emotion.

“Our lives and souls are steeped in sorrow and agony,” San observed.

“Yes, we are overwhelmed,” Mam Wali agreed, tears beginning to well in his eyes, a testament to the depth of his sorrow.

**(Chapter -28)**

The cellar was suffused with a mélange of aromas — garlic and apple intermingling with the established scents of scattered tobacco leaves, dust, and gunpowder. The inhabitants, gripped by anxiety, found it hard to discern between the old and new smells.

Omar, with swift movements, unfurled a fabric pouch, wrapping it snugly around one of his tiny sons who he then perched onto his neck. He gently picked up the other toddler, cradling him in his arms.

In response to Omar’s earlier instructions, Samya had prepared another pouch. This one contained the toddlers’ formula, a thermos, and other essentials. She fastened it carefully around Omar’s waist, ensuring everything was secure.

As Omar made his way to the cellar door, the sound of his daughters crying pierced the tense air. He paused, turning to address them with a reassuring tone, “Why are you crying, my daughters? I will never leave you alone. After I ensure your brothers' safety, we shall all reunite in Chawg village very soon.”

Kizhan and Aram, attempting to offer some comfort, approached Omar with a wet tissue. Without slowing his stride, he declined, “I don’t need it.” His focus remained unbroken as he continued forward, not turning back to face them.

Kizhan and Aram swiftly turned their attention to the other inhabitants of the cellar, their voices urgent. “Find a tissue, make it wet... let’s make these tissues or fabric pieces wet,” they implored the crowd, a note of desperation in their plea. “Please, we beg you, dampen your fabrics and tissues.”

Outside the cellar, Omar took a few steps away from the door. On the exterior side of the cellar wall, he spotted Kafee and Mina. They were lying beside the wall, their bodies intertwined in an embrace that spoke of a final, desperate closeness. Approaching them on trembling legs, Omar stood there, observing their lifeless forms. Mina's prosthetic eyes were hauntingly wide open, as if shocked by the sight of her mother's bloodied face.

Omar yearned to sit beside them but found it difficult to breathe. It wasn't time to rest; he had to save his sons. Resisting the clutches of death, he murmured to himself, “I can’t die before my children. What would become of them? I can't bear the thought of them grieving for me.” With this resolve, he tightened his grip on his son and trudged on, his heart pounding with each step, making his breathing laboured.

The essence of fatherhood propelled him, even as his heart raced and he kept his distance from Kafee and Mina’s remains. His legs, growing heavier, seemed to resist his urgency. It felt as though he was wading through a swift river or thick mud. His vision blurred, and through tear-filled eyes, he glimpsed bodies strewn across the floor, their sight silently wrenching his heart.

He longed for his sons to cry out, to reassure him of their life with their tears, to say, “Father, don't worry, we are silent but alive.” The absence of their cries only heightened his fear, fuelling the flames of his anxiety.

His grip on his son weakened, making it increasingly difficult to hold him. Struggling forward, he reached a house with its door slightly open. Butterflies fluttered towards them, and he staggered, taking one or two more steps before his son slipped from his arms, and he, with the other son wrapped around his neck, slowly sank to the ground. His strength ebbed away, and with his son nestled close, he collapsed.

Lying there, he could hear the soft flutter of butterflies above them, accompanied by his sons' voices, “Father, these butterflies are here to guide us to a place of peace and happiness. It’s time for you to rest now, to be free from our sorrows and yours.”

The butterflies' dance continued, echoing his sons' reassurance, “Father, we will meet again, and together with the souls of our homeland, we will share our tales of pain, sorrow, and melancholy with the angels of peace and eternity.”

**(Chapter -29)**

As I mentioned at the start, I didn’t expect calm from the hall's attendees. So, when an uproar erupted, confirming their scepticism matched mine, someone stood, eyes on me, and accused, “You are here to spread scepticism?”

I didn’t utter a word because, prior to his reaction, I had weighed scepticism against credulity on behalf of him, myself, and the rest of the attendees. His scepticism only reinforced my own. Rising from my chair, I closed the book and picked it up from the table in front of me, then quietly left the hall.

It wasn’t until I stepped out of the hall and the building, abruptly greeted by the sudden glare of street lights, that I realized it was already late evening. Walking under the beams of the lights, the further I distanced myself from the building, the quieter the street became. The houses on both sides were silent too, as if everything I had voiced in the hall had been whispered to all the women, men, and children living there. I asked myself, “Why are they silent? Is it due to scepticism or credulity?” I answered myself, “Perhaps some of them, like those in the hall, are crying and sighing; some, whether they hear it or not, are indifferent to them; and the rest, sooner or later, one will emerge like the one in the hall and express himself to me openly.” But I doubted encountering someone like that on such an empty street. I felt that my mix of scepticism and credulity was blending with theirs.

Reaching the edge of our alley, I took some steps towards our house. Suddenly, I heard the sound of something dropping behind me. Turning towards the sound, I noticed a shadow which soon disappeared from my sight. I thought it might be someone from one of the houses wanting to inform me of the town citizens’ stance on scepticism or credulity. “Why doesn’t he approach me and speak his mind?” I wondered. Continuing a bit further, I heard the sound of footsteps. Turning towards the sound, the shadow disappeared once more. “Who might that be? Could it be the same man from the hall, wanting to express his remorse? What is he waiting for? Maybe he’s shy?” I mused. I decided that if I heard the footsteps again, I wouldn't turn but would remain stationary and motionless. As I was a few steps from our house’s front door, I heard the footsteps once more. True to my word, I didn’t turn but stood still.

The sound of the footsteps ceased.

“Please tell me what you wish to say. I promise to listen to all you express,” I said softly.

Suddenly, inside my head, I heard a series of taps – “Tap, tap…” It felt as if my head had become the basin of a sea caught in a fierce thunderstorm. The waves lifted me up and down with their wings, pulling me in all directions. Their talons pushed me deep within and then brought me back up, dragging me across the agitated surface and hurling me with immense force against the sharp cliffs around its edges. It didn’t take long before the waves and the roar of the thunderstorm caused me to lose consciousness.

**(Chapter -30)**

I regained consciousness in a haze, only to find myself standing over a human body. He lay face down on the ground, his hands outstretched as if to embrace the earth. The toe caps of his shoes were buried in the soft soil, marking his abrupt halt. Blood dripped, drop by drop, from his mouth, each creating a stark contrast against the ground. Nearby, a book lay open, its pages blood-stained, silently revealing the unknown events that led to this moment.

I approached the body and called out a few times, “Why have you fallen to the floor? What’s wrong?” Receiving no response, I examined the book, then quickly returned to the body to listen for a heartbeat, but it had ceased. His lifeless form was soaked in blood. I searched around him, focusing on his face for a moment, when suddenly, I was startled and looked at myself. None of my body parts were with me. Perplexed, I wondered how I could still see, hear, and think without a head. What was I using to walk?

I returned to the book, scrutinising it closely, then went back to the body to examine it more thoroughly. The body’s posture convinced me that he was me; I had found myself. I couldn’t fathom why we had become separated? What was I to do without my body? How could I retrieve my hands, grip the ground with my fingers like forks, or bring my feet together to stand? How could I reunite my soul with my body?

I attempted to swap myself with the parts of my body- the head, neck, shoulders, back, hands, chest, and feet, but to no avail – we did not rejoin. I said to him, “You are my body, and I am your living soul.” I spoke truthfully; we had been together through years of sweat and dark days, never leaving each other's side, never even contemplating separation. And now, this had not been a choice.

Unsure of what to do next and unwilling to leave him alone, I noticed a masked man standing above us, motionless, a pistol in his hand. “Why have you killed me?” I asked.

He jumped, looking anxiously at my body before replying, “You haven’t died yet?”

“No,” I answered.

He raised his hand, aiming the pistol at my body. Desperately, I tried to stop him from firing more bullets, but without my physical form, I could not grasp his hand or the pistol.

“Tap, tap…” He hit my body again with several silenced bullets and then ran away.”

I swiftly spoke to my body, saying, “Forgive me, I should have told him that you had already died.” I stood beside it for a long time, fearing the approach of dawn more than my bullet-riddled body. The thought of people finding me in the morning and surrounding me was terrifying. Each would concoct a story about my death. I thought to myself, “Who can say? My killer might be a high-ranking police officer. He won't come tomorrow to examine my body with open eyes, nor will his assistant weep over me and then carry my coffin. Who knows if they'll claim I committed suicide or falsely accuse someone of my murder, executing them in a twisted act of revenge? What would I do then? How could I face the innocent soul of such a victim? What could I say? That if I hadn't been there, they wouldn't have been falsely accused? And what about the one who killed me? Why did they do it? If the killer hadn't been there, would you still be as free as you are now, standing beside your own body? Why act as if you didn’t want to die? Without your killer, would your wish have been fulfilled so easily? Would you have witnessed every moment of your death? Could you have pondered the reason for it? Without your death, there would be no killer. You are a part of the history of the slain, and he, the slayer. Consider yourself fortunate to have been given the role of the victim, a role you should be proud of. Did you see the cowardice of your killer, his face masked, hiding his identity, lacking the courage to confront you or to explain before firing? Did you notice his fear of your lifeless body, how he froze above you? You saw how, without any physical form, you tried to stop him from shooting more, how he was startled by the sound of your disembodied soul and fired more bullets.”

I decided it was better to stop questioning and answering, and instead find a solution for my body, to take it and hide it far away. My main problem was our separation and how to reunite with it. I tried repeatedly to merge my soul with my body, but it wouldn’t accept me. Overwhelmed by loneliness and nostalgia, I missed my body terribly. I pleaded, “Let me merge with you again, or stand up and merge with me.” I stepped back, hoping it would miss me and follow, but it remained still. Returning, I urged, “Let’s go, dawn is approaching, and people will soon be here,” but it was as if I hadn’t spoken; there was no response. Feeling powerless, I started crying. Gradually, I sensed a warm presence approaching. I searched all around but saw nothing. Suddenly, a voice said, “Don’t cry in vain.” It brought me joy, thinking it was my body showing pity. I examined it closely, but like before, it lay motionless, its mouth full of blood and eyes closed.

Without knowing who I was addressing, I reacted to the voice, “Why?”

The voice replied, “Because crying won’t make him speak.”

“Why?” I pressed.

“Because silence is the language of the dead,” it answered.

Then it dawned on me that this wasn’t my body’s voice, but rather my soul conversing with another disembodied spirit.

“Let’s go,” the voice suggested.

“Where?” I queried.

“To somewhere,” it said vaguely.

“Where exactly?” I insisted.

“Far from Earth,” came the reply.

“I want to take my body,” I insisted.

“We can’t,” the voice refused.

“Then help me hide it,” I pleaded.

“Don’t hide it,” it advised.

“What should I do with it?” I inquired.

“Leave it here,” was the response.

“Why?” I questioned.

“Because without it, you would never have been on Earth,” the voice explained.

“What should I have done?” I asked.

“Nothing,” it said simply.

“How?” I was confused.

“What happened to you was due to your body,” it elaborated.

“Why?” I persisted.

“Because every human action on Earth requires a body,” it clarified.

“What kind of body?” I wondered.

“The body of an executioner, thief, abuser, the greedy, jealous, spiteful, envious, seditionist, troublemaker, and so on,” it listed.

“That’s why I want to hide my body,” I affirmed my intention.

“Why?” the voice probed.

“To erase all my traces, to end all doubts and beliefs,” I explained.

“Don’t worry,” it reassured me.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Without your body, there would be no feelings of doubt or belief,” it reasoned.

“I don’t want to leave it behind,” I admitted.

“Why?” it inquired.

“To prevent leaving behind any doubts or beliefs through my body for others,” I clarified.

“Don’t worry. Without you, your body wouldn't have lasted this long. Now that you're no longer with it, it will soon be found, buried, and forgotten,” it explained.

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Because Earth is where all bodies are hidden and eventually forgotten,” it concluded.

“I don’t understand,” I admitted.

The voice replied, “This is where bodies belong, where you have ended up. So, you need to leave it here as well.” It then asked, “Don’t you want to hide it?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Then what worries you? Why can’t you leave it behind?” the voice queried.

“How can I? We weren’t separated by choice. A killer forced us apart; didn’t you see how he riddled my body with bullets?” I explained.

“It wasn’t the killer who did it,” the voice corrected.

“Who was it then?” I asked.

“It was his body,” the voice revealed.

“How so?” I inquired.

“His body killed your body,” it clarified.

“But I was innocent,” I protested.

“You were guilty as well,” the voice countered.

“Guilty? Why?” I asked, perplexed.

“Because you had a body,” it explained. “If neither of you had a body, there would be no killer and no victim. In other words, there wouldn’t be anyone labelled as the killed or the killer.”

“But why?” I pressed.

“You complete each other,” it answered.

“What brought us together?” I wondered.

“Your humanity,” the voice said.

“How does that work?” I asked.

“Because the act of killing requires both parties,” it explained.

“And what about those who commit suicide?” I queried.

“They, too, need a body to do that,” the voice responded.

“But why is it like this?” I questioned.

“Since humans appeared in physical form, there has been killing among them,” it explained.

“I’m upset about this,” I admitted.

“Don’t be,” the voice advised.

“What should I feel then?” I asked.

“Be happy,” it suggested.

“How can I be happy? I’m full of doubts,” I confessed.

“Soon, you won’t feel doubtful anymore,” it assured.

“I’ll only stop doubting once I've successfully hidden my body somewhere unknown,” I stated.

“Why is that important to you?” the voice probed.

“I feel sorrow,” I admitted.

“Sorrow for what?” it asked.

“I'm scared they'll say I tried to kill someone but got killed instead,” I shared my fear.

“Don’t be scared,” the voice reassured.

“Why not?” I questioned.

“Because only humans would say that,” it replied.

“Why are they like that?” I wondered.

“They are the root of both killing and being killed,” the voice explained. “Humans belittle, harm, starve, and force each other from their homes. Is there any misdeed they haven't committed?”

“Do animals act the same?” I asked.

“They do, but…” the voice trailed off.

“But what?” I pressed.

“They’ll never stoop to the lows of humans,” it concluded.

“Why not?” I inquired.

“Because humans are supposedly wise,” it said.

“If they’re wise, why do they do such things?” I asked, puzzled.

“They claim to be wise,” it corrected.

“What kind of wisdom is that?” I asked.

“A flawed one,” the voice answered.

“How long will they stay like this?” I wondered.

“As long as they have bodies,” it responded.

“Why?” I asked again.

“How can you ask? Look at your bullet-riddled body,” it pointed out.

“I see it,” I acknowledged.

“Then let’s leave,” the voice suggested.

“But what about my body?” I asked.

“Leave it. It’s better that way,” it advised, repeating, “Let’s go.”

“And my book?” I inquired.

“Leave it where it is,” the voice said.

“But why?” I persisted.

“Your words, every sentence, will stay with you in a pouch no matter where you go,” it assured.

Silence followed. Minutes passed as I waited for more words, but there were none. “Are you still here?” I asked, but got no response. I wondered, “It urged me to leave, so why the silence now?”

I looked at my body and book, my vision fading, my hearing diminishing, inching towards deafness. Gradually, I became a being without senses, an existence unbound by physicality. It was an alien sensation, as if I’d never lived, never had a body, never interacted with anyone. Slowly, I was lifted, feeling peace as Earth grew distant and unfamiliar. I couldn't tell how high I was or where I was heading. The unknown surrounded me. These questions remained, unanswered. In my final moments, between doubt and understanding, I came to realize it wasn't just my physical existence that had vanished. My soul, too, had irretrievably faded away to the next step.

**(Chapter -31)**

As night recently yielded to day, it left behind its last transparent veil upon the earth, heralding the arrival of civil twilight. Looking at myself, I was astonished at how my body had returned to my soul in a completely different form! How had the senses of sight and hearing returned to me? I was absolutely convinced it was me, yet none of my body parts resembled those I had on Earth. My entire body was white,shaped like a human. I quickened my steps and tenderly touched the fabric pouch slung over my shoulder. Raising my head, I saw the sky was blue. On all sides of the road I was traversing, a thin layer of snow, remnants of the last winter, still veiled most parts of the earth's face. Short trees on both sides of the road, with branches, twigs, and leaves, peeked through the veil of snow. As I neared them, their heads bowed and then rose again as I passed by.

I stopped without knowing why, looking around. Before moving again, a profound silence overwhelmed my being. I continued on my way, the only sound being that of my footsteps. With each step, a mix of melted snow and mud splashed up, leaving patches on me before being swiftly erased by a steam from my body, drying me off. I was on a mountain path; it stretched up to its peak as far as the eye could see, bisecting the mountain.

A beam of light was swaying on the peak of the mountain. The higher I climbed, the more my body's colour merged with that of the snow and the beam, brightening me like a diamond. On the mountain ridge, here and there, light-kissed dewdrops adorned the green grass leaves, glistening and enchanting the heart, as if expressing a sense of delight for my arrival. The sun emerged with its beams behind the swaying light, embracing the mountain, its meadow, and me, drenching everything in the light of diamonds.

In the sky, four cumulus clouds, from the east, west, north, and south, with a distance between them, began to approach each other bit by bit. They kept getting closer until they embraced each other and formed a cloud umbrella above my head. It started drizzling around me, creating a mesmerizing and intricate musical sound like that of a santur. I continued walking, drawing nearer to the mountain's peak, where I spotted two individuals in the distance, slowly descending towards me. After a while, we met, and they introduced themselves to me one by one.

The girl, imagine the most beautiful girl, and if you can't, ask a trusted friend to describe the most beautiful girl to you—she was even more beautiful than that. She was around 20 years old. The boy, imagine the most handsome boy, or if you can't, ask a trusted friend to describe the most handsome boy to you—this boy was even more handsome than that. He was around 21 years old.

“My name is Raz,” the girl said.

“My name is Niyaz,” the boy said.

They both embraced me, each taking one of my hands, and led me to the peak of the mountain. The sun drew closer to us, as if it wanted to envelop us.

At the mountain's peak, looking down from its back, there lay a serene blue sea. A gentle zephyr stirred its surface, and we could smell a fresh fragrance of flowers mixed with the sea's aroma. A narrow bridge extended over the sea. We descended to the base of the mountain's backside, walked onto the bridge, and it automatically carried us through a valley, gradually disappearing from the mountain's view.

**(Chapter -32)**

With Raz and Niyaz, we stood in front of a wooden door that opened for us immediately. Upon entering, we found ourselves in a wide, elongated hall. Its walls resembled cinema screens; when you looked at them, you could see not only your physical body but also your senses and desires expressed in words. Whatever you sought, it would manifest in words as well.

Four large canvases, spaced about fifty meters apart, stood on easels in the middle of a spacious corridor leading to the hall. They were adorned with vivid and captivating colours. The first canvas, labelled “Arctic,” the second labelled “Mesothermal,” and the third labelled “Desert,” exhibited colours that seemed to shift and transform into lifelike human faces, only to return to their original forms, leaving me captivated. The fourth bore no inscription but was painted in thick white hues.

I turned to Raz and inquired, “What are these canvases?”

“First, second, and third are representations of the pains of people living in those regions,” Raz replied.

I pressed further, “What about the fourth canvas?”

“For now, it will remain with its unchanging colour,” Raz answered.

Curious, I asked, “Why?”

“In time, the faces of those destined for virtue will be depicted upon it,” Raz explained.

I probed further, “Only faces? What about the soul?”

“Soul does not require a face,” Raz asserted.

Intrigued, I questioned, “What does it require then?”

“Happiness within itself,” Raz clarified.

Seeking to understand, I asked, “How can it attain this happiness?”

“Through the soul itself,” Raz replied.

Wondering about the permanence of these canvases, I asked, “How long will these canvases remain here?”

“Forever,” Raz assured.

I inquired further, “Only their faces?”

“Yes,” Raz affirmed.

Curiosity piqued, I questioned, “Why?”

“The canvases themselves are faces, which are bodies, and bodies naturally occupy their places,” Raz explained.

Seeking clarity about the soul, I asked, “And the soul?”

“The soul has neither a place nor can be placed in one,” Raz clarified.

Intrigued, I probed, “If it neither has nor will have a place, where does it reside or will reside?”

“It neither resides nor will ever reside,” Raz affirmed.

Perplexed, I questioned, “What will it do then?”

“It embarks on a journey in a boundless realm with no beginning or end,” Raz explained.

I asked, “When does this journey commence?”

“When it is liberated from its physical body,” Raz answered.

Curious about its destination, I queried, “Where does it go?”

“To wherever it wishes,” Raz responded.

I sought to understand, asking, “Why?”

“To experience the unparalleled and countless existence that the divine has created,” Raz explained.

I inquired about the fate of the canvases faces, “Will the faces on the canvases remain unchanged?”

“No,” Raz replied.

I continued, “What will happen to them?”

“They will transform into organic colours, the very colours that bring joy to both humans and all beings, whether in the heavens or on earth,” Raz elucidated.

I asked, “What will the soul ultimately achieve?”

“Happiness,” Raz confirmed.

Perplexed, I inquired, “How?”

“Through itself,” Raz explained.

With genuine curiosity, I asked, “Whose soul is it?”

“It seems to be its own,” Raz explained.

I sought further clarification, “What do you mean?”

“It is beyond human comprehension,” Raz replied.

Intrigued, I questioned, “What capabilities does the soul possess?”

“Everything,” Raz affirmed.

I probed further, “Such as?”

“Everything it couldn't accomplish while confined within a body,” Raz explained.

I asked, “Everything?”

“Everything except inflicting pain,” Raz confirmed.

I wondered, “What about the body?”

“The body is the shackles of the soul,” Raz explained.

I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Until the body exists, the soul will never attain eternal purity, freedom, and peace,” Raz explained.

I asked, “How long will it remain like that?”

“Until it remains in the body's shackles,” Raz responded.

I asked, “Where will the soul reach?”

“To anywhere that the body couldn't and can't,” Raz responded.

I inquired, “What will it do in those places?”

“Visit all the stars in the sky; enjoy all known and unknown beauties; swim in the ocean floor of all seas; dance with the waves; journey alongside the swift flows of rivers; perch on the highest crowns of the forest trees; traverse impenetrable grounds and mountains; listen without barriers to the secrets of all beings. There is no place that the soul desires to go to or do but can't,” Raz explored.

I asked, “Without obstacles?”

“Yes,” Raz replied.

I asked, “How?”

“Because there isn't any existing power of all time that can reach the one God-given soul,” Raz explained.

I changed the subject and asked Raz, “Who painted those canvases?”

“The unnamed painter,” Raz responded.

I asked, “What did he paint them with?”

“With tears from the eyes,” Raz responded.

I asked, “What kind of tears?”

“Tears that stem from the inner well of pain and love,” Raz explained.

I asked, “Why?”

“Here, art presents beauty using tears from pure human eyes,” Raz explained.

I bowed my head and in a self-talk said, “Pure human!” Then I turned to Raz and asked, “Why don't their colours match with the ones on Earth?”

“The majority of artists on Earth are not the ones presenting divine beauty. They aren't expressers of genuine, pure feelings. To them, art is a mask to cover the true faces and feelings, to promote and protect individual interests,” Raz explained.

Continuing our walk, I looked at Raz and Niyaz in turn, and in a soft tone, I asked them, “Interests?” I realized that we had reached the front of a gate, and there was no time left for my questions and their answers.

They both, each with one hand, opened the gate, and we went in before it slowly closed by itself. We were struck by a bright light merged with music, followed by flashes of light falling one after another on us like clusters, hitting the ground, spreading around us, going up again, regaining their previous shapes, and hanging above our heads. We found ourselves at the entrance of a large hall's platform.

A group of twelve people, a mixture of men and women were sitting in a circle on a stage in the centre of the hall, a tall lady with long hair was standing in the middle of them, she was raising her hands up and down, taken and bring them back from right to left, the rest were as chorus imitating her, no instruments could be seen, but their movement were creating a groovy musical rhythm.

I, Raz and Niyaz were still standing close to the door.

The lady put her arms down, bowed her head and remained motionless, the chorus stood up and did the same, a cotton candy blackened with darkness engulfed us, a beam of light appeared and gradually milted it.

Lighting overwhelmed the hall, the lady raised her head and so did the chorus, they all looked at us three, raised their hands towards us, their wide sleeves under their writs lighted up and made the hall lighter, they put their hands down, a gentle breeze, accompanied by music, approached us.

The lady came towards me, embraced me and then put her hands on my shoulders, kissed my head, looked at my eyes and said: “My name is Parwana of the Palace of Unknown Tableaus,” She took off her hands on my shoulders, and together went to the centre of the hall.

Raz and Niyaz remained where they were.

Parwana and I sat on a loveseat, which slowly elevated about two meters above the floor, revealing a wall covered with water opposite us. It produced no sound, and not a single drop of water dripped from it; it remained completely still. I took off my pouch from my shoulder and handed it to her. She opened it, took out a book, briefly browsed through its pages, and placed it in a box embedded under our chair.

Instantly, on the water screen, thousands of people were seen running and stampeding, including children, women, and men. A man who was holding a five-year-old child swiftly left him on the floor. The child ran behind him sobbing, soon started heavy breathing, his bare and weak feet ran out of energy, and he sat down. With a hoarse voice, he continued crying, started leg flailing until he gradually bent his body, made his palms to bed his head on the floor, and hopelessly became silent. A dark, thick black smoke quickly blew and concealed him.

In the midst of the chaotic crowd, a separated girl and boy were anxiously looking for each other. When they finally found each other, they eagerly embraced for a while before falling to the ground. Still embracing, they rolled on the floor several times before ceasing their movements.

A Peshmerga, with bandoliers worn diagonally across his chest and a Kalashnikov on his shoulder, was busy digging a hole in the ground with a pickaxe. When he finished, he took off his bandoliers and Kalashnikov and threw them into the hole, covering them with excavated soil. He placed his headgear on top of the soil, stepped back, pulled out a dagger from his traditional belt, and stabbed his belly a number of times, causing severe bleeding. Without uttering a word, his tall body slowly bent towards the floor, and ultimately, his face was drenched in a pool of his blood.

An elderly woman was holding a hammer with both of her weak hands, bit by bit, beating a grave stone, attempting to scratch an engraved patriotic short poetry that read, “Kem bzhi u kell bzhi (live short but live like a deer)!” I stood up and started crying.

“Why are you crying?” Parwana asked me with compassion.

I responded, “That is the grave stone of my father. I don't understand why my grandmother would desecrate it?”

“Your grandmother is not angry with your father, but she is upset with the poetry,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why?”

“Because it doesn't mean anything to her,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why does she react that way?”

“What can she do? She tries to create a meaning for it,” Parwana explained.

We both turned our faces to the screen, and the images ceased.

The sound of rustling pages from the box came— one page, two, three, and hundreds of them. It stopped after a few minutes, and silence overwhelmed the hall.

Parwana took the book out and handed it to me. The hall grew dark, and the walls on our right, left, and behind us turned into screens, displaying live scenes from Halabja's past years.

The water screen rolled itself to the left, revealing a stage. I remained standing, my body distinct from the other attendees. My fingers ran through my wavy, golden hair, which glistened with sweat. I had a halo-like countenance, akin to that of a spiritual figure, with two large, black, luminous eyes that blinked and sparkled, casting beams of light across my visage. My lips moved without uttering a word.

One of the chorus members stood and went to the back of the stage behind the water screen. She retrieved an easel and placed it against the wall on my left. Then, she returned, this time carrying the canvas with the thick white hues, a long brush, and a paint-pot filled with vibrant crystal colours. She attached the canvas to the easel and positioned herself beside the items ready to paint.

Parwana took the book from me and placed it inside the box. The sound of its pages rustling resumed, and the water screen reverted to its previous form. The images on the wall screens came to a halt.

**(Chapter -33)**

Parwana took the book out from the box, handed it to me, and asked me to sit down. I looked at the frozen images of Halabja, sat down, placed the book in front of me on the writing arm of our chair, opened it, and fixed my eyes on its first page. I began to read, “When Halabja was attacked with chemical weapons.” I raised my head to see that the water screen had captured the days and times of the events I was about to narrate. I lowered my head and addressed the attendees, saying, “A number of foreign journalists, videographers, and photographers reached the South of Kurdistan and documented a very limited account of the tragedy. Despite their efforts, the enormity of the atrocity remained inadequately represented. More than 5,000 children, men, and women lost their lives, and over 10,000 were maimed by the devastating attack on my town. Some countries, human rights organizations, and individuals expressed their protests against the use of chemical weapons.” I fell silent.

The painter followed my reading closely. After each sentence, she would dip her brush into the paint pot, apply it carefully onto the canvas. The crystal colours on the canvas transformed into a myriad of shades—shades unseen in any forests, orchards, gardens, or meadows on Earth.

I resumed my reading, “The most heart-wrenching image of the town was that of Omar cradling his own lifeless baby son, both lying face down on the ground, symbolizing the anguish of the Kurdish nation on Earth.” Suddenly, the sound of a baby came while suckling his mother’s breast and strongly engaged the attendees’ feelings for a while.

I ceased reading.

The painter stopped painting and looked at me, the sound of music raised, they all stood up and said in chorus, “We hear the message of night vigils through voice and colour; we paint the message of night vigils with tears of love and compassion.” Then they silently sat down, and the image on the water screen paused.

I resumed reading, “Omar, a native of Halabja, embarked on his journey in 1937,” The water screen displayed the open yard of Omar's father's mud house in the town. The sound of zurna, rhythmic double-headed drum music, accompanied men and women dancing with joyful foot tapping. The scent of organic rice, curries, halwa, and perfume wafted through the air. A midwife emerged from a small room in the house, proud of her role in assisting a woman in giving birth to a son (the little Omar). In return, the family presented her with a pouch filled with gifts, escorting her through the open yard to the neighbouring alley. The chain around the door knocker continued to rustle, its sound merging with the revelry inside the house before the water screen paused the image.

After a brief pause, I continued, “Hardship prevented Omar from completing his studies, and he left school after a few years of primary education. He began working as a manual labourer. During this time, he married Smaya, a girl from Garmiyan, a tropical area in South Kurdistan. Together, they settled in Halabja.”

I looked at all the attendees in the hall before stating, “National consciousness and the aspiration to liberate Kurdistan compelled Omar to become a peshmerga, taking up arms for the cause and participating in the Kurdish September revolution against the Iraqi ruler.” I briefly raised my head and resumed reading, “The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) convened a meeting in March 1975 in Algeria, during which Saddam Hussein, the former deceased Iraqi president, and the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, met and agreed on the Shahabad Treaty of 1937. This agreement granted Iranian vessels the freedom to navigate the Arab Gulf. In exchange, Iranian government ceased its support for the Kurdish revolution, which it did, ultimately leading to the capitulation of the revolution's leadership,” I bowed my head in shame and fell silent.

The lighting inundated the hall, but it didn’t take long, the image on the water screen went dark, and the darkness returned. Parwana directed her gaze towards me, and said, “What you said about the September revolution is nor complete in terms of recording, which was the reason for the inundation of the light and screen’s darkness.”

I raised my head.

The painter fetched her brush, to start painting again.

Parwana nodded her head to me.

“A year before the capitulation, in 24th April 1974, the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Part’s aircrafts, bombarded Halabja with Napalm, it killed ninety people, including children, woman and men,” With my fingers, I swept my hair back, and resumed, “The capitulation left Omar feeling hopeless, prompting him to start working in a bakery. At that time, he had an eight-year-old daughter. As a symbol of his love for Samya, he had named their daughter ‘Germiyan’, after Samya's birthplace. “The water screen revealed a nostalgic scene of Garmiyan during her childhood, sitting on her house's veranda with friends, engrossed in a game of 'Five Pebbles.' They playfully scattered the small pebbles on the ground, deftly retrieving them one by one. The pebbles were tossed into the air, dancing from their palms, bouncing merrily on the floor. Laughter filled the air as the girls swiftly collected the pebbles. With skill, they once again placed pebbles on their palms, producing a distinct sound that echoed their joy. It was summer, a hot noon, and they happily immersed themselves in the game beneath a pedestal fan. Suddenly, the sound of a boy reached them from the alley, calling out, 'Ice pop, ice pop, made by Hiwa Factory, freezes head ice pop…' Upon hearing the boy, the girls scattered, intermittently calling for their moms, 'Mom, ice pop, mom, the ice pop seller is here’,” The single pebbles, as if they had fallen out, each settled in a corner, waiting for the girls' next game.

I halted reading, looked at the water screen and started smiling, before resuming reading, “Two years after the birth of Garmiyan, Samya gave birth to another daughter, as a symbol of her love for Omar, she had named their newly-born daughter ‘Kwestan’, referring to Omar’s birth place, alike a highland area.”

Parwana stood up, the chorus followed her, the music started slowly. I rose my head and told them, “In Kurdish society in general, boy is regarded as the backbone of the family, according to which, those husband and wife who have no boys, labelled as legacy-less (Wecax Kwêr in Kurdish),” I bowed my head in shame, and resumed, saying, “Omar,”

The chorus repeated it after me, “Omar.”

“A labourer,”

The chorus, “A labourer.”

“Simple and kind,”

The chorus, “Simple and Kind.”

“The father of two girls,”

The chorus, “The father of two girls.”

“After having the two girls, he felt a strong longing for a boy,”

The chorus, “After having two girls, he felt a strong longing for a boy.”

“The absence of a son filled him with anxiety,”

The chorus, “The absence of a son filled him with anxiety.”

“Despite his strong desire for a son, he was dedicated to nurturing his daughters, Germiyan and Kwestan,”

The chorus, “Despite his strong desire for a son, he was dedicated to nurturing his daughters, Germiyan and Kwestan.”

The chorus sat down in their places.

I raised my head.

The painter nodded for me to continue reading.

I lowered my head and said, “Samya had become pregnant again, rekindling Omar's hope. He had dreamed of the day when his son would be born, anticipating that the cries of a baby boy in a few months would herald a happy life for him.”

The sound of the music rose again, Parwana and the chorus stood up.

I looked at them, and said, “Time didn’t align with Omar’s wish, as Samya gave birth to another daughter, they named her ‘Zhyan’(In Kurdish life)”

The chorus repeated, “Time didn’t align with Omar’s wish, as Samya gave birth to another daughter, they named her ‘Zhyan’.” Naming her with that name was only to harmonise it with the name of their other daughters.

I raised my head shortly, bended down as resumed, “Omar endured a lot of sorrow, he had no choice but to accept it,” I asked the chorus, “What could Omar do for son?”

“Nothing,” The chorus responded before sitting down.

**(Chapter -34)**

The sound of music could still be heard in the hall with a low volume. Raz and Niyaz were standing where they were. The painter was assessing the colours she had painted so far. The water screen was paused on Omar; he was sitting alone and upset in a room in his house. Parwana and the chorus were conversing quietly.

Parwana approached the chair, pressed a button underneath it, and rewound the pages of the book in the box for a while. During this time, images were displayed rapidly on the water screen. She then brought it back to the previously paused image of Omar. She rejoined the chorus, and the music's volume increased slightly. The painter picked up her brush again.

I glanced at the chorus, lowered my head, and told them, “Time passed. Samya was waiting to give birth to her next child. During the wait, she often said to herself, “God, for the sake of your Almighty, listen to my wish, help me become the mother of a baby son.” Ultimately, the next child was a girl, and they named her 'Beyan.' They became four sisters.

I continued, “The agony of waiting consumed Omar entirely,”

The chorus repeated after me, “The agony of waiting consumed Omar entirely.”

“Pain etched wrinkles onto Omar's face,”

The chorus echoed, “Pain etched wrinkles onto Omar's face.”

“Only Omar could hear a voice echoing within him, and it was ironically repeating, Father of girls,"

The chorus repeated, “Only Omar could hear a voice echoing within him, and it was ironically repeating, Father of girls.”

I explained, “His inner voice was no different from the voices of the men and women in the community. With the birth of every child, they all asked him the same question, as though they were privy to his inner thoughts.”

I paused for a moment before continuing, “What did you have, Omar?” a man inquired. Then, a woman asked, “What did you have, Omar?”

“A girl,” Omar replied to each of them.

I explained, “His inner turmoil was painful, waking him up at night, asking him, 'What did you have, Omar?' 'What will you have?' He couldn't escape the answers, reluctantly easing the burden on his shoulders. 'We are going to have a girl.' He was more terrified of his inner voice than the external one."

I briefly looked up and continued, “Occasionally, some women in his neighbourhood used to console him by saying, ‘God is great, there will be a day when you become the father of a son.' But it didn't leave a lasting effect on him. When they consoled him, he would raise his index finger to his forehead and say, it’s written in here, I know, we will only be having girls.”

The chorus echoed, "He thought it was written on his forehead, that they would only have girls."

I described Omar's feelings towards his daughters, "He loved them very much, a love that always emerged after their births. He didn't know why he wanted to forget the love before their births, why he was scared of them, and why he became so attached to them afterward. Sometimes, he would joke with his older girls, saying, If I weren't scared, I would pin you to the front of my jacket during the day instead of flowers.”

“What are you scared of?” the girls asked him.

Omar responded, “Of winds.”

“Why?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “I'm scared they might blow you away."

“To where?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “To the meadow of the angels.”

“Where is that?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “It's quite a distance from here.”

“What's the travel distance?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “The distance is so great that it makes it impossible for me to reach you.”

“Then, pin us to your jacket at night,” the girls proposed.

Omar responded, “I go to work late at night.”

“Doesn't matter,” the girls responded.

Omar responded, “I'm scared.”

“Of what?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “You will fall asleep on my jacket.”

“Doesn't matter,” the girls responded.

Omar responded, “I believe it does, as though you don't know.”

“What?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “During the day, the little stars are hidden on the horizon.”

“What about at night?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “Restless.”

“Why? What do they do?” the girls asked.

Omar explained, “Guarding.”

“It doesn't matter,” the girls responded.

Omar explained, “I believe it does.”

“Why?” the girls asked.

Omar responded, “They will set up an ambush and might take any girls they see away.”

I looked up at the chorus and continued, “Despite the deep love Omar had for his daughters, he still clung to the hope of having a son. However, a few months passed, and Samya gave birth to another girl. They named her 'Cwan’.”

Parwana and the chorus took their seats

**(Chapter -35)**

I took a deep breath and addressed Parwana and the chorus, “Yet another year has passed, contrary to Samya and Omar's wishes, Samya gave birth to another girl, and they named her ‘Armand’.” Hopelessness weighed heavily upon him; his relatives offered consolation, saying, “Why are you so down? Be patient; there will come a day when God will make your wish come true. You should be proud of your girls; they are clever and honourable. Neighbours and relatives are all satisfied with them.” The music began softly.

I paused for a moment, then continued, “As I mentioned earlier, consolation didn't have a lasting effect on him; hopelessness would soon take hold of him.”

The painter took her brush and, along with my narration, continued her painting.

The water screen displayed Omar under the shade of a mulberry tree in the outskirts of Halabja. He was lost in thought, and in a soliloquy, he said, “I will never be upset about having girls.”

The chorus echoed, “He had never been upset about having girls.”

“They all know how I nurture them, how I take the little ones into the bathroom and wash them one by one,” Omar said.

The chorus echoed, “They all knew how he nurtured them, how he took the little ones into the bathroom and washed them one by one.”

“It's the sarcastic remarks of people that have deeply affected my emotions and troubled me,” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “It's the sarcastic remarks of people that have deeply affected his emotions and troubled him.”

“Believe me,” Omar implored.

The chorus echoed, “Believe him.”

“When I shop in the markets, some people ask me, 'What do you need that for? Are you raising daughters for your future sons-in-law?” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “When he shopped in the markets, some people would ask him, 'What are you shopping for? Are you planning to raise daughters for your future sons-in-law?”

“At night, while people are asleep, I am at work, and during the daytime, I am a guardian in a kindergarten,” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “At night, while people are asleep, he is at work, and during the daytime, he is a guardian in a kindergarten.”

“I endure hardship to ensure my children are never hungry, lacking love, clothing, and always happy,” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “He endured hardship to ensure his children are never hungry, lacking love, clothing, and always happy.”

“What can I do? My endurance of hardship doesn't deter people's sarcastic remarks; they perceive me as a weak individual,” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “What can he do? His endurance of hardship hasn't deterred people's sarcastic remarks; they perceive him as a weak individual.”

“People are heartless; they refuse to understand that I don't have the power to determine the gender of my children,” Omar expressed.

The chorus echoed, “People are heartless; they refused to understand that he didn't have the power to determine the gender of his children.”

The water screen froze Omar's image; the music came to a halt; the painter ceased her work.

Parwana looked at me and asked, “Could you pause your reading for a moment?”

I nodded in response.

Parwana commented, “Omar's hardships were all a result of people's misguided beliefs.”

I inquired, “Why is that?”

“Because humans often conceive wrongful notions,” Parwana replied.

I pressed on, “Why do you think so?”

“Omar's suffering wasn't due to the absence of a son or his occupation,” Parwana clarified.

I probed further, “Then, what was it due to?”

“It was due to human ignorance,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Ignorance in what?”

“Ignorance in their way of thinking, which resulted in suffering and the shaping of the social, political, and economic environment in which Omar and people like him lived,” Parwana elaborated.

The chorus echoed, “Ignorance in their way of thinking resulted in suffering and shaped the social, political, and economic environment in which Omar and people like him were living.”

I questioned, “What is the root cause of suffering?”

“Each suffering has its own origin,” Parwana replied.

I inquired further, “What causes human suffering?”

“The existence of humans themselves and their thought patterns,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“Humans are often the primary source of their physical and mental suffering, and they also bear responsibility for inflicting pain on animals, contributing to corruption, and causing environmental destruction,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Who is responsible for the viruses that lead to suffering and death in humans?”

“The weakness of humans,” Parwana replied.

I followed up, “In what way?”

“In their way of thinking,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “What are they thinking?”

“They often engage in self-deception,” Parwana replied.

I asked, “How is that influenced by history?”

“Throughout what humans themselves have termed 'history,' they have struggled to overcome viruses,” Parwana explained.

I countered, “How have they managed to do so?”

“They have managed to conquer Plague, Smallpox, Influenza Pandemics, Tuberculosis, and then they faced HIV/AIDS, as well as others, and new ones will inevitably emerge,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “What do you mean?”

“I mean that every time, viruses reappear with new names and disguises,” Parwana clarified.

I questioned, “Why is that?”

“To wreak havoc on human beings,” Parwana responded.

I probed further, “Only on humans?”

“Also on animals and birds,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Why animals and birds?”

“Because of human actions,” Parwana replied.

I wondered, “Why are humans like that?”

“As I mentioned, it's their flawed thinking,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What should they do then?”

“They need to think beyond their own limited perspectives,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “How can they achieve that without losing their individuality?”

“The problem lies within human nature,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Within what aspect?”

“Within the essence of being human,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “What would happen if they ceased to exist?”

“They would no longer be at risk,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Risk from what?”

“From their very existence,” Parwana clarified.

I inquired, “What do humans need to do in order to be free from risk?”

“They must abandon their destructive behaviours,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Which behaviours specifically?”

“Those that lead to their own destruction and that of the environment,” Parwana elaborated.

I wondered, “What would happen if they do so?”

“Viruses would spare them,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Where should humans begin?”

“Within themselves,” Parwana emphasized.

I inquired further, “What do they need to do?”

“They must let go of their self-centeredness,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What would happen if they do so?”

“They will rediscover their true selves,” Parwana clarified.

I questioned, “What changes will occur within them?”

“They will embrace genuine wisdom and strength,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What will they do then?”

“Instead of self-destruction, they will combat the viruses,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “All viruses?”

“No, not all,” Parwana confirmed.

I inquired, “Which ones then?”

“Those that they themselves have created,” Parwana responded.

Perplexed, I asked, “Are there viruses created by humans as well?”

“Indeed, there are,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Which ones?”

“The ones they have engineered,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “Using what methods?”

“Malicious behaviour and speech,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why?”

“To employ them in a way that ultimately leads to self-destruction,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “How can they use them if they believe it would lead to their own destruction?”

“Do you understand?” Parwana asked me.

I responded, “What?”

“There is no distinction between one's own destruction and harming others,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “How is that?”

“If one harms other beings, it means they are also harming their own existence,” Parwana clarified.

I questioned, “What will happen to them then?”

“All their wisdom will be stripped away,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What will they become?”

“They will become a living embodiment of destruction,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “What about those who are harmed?”

“They will be the living proof of the destructor's wrongdoing,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “How so?”

“Observe how the absence of sons continually affects Samya and Omar's mental and physical well-being,” Parwana pointed out.

I asked, “How is that related to viruses?”

“It is related because humans' misguided thoughts are also a form of virus,” Parwana explained.

I questioned, “What does 'virus' mean?”

“It is the assailant of the body and the tormentor of the soul,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why do humans do that?”

“Because of their incapability,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “In what way?”

“In bringing about lasting peace,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “For whom?”

“For themselves, all living beings, and nature,” Parwana explained.

I questioned, “So you mean they haven't achieved anything?”

“They have achieved some things, but all have been temporary,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Will it always remain the same?”

“It has always been and will continue to be the same,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “Why is that?”

“Humans believe that their programming will always lead to a desirable outcome,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why doesn't it lead to the desired outcome?”

“No programme, whether invented by humans or otherwise, has ever been, nor will ever be, completely flawless,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “What do you mean by that?”

“Because humans will never reach their intended destination and end,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why won't they?”

“Because they have become lost,” Parwana responded.

I wondered, “Whom have they lost?”

“Themselves,” Parwana clarified.

I asked, “Is it possible for them to find themselves?”

“Where?” Parwana asked me.

I responded, “In life.”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why not?”

“Because human beings are consumed and vanish within the course of life,” Parwana explained.

I questioned, “Who or what has caused their destruction and disappearance?”

“Life itself,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“Because life does not align with the desires and aspirations of humans,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “What evidence supports that?”

“The inevitable death of human beings,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“Because life has never been and will never be subject to human fantasies and wild dreams,” Parwana explained.

I questioned, “Why not?”

“Because life has only allowed humans to coexist with it, but on certain conditions,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What conditions?”

“Surrender,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Surrender to whom?”

“To death,” Parwana responded.

I inquired, “Why is that?”

“Because humans cannot always be relied upon to do good deeds,” Parwana explained.

I asked, surprised, “Nothing of good at all?!”

“Things that can help them transcend their current state,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Whose fault is it then?”

“The fault lies with life itself,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “What has life done?”

“It has provided the opportunity for human beings to become oppressors and engage in bloodshed,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why would it do that?”

“To lead them towards self-destruction and harm to other beings around them,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “So who bears the blame for the guilt?”

“Life bears that responsibility,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“If life had not allowed humans to coexist with it, there wouldn't be acts like killing, inflicting pain, and causing destruction,” Parwana explained.

I said, “This suggests that humans are innocent.”

“They are, as long as they refrain from engaging in those actions,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why do humans engage in such actions then?”

“Because they are often driven by arrogance and violence,” Parwana responded.

I inquired, “Can they ever cease such behaviour?”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why not?”

“Because they have never been able to harmonize with life, and they never will,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What does that mean?”

It signifies their inherent imperfection,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “How so?”

“If humans were flawless and impeccable, you would not be here in 'The Palace of Unknown Tableaus' with us now, bearing the message of night vigils,” Parwana expressed.

I asked, “How long will they remain flawless and impeccable?”

“Forever,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Are you the same?”

“No, we are not,” Parwana responded.

I inquired, “Why not?”

“In our realm, there is no concept of life.”

I asked, “Only life?”

“No, humans as well,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “So, what exists in your realm?”

“Being,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “What kind of being?”

“A being detached from human life on Earth, a being composed of non-being, a being that cannot be eradicated from existence by any means,” Parwana pondered.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“Because in our realm, existence has eternally subsisted, and it hasn't revealed itself through tangible forms,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “If not through tangible forms, then how?”

“Through sacred purity,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What does that entail?”

“It transcends both colour and voice,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “What about the colours and voices of humans in relation to sacred purity on Earth?”

“They hold no significance,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“If they held any importance, purity would have already encompassed the entire Earth, and we wouldn't perceive your sorrows, pains, and agonies through your voice and the water screen now,” Parwana expressed.

I asked, “Why are humans like that?”

“Because their colours and voices are artificial,” Parwana explained.

I questioned, “Whose creation, are they?”

“Human beings themselves,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Which human beings?”

“Those who present themselves as philosophers and wise individuals, merely preaching purity without taking any practical steps,” Parwana expressed.

I inquired, “How do they manage to get away with it?”

“Because they are humans who interact with other humans,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What can ordinary people do then?”

“Instead of holding them accountable, they follow suit by praising them,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “Why is that?”

“Because these self-proclaimed philosophers and intellectuals are charlatans and deceivers,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why are they like that?”

“They are driven by cowardice,” Parwana responded.

I inquired, “Where does this cowardice originate?”

“It stems from their dishonesty,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why do humans resort to lying?”

“They are afraid,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “Afraid of whom?”

“Of themselves,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why is that?”

“Because they are the closest to the lie itself,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Is it possible for them to distance themselves from falsehood?”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I questioned, “Why is that?”

“Let me ask you this: Can humans detach from themselves?” Parwana inquired.

I asked, “Why couldn't they?”

“Because nothing would remain to be called 'themselves,'” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “Who?”

“Human beings,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why can't they do it then?”

“Because they are deeply entwined with falsehood,” Parwana responded. She paused briefly and continued, “They can't control themselves, nor can they control the lies. That's why they struggle to manage the lies of others. In other words, if they can't be truthful with themselves, how can they be honest with others? Suppose they begin to tell the truth; what would they admit? 'We are liars?' To whom would they confess?”

I replied, “They could say, 'We are liars.'”

“To whom?” Parwana asked.

I responded, “To the public.”

“How would the public know they are liars?” Parwana inquired.

I acknowledged, saying, “They wouldn’t know.”

“Of course, they wouldn’t know,” Parwana affirmed.

I asked, “Why?”

“Because people are always and only seeking answers,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why do they seek answers?”

“To convince themselves,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why do they need to self-soothe?”

“To find comfort,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why don't they first determine if it's true or false?”

“It's not their top priority,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What is their priority then?”

“To receive an answer,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What kind of answer?”

“Any answer, no matter how it's been crafted with deceptive tools, regardless of the masks it's been adorned with, and how it's been conveyed; they don't see any problem with it,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Is there a problem with that?”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why not?”

“Because lies, whether told or heard, remain lies; I mean the falsehood and deceitful nature of lies persist,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “How?”

“Because the liar and the listener of the lie complement each other,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “How do they complement each other?”

“If either of them were absent, there wouldn't be anything called a lie,” Parwana explained.

I inquired, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if there weren't any humans, there wouldn't be any lies,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “All humans?”

“Yes, all humans lie; kings lie, queens lie, princes lie, princesses lie, presidents lie, professors lie, doctors lie, lawyers lie, scientists lie, millionaires lie, etc. Whoever you have seen or encountered on Earth, regardless of their background and title, they have all lied, and they still lie.”

I asked, “Why do they lie?”

“Because they are equals,” Parwana answered.

I asked, “Equals in what sense?”

“They are all humans,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Do animals lie?”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why not?”

“Because they are exempt,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Exempt from what?”

“Exempt from having the capacity,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What capacity are you referring to?”

“The capacity to lie in the way that humans do,” Parwana clarified. She then asked me, “Did you encounter any liars and deceivers while you were on Earth in your physical human form?”

I said, “Yes.”

“Who did you see lying?” Parwana asked.

I responded, “Someone who referred to himself as a philosopher and asserted expertise in matters of beauty.”

Parwana asked, “What was his or her name?”

“Hlêw,” I responded.

Parwana asked, “Where was he?”

“He stood with an upright posture on a manure pile,” I responded.

Parwana asked, “Why?”

“To be seen,” I responded.

Parwana asked, “What was he doing?”

“He was delivering a speech to a captivated crowd,” I explained.

Parwana asked, “About what?”

“Exploring the concept of beauty and the enchanting essence of floral scents,” I explained.

Parwana inquired, “And what about you? What did you experience or perceive in there?”

“I didn’t perceive anything, other than the overwhelming scent of manure,” I replied.

Parwana asked, “Did anyone call him out?”

“They did,” I answered.

Parwana asked, “Who did it?”

“The scent of the manure itself,” I responded.

Parwana inquired, “Apart from that, have you witnessed similar incidents?”

“Yes,” I replied.

Parwana asked, “Who was involved?”

“An individual who claimed to be an intellectual,” I responded.

Parwana inquired, “What was his name?”

I answered, “Frew.”

Parwana asked, “What did you see him doing?”

“He penalized a TV station,” I responded.

Parwana inquired, “How did he do that?”

“He ceased production of one of their programs for two weeks,” I replied.

Parwana asked, “Which programme?”

I replied, “Transparency, which he named 'The Crown of Humanity.'”

Parwana questioned, “Why did he punish the station?”

“It happened when a guest on another programme on the same TV station exposed the corrupt behaviour of one of his friends,” I explained.

Parwana asked, “What was this behaviour?”

“Stealing,” I said.

Parwana further inquired, “Stealing from whom?”

“From public funds,” I clarified.

Parwana responded, “That's considered normal!”

I asked, perplexed, “Why do you think so?”

Parwana explained, “Because liars and thieves often cover up for each other's malicious actions.”

I asked, “How do wise and intellectual individuals exhibit such behaviours?” I was puzzled.

Parwana answered, “They exhibit.”

I asked, “Why?”

“Because essentially, no one is wise and intellectual,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What are wise and intellectual in essence?”

“Nothing more than two words,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “So, why are they there?”

“People invented them,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why?”

“To intoxicate themselves,” Parwana replied.

I asked, “Why?”

“To persuade themselves with these two words and to recognize who they are,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Who are they?”

“Little,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “How do they view the philosophers and intellectuals?”

“Big,” Parwana responded.

I inquired, “Do philosophers and intellectuals truly deserve to be seen as significant and advanced individuals?”

“No,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Who are they?”

“They are individuals who claim to change the course of events,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “What do they actually achieve?”

“They often discard old paradigms and introduce new ones,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why?”

“Perhaps just to pass the time,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Such as?”

“By attempting to link today, yesterday, and tomorrow together,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Does that mean they keep life going?”

“No, life doesn’t need them to keep going,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What will life do to them?”

“It will make them leave everything incomplete,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “To whom?”

“For the ones who will come after them,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Can those after them complete what they started?”

“No,” Parwana confirmed.

I asked, “Why?”

“Because, people before them couldn’t complete it,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why?”

“Because they are human beings,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “What’s wrong with human beings?”

“Since human existence, they have always been struggling with incompleteness,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Why don’t they try to get rid of incompleteness?”

“They cannot,” Parwana responded.

I asked, “Why?”

“Because they have never witnessed their beginning, and their future is unknown to them,” Parwana explained.

I asked, “Where will they ultimately end up?”

“If they continue as they are now, I'm certain it will only get worse,” Parwana explained.

The music's volume increased gradually, then the hall quickly plunged into darkness.

**(Chapter -36)**

The darkness lifted, and the lights returned to the hall. Parwana nodded her head to me.

I resumed reading, “Another nine months have passed, and Samya and Omar's wait for a son continues. However, Samya gave birth to her seventh daughter, whom they named Tara. This event not only left Samya and Omar in contemplation but also stirred suspicion among their relatives and acquaintances. They began to wonder, 'Why haven't they had a son?'”

I took a seat in the chair, and the image of Omar appeared on the water screen, lamenting, “God's divine judgment will be carried out. In the darkness of the grave, you will be alone with your deeds, both the good and the sinful, recorded by the Noble Scribes, the two angels who documented your actions, thoughts, and intentions during your earthly life. One of them will remind you of your transgressions, while the other will lighten the burden of your sins if you had also performed good deeds. If you are guilty, your grave will speak to you and say, 'I will squeeze you until your ribs on the right side collide with those on the left.” Despite all this, Omar said, “God's blessing and forgiveness are still within reach.'”

Omar raised his head, opened his palms in prayer, and continued, “God, You know I am still alive. I am enduring punishment now. People have hurt us. I am imprisoned in this endless waiting. People utter disparaging remarks, seeing me as feeble. They fail to understand that I work tirelessly, more than the capacity of two people. Some overlook my efforts for my daughters, not realizing that we are all born from females. God, what is my sin? My only fault is not having a son. I don't understand why people don't comprehend my innocence. When will they realize that I am not the one who grants sons, but that it is You, God?” Omar fell silent, and the water screen slowly faded his image.

I continued reading, “With each passing day, Samya grew increasingly distressed. Giving birth to a child every year had taken a toll on her, leaving her physically weakened and slimmer. Imagine the challenges of carrying each child for nine months, nurturing them, and tending to their well-being. Each pregnancy was a period of hope and hopelessness, as she awaited the arrival of a son.”

“I, Parwana, and the chorus watched as Samya appeared on the water screen. She was sitting in a room in her house, gently rocking her daughter's wooden cradle, whispering quietly and rhythmically, 'In less than nine months, my inner pain will be gone. Like other mothers in our neighbourhood, I will finally have my son. My daughters will be proud among their friends to have a brother.”

She then retrieved a prayer mat, positioning it for her prayers. At the conclusion of her supplication, she raised her hands and said, “God, I have never been discontent with my daughters, nor will I ever be unhappy to have girls. But, God, what should I do? People have labelled each of us with a flaw simply because we lack a son. It's a tangled knot that only You can unravel. God, please help us by granting us a son. Let us leave this enduring pain behind. O God, do not burden my heart. Instead, hear my prayer and bless us with a son, even if it means taking one of my eyes.”

She lowered her hands, covering her face in deep supplication, and bowed her head, resting it against the prayer mat. The water screen turned green, followed by scrolling text that read, “Samya gave birth to her eighth daughter and named her Shilan.” Soon after, the text gradually disappeared, and Samya reappeared on the screen. Her head remained on the prayer mat as she continued her plea, “God, Omar has been tirelessly working day and night to provide for our family. He toils with his hands in dough and his eyes filled with tears, grieving internally due to the absence of a son. God, in my dreams at night, a little boy crawls to me, calling me 'mother.' Except for You, I have no one to turn to for peace and tranquillity. We are exhausted, God. Without a boy, our relief seems impossible. Our knees are bent in prayer to You. We implore You. We beg You to bless us with a son.”

The screen then ceased displaying her image.

I continued, “Samya and Omar decided not to try for any more children. They held onto this decision for five years, but their pain never truly vanished, and the desire for a son remained etched in their hearts. Eventually, they had no choice but to reconsider their decision.” I fell silent, and the music in the background increased in volume.

After a brief pause, I resumed, “Samya became pregnant again, and a flicker of hope ignited within her and Omar. Like sentenced prisoners, they began counting down the days of the pregnancy, yearning for the release that could only come with the birth of a son. This child would be their saviour, freeing them from a fate they had witnessed repeatedly after the births of their daughters.” The volume of the music swelled, enveloping the scene.

**(Chapter -37)**

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. Omar and Samya continued to wait for the arrival of their son.

Omar had not been going to work, and on this particular late night, he made his way to his mother-in-law's (R) house. Upon his arrival, he urgently knocked on her front door. (R) quickly opened the door, only to find Omar visibly anxious.

“Samya is having contractions,” he quickly informed her.

(R) inquired, “Where is she? Is she still at home?”

“Yes, she is,” he replied, his face reddened under the light above the door, as if he had just stepped away from his bakery's tandoor.

Without delay, Omar and (R) hurried to reach Samya and rushed her to the hospital, which was a mere one and a half miles away. After spending the night in the labour room, Samya gave birth to their long-awaited child. Early the next morning, as they left the hospital, (R) bid them farewell and returned to her own home.

“Wake up, quickly... Wake up, all of you, wake up!” (R) urgently knocked on the doors of her sons' and daughters' rooms, where they were still sound asleep. “Wake up,” (R) repeated, tears streaming down her face.

One by one, they emerged from their rooms, half-asleep and anxious. They asked, “What's wrong, Mother? Why are you crying? What's happened?”

“I have wonderful news,” she said.

They implored her, “Then tell us.”

“The moment we've been waiting for has arrived,” (R) replied, her eyes filled with tears of happiness.

They eagerly questioned, “Tell us, please, what is it?”

“Samya...,” (R) began.

They pressed, “Samya what?”

“She has given birth to a boy... a baby boy,” (R) announced.

“Yes, a baby boy,” confirmed (R).

I glanced at Parwana and the chorus, and continued, “The boys and girls rushed over to Omar's house to catch a glimpse of the long-awaited baby. Upon entering the front yard through the front door, they spotted Omar, pacing restlessly in excitement. His face lit up even brighter as he saw them approaching. Tears of joy streamed down his face as he embraced them. 'Come to me, my dear sisters and brothers, come to me! We have a boy. I am now the father of a boy,' he exclaimed as they embraced each other.”

I fell silent, and the music's volume gradually increased even more.

With the gradual fade-out of the music, I continued, “The arrival of a new baby boy melted away the cliffs of sorrow that had accumulated throughout the past years. Their bud of hope had finally blossomed. To them, the boy was a special gift from God, and they named him Hemecwan (in Kurdish, meaning 'the handsome Heme'). His birth brought a ray of light to dispel the long-lasting darkness that had enveloped his parents and his eight sisters.”

I paused, allowing the emotions to settle in the room. Parwana and the chorus stood up, and the volume of the music increased slightly. Together, they echoed, “He was a special gift of God, they named him Hemecwan,” and then they sat down.

Resuming, I narrated, “A few months passed. Every night, before Samya placed Hemecwan in his cradle, his sisters and Omar would go to him, refreshing their happiness by looking at him. Each one showed their love by kissing and speaking words of affection. 'My sweet son,' Omar said. 'My heart,' Samya added. His sisters, not once or twice, but many times, said, 'We would all sacrifice ourselves for you.'”

I stood up briefly and then returned to my seat. The water screen displayed their bedroom, where Samya was carefully placing Hemecwan in his cradle, securing him with straps.

“It's enough, girls. It's time for you to go to your own bedrooms and let your brother sleep,” Omar told the girls.

The girls kissed Hemecwan and left the room one by one. Samya began gently rocking the cradle, and with each sway, her heart filled with increasing joy. Hemecwan slept peacefully, and shortly after, Samya, with a satisfied soul, drifted

into slumber. Omar had already fallen asleep, knowing he would need to wake up in four hours.

When he did wake up, Omar approached Hemecwan cautiously. He lifted the edge of the cradle cover and gazed adoringly at his son, wanting to kiss him but not wanting to wake him up. Instead, he listened to Hemecwan's cooing breath. “My dear, may I sacrifice for your cooing breath,” he whispered in his heart, careful not to disturb anyone. Omar then prudently picked up his hand torch from the top of the TV and silently left the room.

In the open yard, he tested the torch by toggling the light on and off a few times, then directed it at the front door's lock. He opened and closed the door quietly, leaving the sweet sleep and the happiness of his home behind for a few hours. In the dimly lit alley, with the help of the torch's beams, he pierced through the darkness of the night, heading to the bakery.

The water screen paused the image, and the hall's lights returned.

I glanced at Parwana and the chorus, offering an explanation, “Omar's tears were no longer shed for the absence of a son, but now they fell in front of the bakery's tandoors as he worked tirelessly to provide for his large family. Despite enduring hardships, he remained enthusiastic and filled with joy. The taunts of heartless individuals, reminiscent of the era when he had no son, could no longer hurt his soul.”

I fell silent again and settled back into my chair. The sound of rewinding papers in the box came and swiftly ceased.

**(Chapter -38)**

I rose from the chair and announced, “Hemecwan has turned two years old,”

Parwana and the chorus followed suit, echoing, “Hemecwan turned two years old.”

I continued, “He fell ill suddenly.”

The melancholic music began to play.

I gazed at Parwana and the chorus, explaining, “No one could determine the cause of his health issues, as if it were an enemy of life, aimed at extracting the only little green tree of Omar, Samya, and their daughters’ garden of life, and eliminating their short-lived joy.” I paused, “They implored God fervently, consulted every doctor they could find, searching for a cure, but luck eluded them, and ultimately death struck, extinguishing their mere light.”

My heart filled with sorrow; I covered my face with my hands.

The volume of the music faded.

I released my hands from my face, raised my head, and narrated, “Omar was atop Hemecwan’s lifeless body, crying and lamenting, ‘Hemecwan, are you leaving? Leaving our cradles? Taking our sight away? My dear boy, are you departing? What about me? Your mother? Your eight sisters? In this harsh and merciless world, don’t abandon us. Please stay with us; my dear, we waited fifteen years for you to come, and when you arrived, you brought joy, light, and warmth that thawed our cold hearts. My flower, why did you wither in the vase of our hearts so quickly? I hoped to watch you grow as long as I lived, my little one, don’t dry up our recently sprouted spring of happiness. Please stay with us, don’t go away.”

I serenely returned to my chair.

Calmness swept over the entire hall.

A gentle breeze enveloped us, while flashes of light fell like clusters, scattering diamond-like sparks across the ground.

Parwana and the chorus moved one step forward, bowing their heads; the sound of their attire merged with the melancholic music.

The water screen displayed Hemecwan in the arms of (Mama K), the husband of (R). His body was wrapped in a red wool fabric, and relatives along with several town residents followed them, heading toward a cemetery.

The screen paused the image at the cemetery, instantly turning it green.

The sound of the rustling box under the chair returned. I continued, “Every late night, the deep, mournful cries of Omar and Samya shattered the silence of the neighbourhood, awakening their daughters, who would join in their lament.”

I looked at Parwana and the Chorus and said, “Omar had cried so much that his eyes became swollen and puffy. Samya scratched her face with her nails in grief, and the weight of the sorrow caused her to lose consciousness intermittently. Their daughters cried inconsolably, anytime and anywhere.”

I fell silent, sensing their tears mirroring my own. My tears fell onto the papers before me, transforming into shimmering drops of light.

I resumed, “Omar woke up at the crack of dawn every day, heading to the cemetery, to Hemecwan’s resting place. He would stand still on top of the grave, bending over it, embracing the soil, and crying as deeply as he could. Then, he would take off his hat and place it on the grave, resting his forehead on it, breathing a deep, sorrowful sigh.” I paused, “Omar had no hope left for anything, as all his hopes had turned into a small grave; he no longer thought of the future, and wherever you saw him, you could recognize the deep, painful grief of a father for his deceased child in his expression.”

Parwana and the chorus bowed.

The water screen displayed Omar, his head still resting on his hat, and his hands embracing the soil of the grave.

I glanced at Parwana and the chorus and continued, “Hemecwan's grave became the only place that could console Omar's soul, nowhere else felt as close to him.” I paused, “To him, the entire world became a graveyard, where both the living and the dead were buried. Whenever he wasn't at home, at work, or in the market, his family and friends knew immediately that he was in the cemetery, and they would go to implore, console, and persuade him to return home with them.”

**(Chapter -39)**

The water screen displayed every moment of the 1970s and 1980s in Halabja and its surroundings during the twentieth century, leaving no detail untouched. I couldn't comprehend how Parwana, the chorus, and I managed to see and hear everything in such a short span.

Suddenly, a lady's voice emerged from the screen, conveying, “The neighbourhood was abuzz with a rumour about Samya's health issues related to her womb. This suggested that she might not be able to bear more children. It was said that Samya's next-door neighbour, Ameen, was the source of this rumour. Ameen claimed to have heard it from a doctor's relative. Samya herself had heard the rumour, and despite its speculative nature, she couldn't help but believe it. She felt utterly fatigued, exhausted, and weakened. After all, she had already given birth to eight surviving daughters, in addition to two toddlers who had sadly passed away, and her beloved son, Hemecwan, who had recently departed from this world,” the lady's voice trailed off as she concluded.

The water screen paused the image but continued with the lady’s voice, who went on to say, “In the town, there were no Obstetrician-Gynaecologist doctors; therefore, any lady with related health issues had to travel to Slemani for treatment. The expenses for the round trip, accommodation, doctor's fees, medications – all of it burdened a poor family like Samaya's. Omar somehow had to bear the weight of this responsibility.” The lady fell silent.

We all exchanged glances, understanding the gravity of the situation.

The lady resumed, “A few months passed, and Samya's condition worsened. She needed someone to take her to Slemani to see a doctor, and the only person who was willing and able to do so was (R). Omar was preoccupied with his work and caring for their children. He had to borrow the money from someone to cover Samya’s medical expenses.”

Following her surgery in Slemani, Samy received the news from her doctor that her womb had fully recovered.

**(Chapter -40)**

A few months after Samya's visit to Slemani to see the doctor, she decided to go with (R) to see another doctor again.

The voice from the water screen narrated, “Samya's belly was growing day by day, to an extent she had never seen her belly so big for any of her previous children, and she had never witnessed such poor health during any of her past pregnancies.”

The voice from the water screen paused. Parwana, the chorus, and I exchanged glances.

The voice resumed, “In Slemani, at a clinic, a female doctor asked Samya to lie down on the examination bed, and she conducted her examination. Samya's face turned very pale, yellow, and she had lost a considerable amount of weight. After the examination, the doctor prescribed some medications and handed them to (R).”

The voice from the water screen paused once again. After a brief pause, the water screen displayed the clinic.

“You have finished. You may go and wait outside,” the doctor said.

Samya and (R) were about to leave the doctor's room, thinking their visit was over. The doctor told (R), “You stay.”

Samya gave the doctor a suspicious glance and asked, “Can I stay in the room, too?”

“There's nothing to worry about. Wait outside for a moment; your companion will join you soon,” the doctor reassured her.

Samya left the room with a reluctant expression.

“Why did you allow her to get pregnant?” the doctor asked (R).

(R) responded, perplexed, “Why?”

“How could you not notice her frailty? 'I have concerns about her ability to endure the pregnancy given her frailty,” the doctor explained.

(R) responded, “She wants to have a son.”

“Alright, but she needs regular check-ups,” the doctor urged.

(R) asked in confusion, “Why, Doctor?”

“Because of the size and weight of her belly,” the doctor explained.

(R) inquired, “Why is she like that, Doctor?”

“God knows best,” the doctor expressed.

(R) gave the doctor a doubtful look, bid her farewell, and was about to grasp the door handle to leave the room when the doctor called (R) from behind.

(R) turned and asked, “Yes, Doctor?”

“Please," the doctor said.

(R) questioned, “What is it, Doctor?”

“She is pregnant with twins,” the doctor confirmed.

(R) echoed, “Twins?”

“Yes, but...” the doctor began.

(R) asked, “But what, Doctor?”

“I hope everything goes well,” the doctor wished for Samya.

**(Chapter -41)**

Today marks approximately four months since Samya's second visit to Slemani to see the doctor. Later in the day, Samya's two older daughters hurriedly went to (R)'s house. “Please help us,” they implored.

(R) responded, “What has happened?”

“Our mother is very ill,” they replied anxiously.

The water screen halted the image, the green colour returned.

The sound of the lady came back, narrating, “The two girls and (R) went to Samya and quickly rushed her to the hospital,” the sound paused.

The water screen displayed (R) and two nurses in the hospital’s labour room, they were trying to laydown Samya on a bed, the girls who were also with them, one of the nurses asked them to leave and wait outside in the waiting room, they then went out, the nurse closed the door behind.

The water screen paused the image.

I, Parwana, the chorus, Raz and Niyaz were still standing where we were bowed our heads, our bodies were totally motionless, music already played itself but was about to fade down gradually.

The water screen displayed (R) and the girls outside the labour room.

“When Samya delivered the baby, to know whether it was a boy or a girl…,” (R) started narrating.

The girls bounced and loudly asked,” Is a boy? Is it?”

“I stretched my hands to the private area of the baby…,” (R) said.

The girls interrupted, nervous, “And?”

“I sensed it was a boy, but…” (R) said.

The girls interrupted, “But what?”

“I couldn’t trust my hands until I saw the whole body of the baby, and I ascertained it was a boy,” (R) explained.

The girls started crying in happiness.

(R) resumed, “I was overwhelmed with joy and yielded in excitement. It's a boy, a boy... I was in a hurry and wanted to pass the good news to Omar straight away,” Her heart filled with emotion as she continued, “One of the nurses told me, ‘Don't rush,’ and she brought her hand over Samya's belly while giving me an inquiring glance. She shortly said, ‘She has another baby’. It didn't take long; the other baby was born. I yielded again, thanking God. This one is a boy, too.”

The exited girls asked, “What about Samya?”

“She lost her consciousness for around five minutes,” (R) responded.

The girls asked, “Why?”

“When she regained her consciousness, I asked for the reason,” (R) said,

The girls asked, “What she said?”

“She said, ‘As soon as I heard that I gave birth to boy, I lost my consciousness in delight,” (R) explained.

The water screen paused the image.

I looked at Parwana, the chorus and said, “Samya, her daughters and (R) with elated heart along with two toddler boys left the hospital. On their way back home in A short distance away, they saw Omar waiting for them in front of his house. As he noticed their happy faces, he felt as if he were on tenterhooks, waiting eagerly for the news. Happiness enveloped him, too. (R), with a proud voice, told him, 'Give me a gift, you have a boy, two boys, two boys at a time.' He quickly went towards them, grabbed (R)'s hand, and kissed it.”

I became silent and sat on my chair.

The sound of the music raised a bit.

Parwana looked at me.

I stood up, told Parwana and the chorus, “Omar and Samya became the mother and the father of son, once again, boys shielded them from sharp sword of people’s sarcastic remarks, again none can hurt their souls.”

Parwana and the chorus stood up, too, and echoed, “Omar and Samya became the mother and the father of son, once again, boys shielded them from sharp sword of people’s sarcastic remarks, again none can hurt their souls,” they then sat down.

**(Chapter -42)**

I, Parwana, and the chorus stood still. The water screen displayed Samya and Omar's house.

"(R) asked Samya’s daughter, 'Go and ask Heme-Amin, the barber, to come and circumcise your brothers.'"

The water screen paused the image.

I turned to face Parwana and the chorus and said, “Heme-Amin was a multi-skilled man. Besides his main job as a barber, he was also a cupper therapist, bone setter, mohel, herbalist, and more. Following his arrival, Samya and Omar left their two babies with him in a room, as they couldn't bear to watch the surgery. If it were not for religious and social norms, neither Omar nor Samya would allow anyone to remove even a single hair from the babies, let alone cut a piece of skin,”

I sat down in the chair.

Parwana and the chorus echoed, “If it were not for religious and social norms, neither Omar nor Samya would allow anyone to remove even a single hair from the babies, let alone cut a piece of skin.”

The water screen displayed Omar in his house. He climbed the staircase to the roof, where he housed his doves in a loft. He took out two of his favourite elite pigeons, which bobbed their heads eagerly, their tiny alert eyes moving restlessly like small, gleaming marbles. They seemed in a hurry, longing to fly and dance in the boundless sky. Omar kissed them and released them one by one. They circled over his house several times before gradually ascending into the vast expanse of the sky. He shielded his eyes with his hands and watched them attentively, not stopping until they disappeared. He wished he could fly like them, to soar amidst the white clouds, and go further, so he could give the Sun and the stars a passionate kiss. He raised both hands in prayer and said, “God, thanks to you. You taught us to be passionate, you lifted the heavy burden from our shoulders, and you made us happy with two boys, Ahmed and Mohammad.” He brought his hand to his face in supplication, then left the roof to rejoin the guests. His daughters didn't know how to express their happiness and couldn't stop watching their brothers. They distributed candies and sweets to the men, women and children guests, who laughed, embraced Omar and Samya, and congratulated them. Some danced in Kurdish traditional attire while listening to music.

The water screen turned green.

The lady's voice returned, saying, “Omar borrowed money to spend on holding the baby shower.”

I, Parwana, and the chorus bowed our heads.

**(Chapter -43)**

I stood up, raised my head, glanced at Parwana, the painter, the chorus, Raz, and Niyaz, and said, “I don’t have anything else to say,” then I sat down.

Parwana stood up, approached me, took the book from the box, and handed it to me.

The chorus, while standing, remarked, “Neither thoughts nor the passage of time and place can alter the truths; it is humans who fabricate lies to distort the truth for personal gain and out of fear.”

Parwana went and joined them, and together they said, “The voices will remain as they were, the colours will be presented as they were, love and hate will be exactly as they were expressed; everything shall be kept by God and endure.”

They took their seats.

Parwana returned to me, placed her hands on my shoulders, briefly glanced at my face, and sat down beside me.

The music ceased.

The hall was shrouded in darkness.

Everyone remained motionless and silent.

The water screen turned a bright white, and the voices of children, women, and men emanated from it, saying, “life and death, virus and illness, men and women, boys and girls, love, hate, anger, wounds, healing, violence, fear, bombs, killings, decimation, and outcry; sounds of hungry animals, injured and hungry birds, rustling leaves blown by the wind, crushed green grass underfoot, tempestuous waves of seas, the rush of rivers, the destruction of houses, buildings, and villas, deep cries, begging, and imploring.”

The sound from the water screen paused.

All the hall's attendees remained standing, motionless and mute, including myself. Nobody knew how long we were like that. Was it one second? One hour? One day? One month? One year? Or perhaps countless years?

The sound from the water screen resumed, this time with the sound of “Arrogance of wealth, enduring hardships, negligence, sleeping and narrating dreams, the pain of giving birth and abortion.” Nobody could ascertain how many people these sounds represented. Was it one? One hundred? One thousand? One million? One billion? Different sounds with varying volumes frequently emerged, and we couldn't discern their origins.

**(Chapter -44)**

Gradually, the hall began to fill with light. Parwana and I stood up and joined the chorus, all of us facing the water screen. The music slowly increased in volume. The painter applied her final brushstroke to the canvas, placed the brush back in the paint pot, removed her apron, and sat down in her chair. Raz and Niyaz joined the painter, each standing on one of her sides. Parwana and I, with no control over it, found ourselves drifting away from each other as our bodies gradually shrank until we transformed into two butterfly-like forms, yet our language and tone of voice remained the same.

In an instant, we began to flutter together in the air. Shortly after, the painter, the chorus, Raz, and Niyaz also underwent a transformation, their bodies taking on the shape of butterflies, and they too started fluttering in a circle. The canvas, easel, brush, paint pot, apron, water screen, box, chairs, walls, door, and all the materials seemed to melt into pristine white, leaving only us as colourful butterflies, fluttering in the bright, cloudless sky.

Parwana, in her butterfly form with agile flight, said, “Crimes committed by humans against humans cannot be healed by humans alone.”

The others, in their butterfly forms with fluttering wings, echoed, “Crimes committed by humans against humans cannot be healed by humans alone.”

Parwana continued, “The criminal humans will never receive just punishment for their crimes from humans.”

The other butterflies echoed, “The criminal humans will never receive just punishment for their crimes from humans.”

Parwana resumed, “The crimes of humans against animals and birds will never be eradicated by humans.”

The other butterflies echoed, “The crimes of humans against animals and birds will never be eradicated by humans.”

This time, they all said together, “As long as humans are the recorders of behaviours and speeches and the judges of humans, the source of justice will remain unclear.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who brought enemies to the homeland?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who inflicted death and injuries on children in Halabja?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one … No one … No one … No one …,” their voices echoed several times in the sky.

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who inflicted death and injuries on women, men, girls, and boys in Halabja?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who plundered their possessions?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who looted the town's infrastructure?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who left thousands of women, men, and children homeless?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those responsible for suffocating thousands of voiceless innocent animals and birds?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those accountable for the gas contamination of the Halabja environment?”

The other butterflies responded, “No one.”

Parwana asked, “Who judged those who assassinated Kawan?"

The other butterflies fell silent.

I replied, “No one judged those who assassinated me.”

Parwana and the other butterflies echoed in unison, “No one judged those who assassinated you.”

Parwana stated, “For one crime, a thousand crimes, or even a million crimes, there will always be unnumbered individuals who will not be held accountable,”

The other butterflies echoed, “For one crime, a thousand crimes, or even a million crimes, there will always be unnumbered individuals who will not be held accountable.”

Parwana explained, “The rule of oppressive monarchs, queens, princes, princesses, leaders, and political parties cannot be sustained without the involvement of those willing to resort to bloodshed, opportunism, thievery, and cunning strategies,”

The other butterflies echoed, “The rule of oppressive monarchs, queens, princes, princesses, leaders and political parties cannot be sustained without the involvement of those willing to resort to bloodshed, opportunism, thievery, and cunning strategies.”

Parwana narrated, “Halabja, in the aftermath,

Became a tapestry of collective sorrow,

Where green leaves fell like petals from roses,

In the grasp of forces that shattered the flow of love.

Spring's demise marked this desolate space,

Ruined dreams and hearts weighed down by pain,

Once a tender cradle for girls and boys,

But the solace of sweet sleep's reign was stolen away,”

The other butterflies echoed, “Halabja, in the aftermath,

Became a tapestry of collective sorrow,

Where green leaves fell like petals from roses,

In the grasp of forces that shattered the flow of love.

Spring's demise marked this desolate space,

Ruined dreams and hearts weighed down by pain,

Once a tender cradle for girls and boys,

But the solace of sweet sleep's reign was stolen away.”

Parwana explained, “As long as human thoughts stem from and revolve around materialism, as long as their actions and words are driven by materialistic values, life will continue to be tainted by negativity, and the wounds and suffering of humans and all living beings will persist,”

The other butterflies echoed, “As long as human thoughts stem from and revolve around materialism, as long as their actions and words are driven by materialistic values, life will continue to be tainted by negativity, and the wounds and suffering of humans and all living beings will persist.”

We all fell silent but continued to flutter about.

The Sun and the small stars drew nearer to us gradually. It didn't take long before they enveloped us in their radiant embrace, leaving us intoxicated by the divine beauty they had to offer. We continued to flutter, never ceasing for even a moment.

Parwana fluttered over to me and said, “You have now become one of us, united in this boundless sky, where we shall live in eternal freedom.”

“I am grateful to have found you,” I replied.

The other butterflies circled around me, fluttering, and said, “Welcome, messenger of the night vigils. Your soul has returned to the source of truth.”

“Tell the night vigils on your journey to the waiting star that they shall not be deprived, and they will soon bask in the radiance of the Sun and the little stars, intoxicated by their divine beauty,” Parwana told me.

The other butterflies added, “Tell them that they too shall soon join us, and together in this boundless sky filled with secrets and excitement, we shall live eternally.”

Raz and Niyaz drifted over to me and said, “Let's go.”

“Where are we headed?” I inquired.

They responded, “To visit the night vigils.” Together, we soared into the depths of the sky.

Parwana and the other butterflies began to dance towards us. I, Raz, and Niyaz drifted a short distance, and our body parts – exoskeletons, wings, antennae, legs, proboscises, heads, thoraxes – began to detach in delicate forms, merging with the beams of the Sun and the little stars. They scattered and descended upon Parwana and the other butterflies.

Soon, all of us vanished into the brilliance of the light, leaving behind nothing but a radiant white luminescence that transformed everything into its essence.

End