

Chapter 13 Bahtiyar

It's seven-thirty in the evening. He taps his foot impatiently. Off the mirror-glass of the blocky building, the shine sublimates vapor off the icy pavement in the square around him. There's a thin layer of snow whipping around as the sun is dropping behind crumbling buildings across the river that splits the city in two. A few mid sized sky rise apartments stand over a theater on an island, featuring Debussy a hundred years after the Sarajevo incident. The prefecture displays a few bullet holes on a high corner. Bahtiyar flips open his phone and plays a game while he waits.

He's too old to have this temper and too young to be so callow. His pale, thin face is prone to bad looks with random passers-by. When he's not looking down at his phone or his feet he stares at women and raises his eyebrows. He notices some red and black bugs on the ground and cancels the game to crush them. He scowls and thinks about his roommates who are probably fretting over finals. Suckers. They should drop out. What's in store for Bahtiyar is an exciting and righteous life.

He values his short time at Sarajevo University because it had given him the opportunity to break away from the stifling ubiquity of his grandma and needy mom. He didn't like waking up early but in the evenings he was happy to come out for the social clubs. He loved talking about communism, multiculturalism, history and politics. Hearing opposing sides acculturated him to the lives and works of Guevara, Malcolm X and Tito. Vehemence was power. They were all so sure and if someone disagreed, they could back up their points with facts. Suddenly a head full of facts was of the utmost importance so he scoured wikis, archives and message boards to find clues, links and fuses. Eventually his curiosity got the better of him and he stumbled upon Islamic State recruiters and links to action. They invited him to come shoot guns and read the Koran.

Often Bahtiyar fell asleep walking towards a deep, wide pit. With hands tied, looking ahead at more hands tied back to the guns, at the back of the head. It was a waking sensation too, it came from a life he didn't remember, but was taught never to forget. He remembered the symposiums, dedications, and memorials. He held his mother's hand and learned about his father's execution, his sister's rape. Survivors spoke—twenty widows for each man—about returning to Srebrenica. Hopeful politicians and Dutch money re-opened the salt mines and schools but they were mostly washed out. Homes were rebuilt, but bullet holes still shined rare beams of light across abandoned walls. Bahtiyar saw a classic horror film about a mummy awakened by a ray of starlight. From August until September, he noticed the sun would shine into his irises through the bullet holes in the evening.

He watched his mother roll doughballs flat for *borek*. Under the surface of the river, while he competed with friends to hold breath, he made his nightmares a fantasy. Thoughts of mass graves exploded through the dull throb of the flowing water. He imagined himself on his knees, in the same position his father must have been in in his last seconds. He looked down his right side, waiting for the sound of the pistol's hammer to click, but he was faster than the guns and raised his bound hands to intercept the bullet in a flash. The dream bullet would sever the ropes but also graze his wrist letting fly ribbons of his blood and setting an hourglass of vitality. Like a supercharged ninja, Bahtiyar could dodge bullets, snap necks, re-purpose weapons and single handedly rout the ultra-nationalists. The tilted berets flew like Frisbees as he severed heads from shoulders. Blood mixed in midair ribbons. The fantasy was a time-killer, an antidepressant, and as much a part of him as his subtracted father.

He checks his phone. It's 7:33. He was instructed by his teachers to trust in Islam and to keep

phone communication to a minimum. Especially in Sarajavo, Bahtiyar's feels the sting of prejudice and hate. At uni, he joined a club for peace and environmental activism after a sweet and outgoing girl named Edita invited him. "This is good for me because I really care about peace and the environment," he accepted. She smiled, said "see you there," gave a little wink and left.

At the first meeting, in a round of introductions he said outright, "I would get up and roll a car right now, burn a factory." Afterwards the meeting he backtracked, "I hope everyone got my joke. I know that burning and smoke cause more air pollution of course."

He came a little late to the next meeting. They were showing a film about jungle deforestation. He sat next to Edita. As he inched his chair towards her, she slid away. He continued to encroach upon her personal space until part of his ass, was on her chair and hers was half off. Later that week, a group started verbally abusing Bahtiyar in the dining hall. That time, he didn't talk back or fight back. Everytime he saw her she was surrounded by people but he couldn't get the powdery smell of her hugs out of his mind. He built himself up to approach and try a pickup line, "Global warming's your fault..." but she pretended not to hear.

The abuse got worse. People threw spitballs from the desks behind him, so he skid his desk forward and interrupted a lecture to fight. After landing a few hits he exited the classroom unemotionally. It was his last university class.

He spent the next few weeks online. Locked in his dorm room, he started to correspond with a new world, a world of righteousness, glory and freedom. Almost out of thin air, he was given a new reason to live and father figures who could return the life that was taken from Bosnian Muslims. He found people who laugh, smile and have power, wealth and love in their lives. He accepted the first challenge and with a small bag, he traveled to a mountain village to swear allegiance to the caliphate of Abu Bakir al Bagdadi.

The minibus wound through mountain roads to Gornja Maoca. Whirling gales of snow were pushing the vehicle around the roads as it crept up slower and slower, until the driver saw a line of red tail lights and came to a stop. The road was closed due to a fallen stone. Bahtiyar put on his hat, zipped up his jacket against the blizzard and stepped out with some of the other passengers. A sheer cliff dropped into a white swirling abyss to the left side and to the right, the rock wall rose into the same snowy darkness. "Got a cigarette?" he asked a traveler in his thirties who looked like he'd never cut his beard. They walked together up the road to see the stone blocking their path. It was about the size of a cow. He threw his cigarette over the cliff and declared, "By the will of Allah I summon the strength of a bull!" He laid his hands on the stone and struggling against it. Bahtiyar watched for a moment, shrugged dreamily and went back to the minibus to rest his cold eyes.

They arrived at the village just before dawn. The first *azan* was being pronounced as clear and crisp as the untouched snow. Gornja Maoca seemed pure and elemental as crystal water. The village was reduced to cylinders and cubes, surrounded by long unbroken borders, connected by smooth flat white plains. Dimensions of size and distance were obscured by a pure white dressing and a low, dim sun. The bearded man and Bahtiyar left tracks in the snow, walking towards typical red block houses at the back edge of the village.

A scarred face watched them approach over square shoulders in a tan cover-all. He nodded and returned to shoveling the front walkway. An AK-47 was leaned against a cobblestone gateway. Bahtiyar recognized the black flag that drooped overhead. He didn't have to see it blow to know that it said *Allah Messenger Muhammad* with no hamza. Bahtiyar glanced up and said, "A nobel flag." The man leaned against his shovel and greeted them removing a glove and shaking their hands firmly. He spoke in a

mix of Arabic and Slavic, "Welcome, to Maocha Training Camp. Please join breakfast and afterwards you'll see the compound."

Bahtiyar heard a recitation that mixed the words of the Holy Koran with Bosnian. "Brothers of the Islamic State," he looked up, but couldn't see the speaker over the tall men. He pricked up his ears though. "Take strength now, because we wrestle our enemies soon. Eat the food that Allah's given, and was loved by our Prophet, Peace-be-on-His-Name. May it bring us power." He entered the building and saw a plate of dates on the table. Men stood around a samovar. Across the room, there was a serving station with bowls of boiled eggs, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, a large bronze samovar, and a pot of potatoes came through a pass-through window curtained off next to a closed door across the dining room.

As the men lined up, Bahtiyar noticed that the speaker was dressed in camouflage. Before long, he came directly to meet the newcomers. "Welcome brothers. Aside from sleeping and eating, your time will be spent with education, exercise and recreation. We will teach you to write straight, think straight and shoot straight. Soon you will join the caravans but now, eat and take strength. There are brides waiting for you in the Levent."

Breakfast began and they took their place in line. Someone whispered, "I hear they love blue eyes there." "We'll have as many wives as our balls can take!"

"Or we'll all share the same one."

They laughed and sipped their tea. Bahtiyar sat down to breakfast with seven other young men. None had been there for longer than a week. Six were Bosniaks and the last was a Gagauz from Moldova. "What do you mean no smoking?" they heart shouted from the doorway.

The Arab came to their table and greeted them. His voice was soft and breathy and he replaced *y* sounds with *h* sounds. "After breakfast you'll run the course and later we'll shoot. You're going to learn to shoot straight through the eyes of *Shaytan* and his allies around the world. *Wallah* all who dam the waters and cauterize our faces. Kill them and scatter rose petals to cleanse the ground of their blood." He shifted to verse.

*Strike them with the strength that Allah gives you
Take the lives of those who block the river to you
Reach out your hands and let Allah empower you
To beat in the heads of anyone who oppressed you*

Released from hypnosis, Bahtiyar's attention drifted back to his surroundings, a newly built dining room with calligraphy about the caliphate. The Arab drew them in closer, "I was born into the family Saud and I thank them for the privilage to study abroad. I first traveled to Deoband, India where I studied Pashto, Urdu and Farsi there. When I was a boy, I came to fight Mujaheddin. I know the standard of war that we're capable of. I've seen soldiers storm villages in Srebica. I've walked through minefields into Warzistan. I've fought the Christian Crusaders around villages full of innocent children." he made and held eye contact with Bahtiyar, "Allah's blessings be upon the princes of Islam. Eat now. After breakfast we tour the compound."

It was a typical village yard filled with noisy farm birds and scrubby bushes. On the high edge of the yard, snowy pine trees glimmered in the new sun. Uphill, through a path in the forest, Bahtiyar

noticed men running a course. From a distance, he heard them shouting and climbing a thick rope to pass over a high wall. They gathered on the opposite side. Bahtiyar introduced himself to the others smiling.

"You'll be too tired to masturbate at night," they laughed heartily. "Go ahead and try the course. My best time is six minutes. There's also a longer one with traps."

After the evening prayer the Arab approached Rabi slowly. He was wearing slippers and tan robe. He seemed much older. "My name is Abdullah Zaik al Muqrin. Jihad is my state of mind, and Caliphate is our State in the world. Both are states of readiness to serve Islam and rise to martyr. Physical, mental and spiritual you must train to the will of Allah Subhan. The Caliphate is established. It is here. You are a soldier in Jihad. When I came here, I was scarred and weary of battle. I came here to start a family but Allah had other plans and my sword has remained unsheathed for many years."

The teacher resumed, "We fought the Crusaders in Srebica. I remember it like yesterday. Muslims hadn't formed an army. For many years the crusaders had been raiding our houses and taking our weapons. When they came to kill us, few could resist. All the world failed us. We were being killed in shifts by Croats and Serbs. Ignored by the West, but also by the despots in Turkey, Iraq, Egypt... It was brave men from stateless regions in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and East Turkestan who came to Jihad. We formed small militias to defend the faithful. We were few and the Crusaders were many. We defended one village but another was sieged. The crusaders spread like fire and before long, it was all burning. When the war ended, there were fewer than a hundred mujaheddin left in Bosnia and we were being systematically assassinated. I hid in Albania. I went to Croatia. I tried to find comfort, but my jihad has never stopped and now I pass these messages to the new armies of the Caliphate. Stand up brother for Allah is the greatest and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah!"

He stood up. "We are bringing *sunah* that the world hasn't seen since the days of Hazreti Muhammad—peace be on his name. Abu Bakr al Bagdadi has the same spirit of truth and jihad as the first four caliphs of our glorious faith. Our success to reestablish the Caliphate brings us closer to the holy times of Abu Bakr al Zulfkir, spiritual successor and father in law to Hazreti Muhammad, our Exalted Prophet peace-be-on-his-name, with whom the line continues to our righteous caliph Abu-Bakr al Bagdadi. We will return all the lands of Muslims to the rule of Shariah across a great, new empire in the first and last Islamic state. Europe and America might be on top of the world, but they're due to be toppled. Allahu Akbar!"

"Allahu Akbar!" Bahtiyar echoed.

After that weekend, Bahtiyar rarely went to class. He read the Koran. He lived out of a backpack, sometimes staying in Gornja Maoca through to the next week. His dorm mates asked where he'd been and he said he was homesick. His mother called and he lied to her too, telling her that he'd met a nice girl and traveled to the thermal baths where she worked. The web of lies was calling him to a remarkable, one-way journey. Each week, the fundamental lessons his teachers were imprinting on him instilled in him confidence in both the greatness of the Caliphate, and his duty to serve it. Abdullah Zaik became the father that Bahtiyar never knew. He shared untold secrets about those men who were busy in the cradle of civilization carving out a new Caliphate with knives.

The wait is aggravating. He jerks his phone out again. His gaze snaps from moving cars to bicyclists to pedestrians to birds. He feels his reflexes elevated from the training and he's able to smile and laugh, but he can't shake the wild look in his eyes. Older people waiting outside the shopping

center leave his proximity but he couldn't care less about them. Working as a fighter is a fresh start. It will be easy to make friends of the Caliphate.

He face has always betrayed him, showing rage or wavering confidence when he needs to look warm and friendly. His lot in life prepared him for hardships. The young man who steps into the large vehicle with aggressive Englishmen and a veiled French woman is a far cry from the teenager who swept cigarette ashes from his mother's room and cradled her in bed when she refused to get up in the morning.

Chapter 14 Kapıkule

Rabi's vehicle slows down. Hayat looks out the window to see blurry red lights through the rain. Before funneling into a single lane at Kapıkule border crossing he wakes up his sleeping passengers, "Friends of Islam," prophetic, "We've born witness to *bid'ah*. Under a new shariyah we make *hudud*! And we travel to the new Islamic State as a testament to its righteousness and to live as our ancestors lived, in the Caliphate."

"Unh... Where are we? What are you proselytizing for? We've already said all that." Abu looks ahead and sees them slowly approaching a few dozen cars in line. "Are we at the border?" Above, there's angular archway with red letters reading *Kapıkule Gümrük Kapısı*. In the black wet night the lights are rotating compass needles on an off screen.

"Now and forever, our *Dalwah* follows the *sunnah* of *Muhammad nabina sallallaho alaihe wasalam*. We renounce our European identities as Muslims fighting *mujhadeen* for the Caliphate. Borders will be erased with our swords." He turns back and gives heavy looks at Abu, Tola and Bahtiyar who nod with squinted eyes.

"Turkey is not a friendly zone. It's apostate. After we pass this gate, the government and its agencies will not be friendly. Friends have opened this door and this door alone. If detained, wait silently and peacefully. Trust Allah, show no fear and answer no questions. We come as friends and guests to Istanbul."

Abu says casually from the back seat, "I've been here before, not too long ago."

"What'd you think?" Tola asks.

"Beautiful, with all the open water and ancient architecture. People—police officers, border guards, guys—they really only care about money, and sex. Just a couple of pounds got us out of a speeding ticket. I'm sure it's why Turkish women are so difficult. But *the* people, the mob, they'll tear down the walls of Jericho, and they're fucking serious about Sunni Islam. I saw a gang of Turks set a hotel on fire because there were some Alevis inside. And the police just let it happen. But anyways, Abdul's your uncle and we're through. The police are slaves to the Euro. We are slaves of Allah! They're either working with the Americans or with us."

Rabi retorts, "There's all sorts of Turks. Some are fighting Jihad here and thousands have traveled south to the Islamic State. Give them the respect they deserve."

Tola chimed in, “But I can’t reconcile the way they dammed the Euphrates. To deny Muslims water is to dig your own hell.”

“Yeah fuck the Turkish government. This guy Erdogan is just jealous because we've claimed Caliphate before he could.”

Bahtiyar doesn’t understand English but sounds off, “I fuck Turkey, I fuck America! *Takbir!*” They laughed while shouting together, “*Allahu Akbar.*” “*Takbir*” “*Allahu Akbar*” *Takbir*” *Allahu Akbar.*”

A few days earlier, on a London Avenue, Abu shouted, “That murderer! Blair and his cowboy boyfriend ought to be in prison.”

They were eating sunflower seeds in a crowded public square. A few days prior Rabi's uncle had just crashed a Lamborghini into a parking meter. He recommended A&W Autoshop where Abu'd been working long nights. He'd finished the repair and was dropping off the car with Rabi.

“How can they sleep at night? I know it was ten years ago but,” Rabi pops his lips “*shock and awe* as they rooted through my family's business, killed innocent people. Put kids, women and elderly in prisons and tortured them, just for working in the government. Sadaam, education minister... didn't fuckin matter. Iraqi families with roofs over their heads were exiled into the desert, bank accounts wiped out. It's amazing neither of these guys were assassinated.”

“Who? Blair and Bush?”

“Yeah, they’re just the dirty fingers though. Israel’s the whole hand. The Caliphate's first enemy is Israel, than America, than one by one it'll take out the European countries.”

Tola clears his throat, “The Ottoman Empire crumbled after World War One and Iraq was partitioned for the English Empire, right?”

“Right,” said Abu, “and Syria for the French. Dirty Americans kept Palestine independent until the fucking zionist Jews came. Kept it earmarked for Euro Jews. ”

Tola took the lead, “Yeah, the plan goes back a century at least.”

“The Sikes-Picot agreement was after World War One. Have you heard it has been erased?”

“What's been erased?”

“The Sikes-Picot line, what became the borderline between Iraq and Syria. It is gone, finished, yesterday's news.”

Tola asked, “How do you erase a border?”

Abu responded, “Kill the guards, than drive a bulldozer through the checkpoint. I'll send you the video. It was glorious, and bloody grim. The mujaheddin told them that they were gonna kill them with a sword.” Rabi took out a pack of cigarettes, “Islamic State fighters keep their promises.”

The three young men paused and looked around. Three preteen girls were sitting on an embankment nearby. “Excuse me,” they earnestly grabbed passers-by attention and asked, “Do you smell poo?” “Yeah, that’s definitely poo.” they giggled. Rabi, Tola and Abu smiled.

“Look at this,” Rabi, cleared his throat and pulled up a photo on his phone. It was Rabi as a boy getting sandwich-kissed by two men. One featured the unmistakable face of Sadaam Hussein in dark

sunglasses and the other was dressed like an Imam. "This photo is about fifteen years old."

"Fuckin hell mate, is that you kid? You look like a scarecrow."

"My uncle used to work in the Ba'ath party. That's him with the beard. These two guys would come round for dinner, my father used to tell me it was the president and his father, he's just a body double. Saddam had dozens. He used them to bait assassins. Didn't help him in 2003 though. My uncle had a good job. He worked in the ministry of education. They had a new initiative called Return to Faith"

"What's that?"

"*Yani* in the 90s, the Ba'ath party made a deal with conservatives to teach Islam in public schools. Back then, Iraq had the best public schools in the Muslim world. My uncle worked with religious clerics to write up courses in Islam. He taught the Koran around Iraq for fifteen years before 2003. Now he's on international hit lists for supporting Shariah in Iraq."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yeah, in France. He stole a dead man's identity and moved to Paris. He coordinates Islamic action in France and Iraq and rarely leaves his apartment. I think he's ISIS. His own family doesn't even know he's alive. He sent me a message a while back though. Very secretive. He says he works with important people.

"Straight up?"

"Yeah, probably al Bagdadi."

"I gotta admit... I've seen the news propaganda, and I've seen the ISIS propaganda, and I gotta say ISIS stuff is a lot more compelling."

"We could go. Even this evening we could go. Just saying. There's nothing stopping us and a lot of money there."

"Man, can I get an advance?"

"I tell you what. If you can get a kilogram of superior quality amphetamine powder. I'll pay you ten-thousand pounds before we leave."

"Are you serious? What are you gonna do? Bring it there?"

"Yeah mate. People in the Levent have been on speed for about years. It's crazy popular because they treat it like it's candy. It's called Captagon. But there's silent war over it. If the Saudi donors get their way, then all the supply has already been trashed. Either way, it's a wide open market."

"So we're gonna push pills in ISIS?"

"Better there than here."

Chapter 15 Fatih

Before dawn, a curtain of rainwater guilds an enclosure; a small passageway from a park to the square with two walls of ancient stone. At a low table, a man with a white beard leans against the wall and three young men sit, taking small sips from their tulip shaped glasses. The overarching aqueduct runs heavily along the crest of the Fatih peninsula and shelters tea drinkers under its arches. Under their robes, they're wearing thermal underwear and under their boots, they're wearing thick leather socks. The speaker is about to begin a story. He sips his tea and clears his throat.

“After one of Hazreti Muhammad—peace be on his name—'s particularly telling recitations, he fell to the ground exhausted and slept. He was carried to bed by his scribe Abdullah Radi Allahy Anha. The next morning, he woke and wanted a date before he prayed, but not just any date, a black date from Persia. Hazreti Muhammad looked in the storerooms, but couldn't find any. He considered this strange because he'd just bought a large box.. Later his scribe returned with fine dates from Jerusalem.

Hazreti Muhammad asked, 'Where did you get these dates and why did you trade the old ones?'

'I wanted only the best for my Prophet,' replied Abdullah.

Muhammad—peace be on his name—considered and replied sternly, 'No, this is *riba* and the sin is punishable by atonement. Halal business doesn't trade up. This is similar to the sin of charging interest on money lending and laundering. To trade for a lesser amount of a higher quality of the same food product is a transaction of excess. We must give these dates up too and eat grain with goat's milk.'

'Yes sir, I understand.'

'I traded food for company and end up with neither, praise Allah.'

'Well, my prophet, I've returned with fewer dates but I also made 20 dinar.'

'And how, brother, did you make 20 dinar? The Persian dates might have sold for less than one dinar and you return with expensive dates and so much money.'

'Well,' he paused a moment, considering how best to phrase the truth. 'Last week, you trimmed your mustache by the river?'

'Yes, I remember I had just detailed the righteousness of atonement.'

'I was downstream. A fish ate something off the surface and spat it out. It was the hairs of your moustache, and I sold it at market.' said Abdullah.

The lecturer clears his throat and asks his students if they would drink another tea. They answered affirmatively so he holds up four fingers and whistles to a young boy who brings tea around to their table. “Now what do you think the lesson of the prophet Muhammad was to his scribe? And what lesson does this story teach us?”

“I believe Hazreti Muhammad—peace be on his name—wanted to teach his scribe that the *ummah* was more important than getting good dates.”

“It teaches us the value of modesty Ahmet *hoca*.”

“Ahmet *hoca*, Hazreti Muhammad—peace be on his name—told Abdullah that we should trade gold for an equal amount of gold, silver for an equal amount of silver, and dates for an equal amount of

dates, but the moustache was a commodity that helped build the mosque and therefore elevate the *ummah*.”

The lecture continues.

“The prophet Muhammad—peace be on his name—heard that his moustache was sold at market and asked, 'So... how does the selling of my moustache at market help Islam?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'When a trifle is sold for a fortune, who has sinned, the buyer or the seller? And who is hurt by this transaction?'

'I'm sorry. I will give you the money.'

'It is Islam that is hurt by this transaction' he cut him off, 'I am a man and a businessman as well. It is Allah that we must pray to and the responsibility of the buyer to see his idolatry. As for the money, we will hire a security guard to the construction of the mosque. People are stealing our nails.'”

The lecturer's tea has gone cold but he finishes it anyway and throws down some coins. He stands up satisfied that his lesson had made an impact. He opens his umbrella and enters the yellow night. He checks his phone and finds a message. *We've just passed the border.*

The strangers are near. He'd heard that Muslims raised in Europe often lacked common sense. They have ants in their pockets and a proclivity for drugs, music and the mixing of the sexes. He first calls Nur, his wife, and lets her know she will receive a guest, then responds *It's raining in Istanbul. What time can we expect you?*

He continues walking past shop windows full of honeycomb and whole legs of lamb -old shops owned by Kurds—the enemy you know.- Falafel and Syrian coffeshops have filled in the gaps in this row. These new businesses sell everything at half the price of their Turkish predecessors. Ahmet cringes with scorn and pity as he sees their awkward smiles in the mosque green. With the same fierce nationalism that filters all his thoughts he considers his guests coming from Europe. At least they're going in the right direction. How can the resurgence of the armies of the caliphate lead so many young men to flee from the Islamic State?

His phone buzzes, *I will be outside your home at noon, inshallah*

“We're the only group capable of reclaiming all of the ancestral cities under Islam—Istanbul, Kabul, Kudus, all of them—under the perfect flag of the believers. We've made it is possible for an Islamic Caliphate to rise and rise again. A state, I mean a superpower, establishing something for the future. Not confined within a geographical framework like Iraq, not like that. Bigger, bigger than that. It's on a world level. We will rule the world.”

The city's unruly as they approach from the west. Skyscrapers in progress, pits the size of parks. Paris, London, Milan, and Sarajevo; it's googled that there are more people here than all those cities combined. They wait at a stoplight. Tall buildings rise on both sides, most lacking walls and draped with billowing sheets of synthetic, orange canvas. Rabi looks down at the map and scrolls his thumb

along the seashore, to the end of the peninsula.

Pedestrians group together and push against traffic, jockeying across intersections as cars pile in and lay on horns, a cacophony of clashing pitches. One plays the theme from the Godfather. Children jump over the highway barriers and pile into the back of pickup trucks filled with melons.

They drive under an ancient wall of heavy, cobbled stone. Hunched old women hobble up and tap against the windshield with pens, packets of tissues and bottles of water. They bless in Arabic and plead in Turkish. Rabi follows his GPS through a labyrinth of side streets, sharp turns and steep hills up towards Ahmet's apartment block on Akdeniz Avenue. They pass ancient, red masonry with thin, round domes on top, buildings for worship, culture and education. It give a passing impression of Istanbul's history. The GPS announces their arrival.

Hayat's eye in the rear view mirror is palpable. Rabi turns around and looks into its black center. "Hayat, we're leaving you here to meet Nur. She's a trustworthy friend and perhaps Ahmet will come speak to you later. We'll meet him now to pray."

Abu vaguely verbalizes, "I'm thirsty. Anybody wanna go to that shop?"

"I'll come out," says Tola. "Come on Bahtiyar, let's go get some water."

Outside, the wet ground smells like cold pavement. The sun is up but there are dark puddles and the scooters and motorcycles smear tracks on the sidewalks. Pedestrians see the doors open to a conspicuously expensive vehicle with English plates. Shocked by the massive black man who gets out, they point and murmur. A few children group up nearby saying racial slurs and doing gestures from rap videos. They take photos on their smartphones.

"Thank you. Thank you for the ride. I don't know how to thank you. You really saved my life. And we're going to the Caliphate. I thank you with all my heart and I hope that we..." the doors open and Abu enters emptyhanded.

"Turks man," he says, "creepy."

"Go meet Nur," says Rabi to Hayat. "I'll send you a message."

She turns down her eyes for a moment then opens them like a peacock, "Will I see you again?"

"Very soon inshallah."

Hayat smiles and slightly purses her lips. She gets out and sees a woman in a black niqab with happy eyes waving and approaching with a glossy bag. Rabi comes around to grab Hayat's luggage while she gets out. The neighborhood stops staring when the women go inside.

Tola hollers, "Damn, look at this city. This is crazy. I reckon the pubs are full of pussy though."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"You think another night stand is going to burn my soul? I know where I am."

"And where the fuck are we? Tola? Eh, Abu Akra? Do either of you even know?"

"Yeah mate, we're in Fatih, going to meet the long-awaited Ahmet Hodja. And last time I was here, I had a bitch on both arms."

He swings the car door open, "Yeah yeah, sure Don Juan," Rabi stretches his eyebrows, gets in the vehicle and starts the engine. "He rolls down the window and motions for Bahtiyar to get in. "Let's go."

A massive dome looms down the Boulevard. The street signs tell them they're on Fevzi Paşa Blvd. They turn by some Roman ruins, then left on Aslanhane Street and park in the back of a crowded lot. Bahtiyar gets out and walks off hastily.

Rabi gossips with a sharp exhale, “this Bosniak kid can’t speak Arabic. Where's he going? They way they talked about him, I thought he was some kind of big shot. Do you know how much time we lost driving to Sarajevo? If he's heavier than he's worth, I'm gonna put him on the garden path.”

“What could he do for the State? Do you think he's got potential?”

“I dunno why Abdul would ask me to pick him up if he didn't.”

They get out and look around aloof. Rabi takes a moment to send another text message. Abu sneaks a look and sees him write something about tea.

Tola smacks Abu in the chest and points ahead. Bahtiyar's leaning against a wall next to two girls wearing dresses. The skinny Bosniak with the bad skin is flirting with one of them and the other is on her phone. Abu's eyes gape in disbelief. They pass inconspicuously and notice that Bahtiyar is speaking Turkish and she's smiling. As they walk by, Abu and Tola give him low-key kudos behind her back but Rabi shoots a nasty glance.

Outside the huge mosque is a square cluttered by grapevines, families, salesmen, beggars, dogs, remote control cars and all kinds of urban social life. Little grassy spots are surrounded by low fences where babies sit and grasp at long grass. All around are smooth slabs of white marble.

A teenager on roller blades is skating fast towards two kids lying side-by-side on the ground. He pumps his legs but aborts the jump within a few meters. Around the edge of the square, kids kick soccer balls hard, using the mosque's body washing tables as goalposts. Corrugated metal barriers block off a large corner of the mosque complex. Dozens of cats ignore slushy food atop marble slabs stacked along a stone wall. Abu, Tola and Rabi walk onto the flat, stone square where young women sell socks for charity.

This is not the world renowned Blue Mosque in all the tourism books. This is Fatih Mosque; older, more worn and certain. Far from the main city tours, this public mosque was commissioned and named after Mehmet the Conqueror, the first Sultan of Istanbul. He broke ground here for a cemetery, hospital, library, rest houses, mosque and schools for the new Muslim population of Istanbul. He didn't forget to leave room for his own tomb however, its location has changed so the few who know where he's buried claim his spirit sits in a tree that grows there on Kindil nights.

The travelers feel exposed but hold their eyes level, scanning the many faces. Ahmet, picks them out of the crowd and approaches. “Selam alekum. Welcome to Turkey.” His smile is low and loose but the upper part of his face crinkles into tight ridges above a high brow. He barrages them with questions,

“Are you hungry? Let us pray. After we will eat the best breakfast you’ve ever tasted. I promise you *vallah!* Wait, where is other man? Where is man from Bosnia?”

“Oh, he met a friend on the street. He’ll be along soon,” says Rabi. They take a wide glance and Abu sees him casually approaching and looking sideways into the cemetery gardens.

“I hear you came far and fast.” Abdul knows their ages, backgrounds and even a few personality details, including the fact that Bahtiyar is a horny teenager. Perhaps Ahmet will teach him a lesson later. Ahmet hums decisively and says, “Ok let us wash.”

They walk towards the faucets, remove their shoes, sit on the stools and turn towards the water. Abu is especially methodological and gives three splashes of water to the face, three on each arm to the elbow. Thrice he rubs each hand with the other, swishes water in the mouth, lightly snorts it to his nostrils and splashes himself once to the hairline. He cups his hand and splashes two handfuls to the back of the ears and one behind the back of the neck. He places his toes and feet under the stream of water.

Ahmet sits next to Rabi and asks if they'd found la Fistanera. "Has Hayat seen the vice and sin of French culture?"

Rabi's language is more dialectic, "Yes *Hodja*. She'll decry France and everything French."

"Allah is laying your path," assured Ahmet before turning and scowling, "and the sooner you pass from Turkey the better. The drugs you peddle have no place here. The Ottomans Caliphate too up the mantle due to the attrition of the Arab Caliphs and it will happen again. You'll wear yourself thin pill by pill, we will be here to protect the *ummah* of the Muslim world."

They regroup on the stone steps. There's a massive wooden door, intricately carved with light and dark patterns and angles framing each other. There are two heavy brass rings in the center of each door. One is swung wide open. They slip off their shoes and enter past bent men slipping off theirs. The pharyngeal sounds of the imam's harmonious voice echo around like ripples on a pond. The peacefulness is a treat for their senses. The tension of the ride is washed away.

Abu inhales deeply. Sandalwood oil soothes his mind. He needs a moment of repose. All through this journey he's been hit with a clarity of personal culpability. He realized he only started to hate Western Culture after dropping out of University. He realized that he can't find a long term girlfriend because he keeps disrespecting the ones who stick around. He can't stop thinking about the taxi driver. He's a murderer, or would it be manslaughter? Is there anything in his life left aside from Jihad? Did all of this happen because he got radicalized by some videos? Excited by those who fight it? Did he decide that he could no longer be complicit, or did English Imperialism chew him up and spit him out just like his mother. He used to be balanced, honest but these radicals taught him that *jihad* is to spend the self to the perfection of Islam. In England, that means exertion, spirituality, self-purification and devotion, but in the lands of Islam, it always means Shariah law. On the borderlands it means the sword. Jihad is a firebrand for young Muslims against skinhead gangs with knives and empty bottles. Despite street battles, Jihad can only really happen in pockets of Europe until it has proved itself in Arabia. The State recruiters targeted him exactly; male, first generation immigrant, raised in the Mosque, dropped out of school, late 20s, strong as an ox, tried it all already. He learned about the subway bombers and weddings targeted in Afghanistan as retaliation. Zionist conspiracies rang truer than the bland newscasts about ceasefires. The mujaheddin in dimly lit caves and bare rooms made bold declarations about centuries of colonial oppression in Africa and Asia. All those sermons and details shaped his curiosity to the Islamic State. Leaving England to see if it's worth fighting had been the plan. The last minute murder was the tipping point. Today though, inside this huge mosque, in a city of Muslims that haven't seen war for a hundred years, peace is worth fighting for.

"Look at this dome," Tola has never seen imperial era mosques, "Godzilla could hide in here."

Rabi asks Ahmet Bey, "*Habib yani*, this mosque was built to honor the conquerors of Istanbul?"

"Yes, Mehmet the Conqueror Sultan. His tomb is on the premises and open to visitors. Would you like to visit it?"

Not far away, Nur brings Hayat to a dormitory for young women. The flat is unadorned and perfumed. It has 3 large rooms, each with four beds and a communal hamper overflowing with fleece pants, scarves, underclothes, towels and sheets. The small kitchen is tidy aside from a large trashcan overflowing with bags, plastic cups and fast food wrappers. The furniture in the living room is cheap, but new. There's a television hanging on the wall, and a long mirror hanging over a couch. The satin curtains are drawn. A large plastic table sits across the room and there are some chairs scattered around it.

“Welcome, to our new guest. She’s from Paris.”

The girls introduce themselves. Some of their names register momentarily. Nur backs out to the hallway to busy herself in the linen closet.

“*Parlez-vous Français?*”

“*Ahah! Hah, I... no French.*”

“English”

“*Yok!*” a few girls tut their tongues and turn up their noses. Hayat feels dismissed and looks away.

“*Arabi?*”

“*Naeam! Merci! Shukran!*”

“*Ahlan Sadakati! Esmee Zeynep.*”

“*Ma Esmouki?*”

Hayat is a bit dismayed, but still knows better than to introduce herself as *Hayat Bournamecca*. She might as well wear a sash that says *Martyr's Widow*, but she's just as careless and reckless as the other girls are acting so says, “Hayat. *Ma Menatuki?*”

“*Ne?*”

The conversation has reached its linguistic limit. “Ahhh, *shway, shway.*” Zeynep remembers something and says something Hayat can't understand, “*bi dakika*” before running to her bedroom. She brings back a beginner level, Classical Arabic study book. Hayat takes a look and they share a briefly pleasant moment correcting pronunciation of basic phrases. The other girls give interested looks from their private conversations, studies and television shows.

Nur returns noisily. She has taken off her niqab and is wearing a green blouse and cream colored trousers. Her face shows that she might be in her late fifties and she has a few moles on her neck. with a shopping bag behind her back. “Are you hungry? Would you like to eat something? Let me show you your house first, than we can eat something. And first,” Nur presents the bag. “A welcome gift.” Hayat reaches in and takes out the black article of cloth. Nur asks, “Is it true that you can be arrested for wearing hijab in Paris?”

“Yes, in a government building.”

“It was the same in Turkey until just last year. Have you ever worn a niqab?” Nur drapes the long black fabric between her two fingers. She flares the other six attractively.

“No, never a niqab. My husband Amedy asked me to practice hijab after we married but I only wore a scarf.”

“Yes,” as the martyr is mentioned, Nur winces. “Well, we aren’t on display for the men of the world now, are we?”

Hayat nods. As she is pulling the black garment over her head she recalls Amedy’s deep voice. He used to say, “Life is not a show. You’re my wife now, not a whore. Please hijab.” Amedy’s request was granted but subtly she redirected his anger inward and outward and away from her.

One Ramadan evening years earlier, Amedy and Hayat were invited to share *iftar* diner with a family who ran an Islamic business incubator. Amedy had been courting them for a loan to buy a truck. They arrived before sundown to find the table filled with roasted lamb, appetizers and a variety of dates. Amedy sat between Hayat and Muhammad, the youngest son of their hosts. As the daylight grew dim they smiled and blessed each other for a successful fast. Hayat noticed the boy sneakily grab a date before last sliver of daylight sank below the horizon. She stretched an eyebrow at Amedy as the boy popped it into his mouth. Amedy scowled and slapped the boy on the back of the neck. He gasped sharply, sucking the fruit into his airway. Then he brought his hands to his throat. His face showed panic. The parents rose from their seats. The boy grabbed the table cloth and clenched his fists tightly at his chest. Mother circled around the table and grabbed her son to administer the Heimlich Maneuver. As she hoisted him up, the boy jerked the white cloth from the table. Dishes of eggplant puree and roasted lamb spilled onto Amedy and Hayat. Glasses of lemonade bounced off their laps and shattered on the floor. Hayat flailed her arms and batted dates through the air. Mother hugged her boy from behind and found a bubble of air to launch the date from his lungs. His face was dark purple. A hard pump and expert fists plunged the offending article out of the boy’s constricted trachea. It struck Amedy on the forehead. The boy’s regained breath rose but sunk below his cries. It was only after he passed that he resumed normal breathing. After a rush to the hospital with the only food passing anyone’s lips having been spit right out did they sit in Amedy’s car eating fast food in silence.

In Hayat’s Istanbul pension, that reprehensible face loosened from the concretion of their marriage and sublimates to a daydream of herself, laid back on a palanquin over the desert, being romanced as she picks nuts and dates from a tray full of rubies and gems. Perhaps these memories will demand one last consideration before she remarries.

Ahmet stands next to a thick marble columns holding up the main dome in Fatih Mosque. “Today’s generation of Muslims worship quietly inside mosques established by great conquest. Have you been to Asia? conquests. When Hazreti Muhammad lived, he prophesied that a magnificent army would conquer this city. Fatih Sultan Mehmet led the Ottoman armies to victory and established the fourth caliphate but, even the Ottoman Empire died and the Caliphate was buried with it. The Turkish Republic was founded by alcoholics. In those days, imams who called the prayer in Arabic were executed. Only in recent years, by the will of Allah, has true Islamic education returned and we believe that the sixth Caliphate will be a peaceful jihad. We live in exciting times. This mosque, the caliphate and the greatest victories of Islam were won through *jihad* of the sword and not through quiet worship or personal struggle. The greatest worship is to fight *jihad* by day and night. Today *inshallah tala*, young Muslims again have that chance.” His quiet voice is brimming with joy and the corners of his eyes raise to his brow.

“The tomb of our great Conqueror lies ahead of us,” Ahmet announces as they pass through a marble archway to the adjacent cemetery gardens. Countless footsteps across this threshold have worn the ancient marble edges smooth. Abu pauses and looks up at the circular calligraphy on the arch. The

letters are Arabic, In the name of Allah the Merciful. He passes through the cemetery of stone turbans perched at the head of tall headstones inscribed with unrecognizable engravings. The graveyard is full of flowers, palms and evergreens.

“Did the Ottomans use Arabic?” asks Abu.

“Like modern Turks, the Ottomans only used Arabic for religious purpose. In their everyday lives they spoke their own language and wrote it with an Arabic script.”

“When did the alphabet change?”

Nearly a hundred years ago, when the first president of the Turkish Republic issued a mandate requiring newspapers, schools and literature to henceforth be written in New Turkish with a Latin script.”

Owing to the childhood religious studies, Abu and Rabi are both fluent in Classical Arabic as well as *baqala* slang. Bahtiyar and Tola are both beginners. Above the tomb door to Fatih Sultan Mehmet's coffin are green plaques with golden calligraphs.

“Fatih Sultan Mehmet fulfilled Muhammad’s Hadith of Konstantinople, but it was first weakened by crusaders from France, Italy and England. They were sent by Allah as marauders. They ignored the pope and their king. They stormed into the Byzantine city and besieged the peninsula. They lingered and sacked the city even after their king had returned to his thrown. That was the last time the thrown between the Black and White seas passed from king to king. *Subhan Allah* reduced Muslim casualties by weakening the city.”

The five men eat breakfast while Ahmet continues to dominate the conversation with declarations of pride about Turkish culture and Islam. The tabletop is completely covered. The restaurant boasts 161 different dishes, most of which sit half-eaten under their noses. “Turkish, is one of the world’s great kitchen cultures. This restaurant is from a city with the world’s best kebabs; Hatay, on the Mediterranean, is an intersting city. It is Turkish but Arabs live there. Turks and Arabs are brothers in Islam and we will live under the Shariat.”

A short tram ride later and the travelers find themselves under a stone archway. They continue to follow and are amazed by antique swords. They're stupefied by fast talking salesmen in traditional garb. And they're breathlessly outpaced by Ahmet in the crowded labyrinthine alleys. The architecture and design, the products, and even the pedestrians are increasingly colorful as they approach the lavish inner *han* of the world famous marketplace.

In front of a fountain, Ahmet turns with his arms wide and declares, “This is the Grand Bazaar, much the same as it was hundreds of years ago. This was the world trade center of the Ottoman Empire, and a lot more durable than the American Empire that tried to replicate it.”

There, they meet Hayat, and Nur. They greet them and walk ahead of them to Topkapı Palace. “Here are the *Babus-selam*.” continues Ahmet. “Notice these two towers are in the European style. This gateway was reserved for European diplomats. Only sultans could pass it on horseback. Look straight through to see the executioner's fountain.”

They purchase tickets and funnel into an incredibly crowded, single turnstile. Long chains of children holding hands, women with limited vision and large, loud men press inwards towards a single metal detector.

“*Shirk*” Ahmet begins a sermon in the picturesque courtyard they've reached, “is a dangerous sin

and Muslims do not worship objects or pictures. The sacred relics within Topkapı Palace are, in fact, improperly named. These personal items that were touched and used by the prophet Muhammad—peace be upon his name—as well as earlier prophets, are less sacred than the verses of the Noble Koran. They are simply items that teach us about the life of the prophet. No more sacred than my hat.”

Inside the chambers of the sacred trust they gaze upon ancient sheets of parchment. “This is the letter written by the prophet Muhammad—peace be upon his name—to Muqawqis, Governor of Egypt under the Byzantine Empire. The letter announces the foundation of Islam and invites the Egyptians to join the Caliphate.” Abu and Rabi read the restored transcription, written in unaccented handwriting.

The seal at the bottom is a familiar stamp used by ISIS, a black circle surrounding the words *Allah Messenger Muhammad*; a mark denoting an ancient allegiance. All five travelers and two scholars have seen this symbol on flags, graffiti and documents in recent years.

They also view the clothes, gifts, hair, teeth and footprints of their prophet before passing into the room which features historical items dating back many thousands of years, such as the unadorned wooden staff of Moses, the iron cooking pot of Abraham, and the curiously well-kept, cloth turban of the Egyptian King Joseph. Tola, with little restraint and a deep interest in African and Egyptian kings, stifles a scoff. “This,” Tola gestures at the stick, “is the staff of Moses? What-with he thirty five-hundred years ago split the seas open? Are you joking?”

Ahmet looked at him stunned, “Hazreti Musa, who by all accounts Islamic, Christian or Hebrew brought that stick down against the Egyptians and shepherded God’s people out of slavery. Man where, perchance, was our sacred staff hiding for 3500 years? Inside the pyramids?”

“*Yani*” he swallowed. “Many of them were indeed gifts from the Vizir of Egypt.”

“Hmm.”

Chapter 16 Jandarma

“Duygu my dear, can you go buy some more bread?”

“Of course mother.”

“And put this gristle out for the cats.”

Duygu grabs a Styrofoam tray of fatty bones and sets it out by the neighborhood dumpster. A dozen cats creep out to show dominance displays. She waits a second to see. A big orange one stalks towards a big and lazy long-haired grey cat and smack it across its fuzzy head, a little screech, and drops the meat. “Heathcliff wins the fat.” She steps off towards the seaside road. The morning sun is bringing in fragrances of oleander and orange blossoms, with the fluffy clouds above the hot wind, and it’s all quite heavenly. As far back as she can remember, she’s been walking this road to the bakery.

She thinks about summers past, ‘I wonder if Arif’s son has flown the coop yet. He was kind of cute. He must be about 18 this year. What’s that ahead? A Gendarmerie checkpoint? I hope this year isn’t too busy for Mom and Dad. Dad’s knees don’t seem too good. He always pretends like they’re not bothering him but Mom and I notice. I bet climbing down those stairs to the beach is hell for him. All

those years of mountain climbing really did a number on him, and I suppose the *raki* isn't helping his cartilage. Maybe after I finish medical school I'll learn how to help his knees.'

On the road ahead, a large battalion of soldiers with black automatic rifles stand around a blue wagon. The word *Jandarma* is printed in red.

"Good morning," she says and thinks, 'damn that was a really big gun. After six years in England it's weird seeing big guns. Hmm I wonder what Abu is doing right now. He was a good time. I really should've fucked him that night. He was acting so sexy. I bet any English girl would've. He'd be on top and he'd kiss my neck- oh my God did I just think that? Anyways, yeah let him be in control. He's probably got loads of girlfriends. He's one in just a thousand sexy men that I could marry tomorrow if I wanted. And he's probably a gangster. I don't even know the first thing about him. It couldn't hurt to call him up though. I'll just send him a cute little message.'

She whips out her phone and taps out the message, *Hey Hun, I'm in Turkey, sun, beach and family dinners :s We'll go out again in a month when I get back to London. If you can wait ;)*

After clearing her head in the sea air, Duygu hops up the curb to Arif's bakery where Arif meets her jovially.

"Who could this beautiful stranger be?" "One of these Syrian immigrants passing through to a better life? No, must be a movie star. Hmm, I know! It's that English pop singer on vacation."

"Hehe, getting warmer," says Duygu."

"My girl, look at you." He steps out from behind the counter, "Ercan!" He calls back into the oven room, "Look who's here."

A well built boy comes out wearing a white apron. "Hello Duygu, how are you?" formally.

She smiles and widens her eyes.

"Wow look at Duygu," says Arif, "All the way from England. I hope those football hooligans have been leaving you alone. Let them come to Turkey to get a taste of real sport." He flexed his muscles, squinted and frowned.

"Ercan here's just made the local youth team."

Duygu gave him an impressed look and a wink. She asks Arif, "How's your wife?"

"Fat," Arif laughs. Duygu laughs too.

"She's pregnant again!" Ercan interjects.

"Oh my god, how will I afford a another child! Maybe I should convert my home into a holiday resort like your family, but I guess it's a little late for that. Maybe I'll get a boat and sail some Arabs to Cyprus."

Duygu looks around and mentions "I see you've started selling cookies and other pastries. That's good."

"Yes take one, I want you to try this." He gives Duygu a crescent moon shaped pastry covered in powdered sugar. "Ercan made it. He's quite the baker."

"Mmm, apple. It's much better than any of pastries in England. Terrible food on that island. Ok," she scans the loaves and cookies and decides, "can I have thirty loafs of white bread and six loaves of wheat please. And a 3 dozen of these cookies "

“Of course!” Ercan starts grabbing loafs and throwing them into bags. “Do you need help carrying these?” Ercan offers.

“I think I’ve done this enough. When I was a child, it was a hundred loaves, and I was only this tall,” she holds her hand low. “Do you remember? I used to balance them on a broom stick and walk with my head barely poking through. They’d fall into the beach foam and I’d just put them right back into the bag. I think I can handle thirty.”

Ercan looks slightly disappointed. “You know best.”

On her way home, Duygu decides to walk on the beach rather than the adjacent road. Her steps sink slightly into the sand. A breeze carries the stink of seaweed and triggers unpleasant memories. Duygu can feel the round stones through her thin canvas shoes. One of the largest Greek Islands is no more than thirty kilometers across the bay. The idle contingent of gendarme is smoking cigarettes along the roadway.

A few hundred meters ahead of Duygu, a head pops up from a behind spillway barrier. A dark haired young man climbs up, looks around and jumps down to the beach. Behind him a few others climb up and balance on the wall. They catch sacks and help the women and children mount the concrete wall too. A group of about twenty-five travelers, half children and babies bundled to their mothers, are clearly visible from the road. The Gendarme forces calmly stop another minibus, take a quick look inside and wave it along, continuing to ignore the beach. The immigrants look tired and hungry and carry many bags and babies. The children are stoic and take this moment to rest as the others mount the obstacle. These travelers want little more than a place to live without bullets, threats and explosions.

She smiles, takes a deep breath and walks straight towards them. Most are resting in the shade of a fig tree. Three men are looking thoughtfully at smart phones and are outlining their discussion with vigorous hand motions and pointed gestures. “Selam Alekym,” Duygu greets. They respond politely but with wary eyes. Some of the men bow gracefully with open palms held against to their chest. “Are you traveling?” she asks in clear English.

“Hello, eh. Yes,” the men are humble and hesitant.

“I want to help. Please take some bread.” A young woman with glassy, blue eyes stands and accepts it. She has a baby bundled to her breast and gives heartfelt and earnest thanks. She might be a teenager.

“My dear,” says Duygu, “be careful. There are police on the road.”

“It’s okay,” the traveler glances toward them. “They don’t want to find us.” Two men with heavy black guns wave down a truck.

“You have many children with you. How far have you traveled?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Where are you from?”

“Damascus. But it is not good for the children so we are going to Germany.” she takes a folded paper from her pocket, opens it and shows Duygu. Among many lines of Arabic is the name *Özden Özdemir* and a German address written below it.

“Ahh a Turk, is this a friend?”

“Yes, he is helping refugees like us.”

“Allaha ismarladuk. Please take these cookies for the children, I wish you all the luck on your journey, may Allah keep you safe!”

They give warm blessings and thanks and Duygu continues home. At the pension, a minibus drops off a crew of backpackers who squint in the bright sun. She thinks of the horrible stories of boats sinking with no survivors and photos of children's bodies washed up on shore. She gives quiet prayer for them before presenting a cheerful attitude and considerably less bread than she bought from the bakery. Her father looks up from his calculator and says, “Welcome back dear, did you get enough bread?”

“I hope so, I can always go back if we need more.” She skips behind the reception desk and kisses both of her father's cheeks. “Hi daddy. Not very crowded this weekend.”

“No, it's not. Good day to fix the walls and fences,” Mr. Özer unfurrows his brow and takes off his glasses. He lovingly touches his daughter's cheek and says in a weary voice, “My dear, what a blessing. How many summers have you helped us here? It must be twenty-four now.” He brushes his hand through his thick grey hair. “Every year it's the same work; trim these, plant those, fix this, buy that. And every winter the same walls crumble and the same plants need trimming. Then it's welcome, serve, clean, welcome, serve, clean, repeat, repeat, repeat.”

“Oh Daddy, you're always so popular with them. Remember last year when Tarkan was dancing with you? Don't you love it?”

He huffs, “Yes, of course, but I'm not a young man anymore. And when your grandmother gave me this land, we built this place with just the money we'd scraped together from fishing. I wanted a quiet place to write poetry, but the guests never stopped coming, year after year for twenty-five years. And look at you! My pride and joy. You're grown up, but you're still my princess. I've made up my mind. This is your graduation year and it's my final year. I'll retire at the end of the season. Let the new generation work like horses.”

“Wow Daddy, I don't know what to say. What are you going to do next?”

“I'll just relax for once.”

“You always know best daddy,” she kisses him again, “do you need any help in the office?”

“No, not here. Bring the bread to Osman Usta right away. He's making lunch right now.”

She pushes through double-doors to the kitchen where a heavyset man in a white apron is chopping onions. He looks up and says frankly, “Just the girl I was looking for. So, my cousin is a great singer and he wonders when we're getting married because he wants to sing at our wedding.”

“Hmm,” she plays along.

“I was thinking next month. He'll be back from the military in June. His band does traditional songs, pop songs, whatever you want.”

“Hmm, let's see... next month, next month...” Duygu tilts her head then selects his eye level, “I think you forgot about your trip to the moon next month.” and sets him with a deadpan grin.

“Listen, I know you love England. You want to buy a house and marry an Englishman and-”

“Oh, give me a break! I'm in no hurry to get married.” She says, and throws a loaf of bread at his head, “I'm not not marrying anyone until I can afford to stop taking Daddy's money.” She blushes

and blinks rapidly, but smiles.

He continues, "Ok ok but when you do, you have to promise to hold the wedding here, I swear I'll kidnap you both. Whenever you marry, it's going to be here at this resort."

She throws up her hands and submits, "Ok bro, but what about all the English? What if they want pig's blood soup for breakfast? Can you cook all that English breakfast stuff?"

"As," he spits, "*Hiram!* Let them eat my tripe! Or brain stew to break their fast. They're fine people, the English. They can eat something new. Cow's heart kebab!" He holds up an onion threateningly and glares, "You're not eating filthy swine, are you?"

"No! Of course not bro, I get sick at the smell of it. And besides, there are lots of Turkish restaurants and other *halal* places in London. I always thought that Istanbul had everything. Well bro, come visit me in London, you can get your heart's desire."

"Hah! As if! You take care of yourself though."

"Thanks. Anything else I can do for you?"

"No no, I've got it. You go have fun."

"Ok, I'm going to the beach."

Chapter 17 Boo

"I swear to god-" Abu jolts up from a dream that someone was stepping on his chest, pushing out all the air and making his heart crawl. His eyes are focused on the darkness. Voices barge into his head space, 'Buckskin dickheads, Trina make frets'. He blinks hard. Thoughts and voices like these show him street fights. The air conditioner is humming inside and out. The moon fills up his window. He tries but can't shut his eyes tight enough. Prayer is the answer, 'Que *wallah Oahu shad*' His neck and shoulders relax. The hotel blanket's too heavy. He can hear Tola taking deep breaths across the room. He throws the blanket back. 'There ain't no turning-' "*Allah hews-Samad*" He opens his eyes and stares at the stucco ceiling. 'Bitch, I'm gonna...' He throws on his shalwar and starts barefoot out the room. The threatening thoughts follow him down the hallway, "kill any fucking extremist... dickhead... ideologue, zealot cunts, pagans, fullback!" but he doesn't manage to answer them with any prayers.

He goes downstairs and finds the reception desk empty, not a soul in the lobby.

"Hello!" he sees the sign for the prayer room pointing downstairs. He creeps down the steps. A hot red light and a strange hum radiates out but he's dirty and walks to the tiled wall and a closed door marked WC. When he puts his hand on the handle he hears an arousing feminine giggle. He pauses, 'is this the right washroom?' the siren calls him in, "Come wash me you big bully." He presses the door open a crack and sees crimson toenails against cerulean tiles. He follows the lines of a feminine figure and sees water trickling down olive skin from a bent knee.

Abu says, "I do ablutions in the name of Allah," as he opens the door. Duygu's inviting form is nestled in the shadows. He steps forward to see her in black lingerie, splashing water and rubbing her

bare thighs with a red cloth. She beacons him over and takes his hand. She teases her breasts with it. "I never tell," she moans as she washes his face and crouches down to wash his feet. She stands up, looks him in the eye and smiles as she lifts up his shirt and touches his belly. He moves his hips towards her and she says "Pray first." His vision tunnels out as he's spirited into the the dreadful hot light within the *mescit*. There's an ominous crackling sound like a bonfire. Abu glides in to meet a creature waiting inside. It excites and offends his sensibility. It's blasphemous, tyrannous, sinful and the shape of the very devil but it's face is the friendly Irishman Jermaine. It's body, a satyr. It sits within the *mihrap* ripping pages from the Koran and tossing them into the air gleefully. Abu feels the pump of rage. He shouts over the flares and quakes, "Fiend! I'll rip your limbs and send you back to hell in pieces!"

"Little old me? Kamakamakamkam. Don't you know me? I've nothing on you. It's the others I've corrupted. You killed, I killed, Kamakamakama!"

"*Bismillahirrahmanalrahim*, you're evil. *Bismillahirrahmanal rahhim*, you're the enemy!"

"No mercy! I'm a little scapegoat acting you out, come pray to me while I hollow you out. Charge out crimes and execute the world. Let loose locusts, fall the sword, burn Azrael burn. That dickless flamer is my sibling, so is Allah and that pig-dog prophet of yours. I roast that pederast over the coals of his tribe, then kick him from pit to pit like a football. Join them in the flames. I've got your mother down here too, she sucks cock, ahhh kamakamakamakama-"

The nightmare ends abruptly. Abu wakes up and looks around the hotel room. It's quiet and canny. He recognizes himself and goes back to sleep without a second thought. He has a second dream that he's in university. Rabi is teaching about explosives. He says, "This bomb is very useful because it shoots only forward, not back. So someone can wear and when it explodes, they will remain unharmed."

Tragedies have shattered and scattered Abu's family, leaving him an orphan. I'm completely estranged. When Abu's father once-upon-a-timed him at the front door of his brick apartment, they looked like Abu Simbel, colossus of the upper Nile. They both could've been statues carved by the same hand.

This didn't change the fact that for a year before his father came, Abu was alone. Even when his mother Fariha was alive, he was alone. She had been cold to the community. After she died, Social Services sent an envoy of clerics to inquire about him. He saw them through a crack in the curtain and climbed out the back window. Eventually the police broke down the door and found the apartment full of trash wrappers and beer cans. They boarded it up but Abu'd grown up in that house and he knew the roofs and how to jimmy the window. When the second English winter came, it was too cold so he went to the Mosque and asked to be an orphan. Social workers came; first two smiley folks with a clipboard and polo shirts but after escaping the orphanage a few time, serious looking men with police accompaniment. Again he escaped through the crevices of the house and returned home late in the night. He'd been drinking and rampaging around Woolwich and Royal Arsenal until the wee hours of the morning when he saw Simbat at his door, scratching his head to find it boarded up and condemned.

Abu's family are stars in a constellation. In the dawn of an old sun, rising to scorch a new world, they fade. I refuse to fade out though. The boy's got a chance, just like his father had.

Chapter 18 The Storyteller

In Stone Town, in the corner of a market, at the edge of the rubble, soot-stained passage leading to a small room that's been holding up its archstones for thousands of years. Adjacent to it, a tourist kiosk borrows a wall. This small arch was part of a tea shop, on the site of a clove plantation built over a slaver's prison palace, in place of a traders office. It stood amidst the ruins in a field cleared by a revolution. As a small fortune teller's booth, all that is left over of the ancient building.

In the small shadowy chamber sits a curious and sometimes terrifying soothsayer, shrouded behind a layer of purple silk, illuminated by a candle within. The tent swells and wanes with her slow breaths. Figures of monkeys and centipedes crawl in the shadowy corners of the room and the fortune teller, Kahina maintains the pillars of Islam in her own unique way. Young boys who tried to steal or ask disrespectful questions were greeted with horrifying and painful hallucinations. Once, an English tourist who disrespectfully asked, "What time is it?" was blown off his feet into the desert, pawed at and paralyzed by sphinxes and slowly drowned into the sands. Despite her sage vengeance, she was loved, visited often and cared for by her many friends at the bazaar. From within her veiled cradle she doesn't reveal her image, or intention unless people gave her respect and patronage.

Simbat crossed the room and approached the luminous purple tent with his head bowed and his hands open in prayer. "as-salaamu 'alaikum,"

"alaikum as-salaam. Your patronage is welcome," Simbat deposited some money into the bowl on the table.

"You've returned to visit me a third time. Has my advice been useful to you?"

"There is truth to your words."

"Allah has blessed me with visions and intuitions. Please light the candles on your sides."

Little bells clinked together as Kahina's hand emerged from a gap in the fabric with a lit candle. As Simbat carefully grabbed the candlestick and held the flame to others, a thin exhalation flared the now darkened veil. He quickly set the candles down and Kahina reclaimed hers. "In your third and final visit, Simbat sailor, you will learn your ultimate fate." A scratching sound from above didn't manage to distract him. "Each man's life has a climax and yours is fast. Long ago you veered from a pious life, yet you help other travelers fulfill their hajj occasionally. Give alms and rejoice in Allah!"

A brief silence was broken by the sound of something ceramic rubbing against smooth wood. Sudden Kahina said, "Would you like to hear about the weight of your soul?" The squeak turned to a scratch. "Like a Sufi Murshid, your devotion is singular, and what drives you will not be revealed in turn. You're not even motivated by money anymore. Please hold your palms out and receive the offering." Simbat's hands opened and extended before his will. Cupped hands with long dark fingernails emerged over Simbat's. The fingers were thin and bony and the joints looked like black walnuts. When she separated her hands outward she let fall the shavings of turmeric root, henna powder and unknown ashes. "Now blow a slow breath."

Simbat filled up his lungs and exhaled through his nose and mouth. He watched the debris form

a cloud and swirl up and around and dissolve into the balance of darkness and light.

Kahina spoke, "I see a soul born. Where you go, there will be suffering, and you must bear it. Even the sea will give you no love in the coming years. A new adventure awaits and Allah will show you three ways. The first to port, money comes at the expense of many lives. The second, starboard leads your heart to adventure and love. The third way is straight to safety and the long season of weariness. Close your your hands. Your patronage is appreciated." Simbat allowed his hands to reach into his pocket, take another large bill and place it in the pot.

"Nevertheless, your lifeline and your loveline meet now and a child is your destiny. Live not for yourself because though you may never meet him, but your child's life will mirror yours." Simbat's heart leapt. He knew that she was right, and that he would leave. He wasn't sure how many sons he had already. "Thank you", he stood up. "Here are a few mangoes. Good bye Kahina." As he rose, a passing question jumped from his throat, "Do you know where I can find a good cup of coffee in Stone Town?"

A short chuckle and a relieved sigh preceded Kahina's answer. "Not a bean at the market today eh? Why don't you follow your nose for for a good one in Dar es Salaam? On the outskirts is Kimbillo's, it's quite good."

Chapter 19 Bandari

In Stone Town late in the evening, Simbat had his mind on a drink and a fuck but in the back of it, gears were starting to catch. He stuffed his pocket full of cash and descended to Bandari, a pub next door to the Dhow Palace Hotel. Outside, hookers posed in the windows and vagrants begged. Simbat threw a few coins and looked down the street. A sharp dressed man poked around a corner, Simbat shouted at him and he quickly disappeared. Simbat figured him for a small time gangster and he wanted to meet him so he slipped a twenty pound note in his hand and rounded the corner, but was immediately grabbed by four big thugs, one with an eye patch. The gangster was approaching with his hand was inside his jacket.

Simbat said, "Whoah there. No need for metal, just got a friendly question," Simbat dropped the money. "I know your time is valuable."

He removed an empty hand from his jacket and said, "Hey brother, with bills like that, you've come to the right street. Everything you see here is mine but don't come asking me. Just find a girl and ask her price." he smoothed the lapels of his sheer grey jacket.

"I'm looking for something more valuable. Gold, coffee and other stuff for the keep of the cargo bay. Especially coffee. Bulk weight for a nice price."

"Well," the pimp mused rhapsodically, "You might find a few ounces of pure gold for a bit under market price around here in an hour. As for coffee, that's comes in seasonally."

"And, when is coffee season?" queried Simbat with a raised eyebrow.

"Do I look like a mainland farmer? All that stuff's gotta cross the border first. I might know the guy who does it."

“And what about the girls? They're not from around here.” Simbat took out a five more twenty pound notes, “for his name, no bullshit.”

“Are you rich, powerful or just stupid,”

“...”

“Alright. He calls himself Tippu.” Simbat winces.

“Oh, you've heard of him?”

“No, just the name.”

“I reckon he'll find you.”

“Thanks,”

“And one last thing. If you meet him, don't look him in the eye and don't mention Bandari or Dhow Palace.”

“Whatever you say man.”

Inside, a bartender yelled out, “Simbat, you old dog. You're late to the party. Is this your fucking crew?” The bartender nodded towards a corner where Aakash, Mbwana, Ali, Sayeed and a few others were teasing women with American dollars and passing them around. Sayeed's monkey was perched on his shoulder holding a little cup. A hookah smoldered in the middle and blue curacao drinks were scattered around.

Simbat looked back to the bar. “Look man,” he slid some pound notes across the bar. “Can you call some more girls over here?”

“What's that mean?” said the bartender winked and pulled the cord on a loud bell. The crew in the corner hollered Simbat over.

“Sons of bitches, what are you doing?” he caught a dark skinned girl in a purple wig's attention and said, “you girls like playing with dogs?”

“Sure we love sea dogs!”

Simbat wrestled with his men a bit before wedging onto a bench and a blue haired girl jumped up on his lap. They drank and carried on a bit until Simbat said, “Dammit!” The girl on his lap was twiddling her purple hair with her fingernails. “This quest has got me again. Every time it starts and I find myself stranded, tempted or worse. I swear this continent'll be the death of me.” He threw back a drink and sized up the woman on his lap.

“But what about the women?” goaded Ali.

“Not the most beautiful,” he said as he swept the whore's plastic, purple hair behind her ear tenderly revealing high rounded cheeks and stoic eyes, “but it doesn't matter how fresh the paint on a beautiful old battleship is.” Simbat had the attention of the table. “We're going to war mates, turn the prop full throttle. If I lie, then we die fore we finish this bottle!” with hearty guffaws and some spillage. A teased curse was toasted. Many fine and slurred renditions of classic drinking songs on, and under the table. Genitals were exposed to the public air. They played card games, grab ass, drunken both hi-jinks and lo-jinks, until two by three or four the sailors and whores slipped into the hotel next door.

This neighborhood was accustomed to Tanzania's sleaziest hosts, bent into pulling a few pounds or dollars from sailors or politicians with low morals. While the rest of the island was in economic depression, these kinds of ships were a huge windfall. All the drunks, pimps and gangsters came out of their holes. The hotel kept large weapons but few were denied their pleasures.

In the room, Simbat directed two whores, a thin one with tight high cheekbones and blue, yarn-spun hair, and a younger one with a round ass, fat lips and long, glittering eyelashes- from a wicker armchair with a nearly empty bottle in his hand.

"Kiss and get undressed on the bed." They followed his instructions and coupled in front of his heavy gaze. His heart quickened. The plump whore's heavy breasts thumped her chest as her tight top was pulled past her shoulders. Arousal stirred the blood in Simbat's veins and he removed his shirt too. The whore laid back and spread her legs nubily. She moaned and beckoned Simbat into her intimate space. Simbat rose from his chair, bent at the waist like a sprinter with an erection lifting the crotch of his baggy linen pants. He approached the bed with a wild grin and deviant eyes. His broad shoulders hunched over his smooth head. He dove into her fat tits with his mouth open and flapped and buzzed his lips between them. The narrow whore got his pantaloons by the cuff and yanked hard on them. He rolled over, resting his head on the soft, titty mounds while his pants were pulled past his penis, which flopped back and smacked his belly with a whiplash. She wrapped her thin dark hands around it, gave it a few tugs and jumped up to her knees to straddle it. "Ahh" Simbat moans with his last bit of air, "fuck me good." He reached back to grab fat tits and found them dangling in his face. She leaned forward to kiss her friend. Simbat was slowly thrusting, arching his back and lifting his narrow whore up into the squalid air with the tension of his spine. His bird's too long for her nest so she found herself deeply pressed and moaning and pining. Simbat triangulated his arms into her upper flanks and lifted her up and down and straight off and wiped off his glistening scope with a hotel towel. "Hey, suck that" to the plump whore and she dropped down obediently. She opened and closed her fat lips and throat, and swirled her tongue around his veiny member. She engaged and worked the muscles of her neck and shoulders giving a direct, wet tunnel for Simbat's throbbing manhood. He was starting to fizz but kept it corked until suddenly, and to her surprise heavily into the back of her throat. She gagged, pulled back her head, gripped it and let the pearly spurts shoot across her cheek. The other hooker slurped her fat lips around it and sucked it to the finish.

Out in the hallway, over one-upsmanship and figs, Simbat quietly announced to his heedful crew, that there was dangerously lucrative work to be done. "Those serious about wagering your lives against untold riches, come to the ship at nightfall. Come prepared to dance with death."

Chapter 20 Affinities for Effigies

Abu wakes up groggily. Tola is not in the hotel room. He gets dressed in a tracksuit, grabs the key card and exits. Between the closing panels of the elevator door he sees a man raise his eyebrow. The door reopens, "Going up?" Abu steps in. The elevator panel is labeled, -1 PRAYER ROOM, 0 LOBBY, 6 DINING SALON.

"No... down, says Abu,"

“Ah good.” and he pushes the button for the basement. The elevator whirs and plays Turkish Music, “Are you English?”

“Born there.”

“So you are traveling in Turkey. ” the man asks.

“...”

“Or are you a tourist?”

He takes Abu’s silence at face value and continues, “want to know what I think?”

“Sure.”

“Tourists follow maps, guides and plans. Travelers follow this” he pressed his right palm against his chest, “the heart.”

“Well, I’m not sure who I’m following. But I know where I’m going.”

“That is good my friend. And I’m sure that Allah will keep your path.” The elevator doors open, “Let’s pray.”

A week ago he was handing over to keys to Lamborogini to Saudi businessmen. That gunshot at the A4 on ramp dropped out the floor. He saw the day of judgement like land on the horizon and tries to clear his mind. The pious men pull their socks up and step across the prayer room’s wall to wall carpet towards the pale stone *mihrap*. Abu continues his reflection, thinking about the advice given by the reckless Saudi. “The best opportunity a Muslim’s got in London is Mayor. If you wanna make any real cash you’re gonna have to move.” He handed him a six-hundred pound tip.

They leave their shoes at the door. A man looks up from a prayer book, smiles and nods. Abu’s last reflection before delving into prayer is that business is tricky in England. A six hundred pound tip isn’t so bad until you learn that your boss was given a golden cudgel. Financial free from the trap of skid row, this opportunity only makes them more English, something none of them could stand.

Upstairs, in the dining salon Tola, Rabi and Bahtiyar fill their plates and sit down. By the time Abu enters, Bahtiyar’s plate has only a few pits and a crumpled up napkin. He wears sunglasses, reclines and checks out his new scrolling mobile feed, tentative to join the conversation with only basic English. Rabi’s plate is full of bread and *borek*, little glass bowls of colorful spreads and white cheeses. Tola’s plate, is completely full of pastries, crusty bread and olives. His hand is unsteady. He’s got his fork and sloppily jabs at an olive. It flies off the table as Abu’s imposing figure sits down with a plate.

Rabi notices Tola and asks, “You alright? I see what you got, I hope for your sake you haven’t touched it. I’m going to take it the rest of the way. I can give you four hundred now. I owe you the rest until we get to Rakka.”

“Nah man, I need it wired right away.”

“Uppers.”

“No, not for a while,” he responded low key.

“How long exactly... How much?”

“Maybe a week? Alright I can pay you six now.”

“A week,” unconvinced.

“Yeah when did we leave London?” He picks up a piece of bread and takes a bite. He chews it a few times but his throat can't swallow. He sips water and continues, “That was like a week ago right?”

“No man, two days man.” Vehemently, “three days ago we shot White Cobra. It's Tuesday.”

“I know what day it is. Road time feels like double time. I'm burnt out from it man. I'll be fine.”

“I hope so, for your own sake,” he said grimly.

“Nah mate, I know what I'm about.”

“Good.”

Abu sits down with a full plate and immediately chows down. He looks up for a bit and says, “So have you heard from Ahmet? Are we driving today?”

“He's not our leader.” Rabi glanced at Abu, Tola and Bahtiyar, “No. He just said, *I'll show you everything you need to see.*”

“Yeah,” agreed Tola.

“Yani,” Bahtiyar says from behind dark sunglasses, “how go to Rakka?” he picks up from his slouch, “it's long way.” and takes off his sunglasses, “Friendly like Turkey?”

“We don't know.” Rabi resigns. “We could find any military. Naturally, we'll know ahead of time. That's why we're going to a city called Afyon to wait for an opportunity.”

Abu's phone buzzes. He checks it, raises an eyebrow and says, “*Yani*, if we have to wait to cross, might as well wait here, where we're already at. Right?”

Tola inquires, “What are we waiting for?”

“Caravans, information, clearance. Hayat's family there are in touch with all the big movements over there and as soon as they say it's safe, we're leaving at short notice.”

Bahtiyar puts his sunglasses back on. Abu holds his knuckle against his clenched lips and exhales swiftly through his flaring nostrils. He pulls it away and uses a bent pointer fist to declare, “This is İstanbul, one of the most important cities to Islam. I think we should stay a while. Besides,” he turns towards Rabi, “Ahmet isn't a leader, he's a teacher. And we have a lot to learn. Let's meet outside the Blue Mosque this afternoon.”

Chapter 21 Sail for Dar

The crew stood at attention and watched their captain on deck with the setting sun. The hatch opened and Simbat emerged, tall, bronze and bald. He checked ranks and greeted his crew slowly, man by man. “Mkash, Mbwana, Sri Ceylon, Berfinber, Krishna Varanasi, Sayeed, last night I had dreams that you would all rise to meet this challenge. Take heart! We fight to defend the innocent. As the way opens up to you, may you find a true purpose. At the moment, it's unclear what way, or when the path

will appear. You'll all fight at a moment's notice."

"Mates," he struck a casual tone, "How many successful journeys and trades? Haven't we shoved off the pirates? By teaming up, we've filled our coffers with gold and karma. For the good of our little boat and each other. Right? This time we fight for villagers and our lives. We're protecting the people of the Great Lakes of Africa."

The crew grunted and confirmed; frowned and nodded in agreement and a few more came up the deck ladder.

"Ali, your family in Baghdad, do they live comfortably? You're already a hero to them. And Sayeed, your son, studying in Istanbul to be a lawyer. Maybe someday he'll get us out of hot water. Mkash, Mbwana, this is your land, I'm happy to be here. Sri Ceylon, Berfinber, Krishna Varnasi, when we're going to bluff, we're all aware of the crossfire as a dragonfly hunts a crane in a swampy wetland.

This afternoon," he pauses, "I met with a friend in the Tanzanian government. There are no trade goods. We have a new purpose. Tanzania's problems are ours too. Bandits roam the villages around Lake Malawi. They've raided nearly a dozen villages and are getting bolder, preying on the unarmed farmers and stealing the last few grains from the bottom of their bowl. These jackals only attack small villages but we will find and attack their base. They are aggressive, drunk and kidnap women, but the irony is, they're most vulnerable to their own tactic. A sneak attack!"

"They're sitting ducks and we will find them sleeping in their fort!" butted in Mbwana.

"We'll catch them before their daily shit." The crew roared and Simbat guffawed, and continued.

"They may be a splinter cell from the Malawian military, or even a guerrilla group gone sour on the president. Soon they'll either dissolve and be reabsorbed or face execution. Tanzania's military is frozen by diplomacy and timing and they know it. These bandits think they're sitting pretty on Lake Malawi. They won't expect us. We have fewer men but better weapons and the righteousness of virtue. You are each offered eighteen-thousand dollars to fight these criminals. The group is still small and poorly armed and the time to strike is soon. Tomorrow I go to the mainland to gather information at dawn." He says quickly and with attitude, "You are all officially soldiers in Simbat's army. Meet here at oh-four-hundred hours tomorrow."

Overnight they took the short sail to the mainland. Before sun-up they'd rested and stretched on deck. Simbat was looking thoughtfully across the little bay at the huge fig tree on shore. As Simbat and Sayeed had stayed in the crow's nest for a long watch, it got out that there were slavers selling African girls to mujaheddin but at a later address, Simbat said, "I'm going ashore for intelligence and to those of you sailing to Dar es Salaam, I would expect the bandits to have crossed many lines, as we aim to do. The Crane will fly us to Iringa for a last refueling tomorrow. Ali!" he barked.

A Step, six feet under his greasy face kicked out fiercely and stepped front, "Yes Captain!"

"Prepare the chopper but don't fly until you are a mile offshore. Clean and test the guns but spend a minimum of ammunition."

"Captain, yes Captain."

"These bandits aren't in the city and there's little reason to make noise here while I look for

their scent. Sayeed, you and Maymun are with me. The rest of you have a day and a half to rest, prepare the helicopter and load the guns quietly. Get sharp and meet me here tomorrow night at sundown.”

Chapter 22 The Blue Mosque

Since receiving the message Abu's scrolling through photos of her legs with the seashore beyond, her head and bare shoulders giving cute kisses to family members, and with arms outstretched in the distant waves. -She doesn't know that I'm here. Should I surprise her? Should I send her a message?- He checks the map. -It's not far, maybe 2 hours by bus.- There's good public WiFi so he checks a bus schedule too. In the three hours since breakfast however, he hasn't responded to her message. He pulls it up again. *Hey Hun, I'm in Turkey, sun, beach and family dinners :s We'll go out again in a month when I get back to London. If you can wait ;)* He's feeling dizzy, his belly grumbles. He hasn't eaten much but he feels full. Love? Lust? It isn't appropriate to lust after a Muslim woman. He wants to marry her but, Duygu would never trust him if she knew where he was going. -She's some kind of progressive Muslim, a moderate. I can't tell her where why I'm really in Istanbul. That leaves only deception. Better to just turn off the phone. On the English talk shows she'd be the type to support the Muslim community's integration into English culture and I'd be the bearded extremist banging on about sharia and jihad. I'm a warrior.- he thinks, -I can't tell her why I'm in here. Should I lie about something? Or ignore her completely. If I lie, I can probably pole her even this evening, and we're supposed to have passed from the house of lies, lust and vice. Well, we're not technically in the House of Islam yet.-

He pushes the button on the side of his mobile and the screen flashes on. In the wide square between Hadjia Sophia and The Blue Mosque, he writes- *Hullo luv, on holiday in your beautiful country and doing research on refugees*- No, he deletes it. She knows he's not a scholar. *Hey have you heard of the new Khalifa Abu Bakr al Bagdadi?*- he chuckles to himself and deletes. Abu puts the impetus on her- *A friend invited me to Istanbul. If you want we can meet for a coffee*- He hits send and stretches out his legs into the busy square.

Sultan Ahmet Square is designed for tourism and Turkey's tourism pamphleture. Groups of Europeans and East Asians assemble around rows of benches while guides explain the history of the architecture and artifacts. They view spectacular obelisks in open air ancient ruins. Empty spaces are dotted with vendors. It's surrounded by domes and minarets and a heavy train that clunks through every few minutes. Two famous monuments, Hadjia Sophia and The Blue Mosque dominate the skyline and wash houses, marketplaces and other mosques in Ottoman style. Fountains, white fences and the aroma of street foods flank garden spaces with flowers, palm trees, baked good carts and information kiosks at the corners of the crowded square.

A buzz alerts Abu to his phone and the butterflies flutter but it's just Rabi, *-Hadji are you in Sultan Ahmet? Meet us the Blue Mosque Nefwrahat at 3-* He checks the time, 2:30 and decides to get up and check it out early. Near the mosque, he notices Muslims and non-Muslims separate and walk towards opposite sides of the heavy stone building. Guards stand at the entrances to the fountain square and Muslims enter there. Non-Muslim tour groups queue to an entrance along the back side. He passively allows himself to be corralled towards the tourist entrance and joins the queue ahead of a

group of ladies from at least three European countries. While they wait, he asks where they're from, what they're doing, and what they're up to tonight. They enter through the main door and a short, pretty Italian girl with dark curly hair gives him her number. She winks and turns to join the others sifting through a bin of silk scarves for tourists to cover up with.

Abu wanders around the disarmingly blue interior in a daze. He holds his face in a neutral position and watches others, after Fatih Mosque and two others he'd visited, this is the most dazzling. People inside are mostly foreigners, and they're acting like the tour guides have explained they should carry themselves inside of holy places. Some gawk and flit as they remove their shoes and wrap cloth around women's heads. Young girls sashay scarves into their locks, scarcely displaying blonde hair with traditional village muslin, beaded up with little bells and flimsy coins savoring the moment smiling deeply at their companions. Men and women walk close and whisper to each other, struggling to avoid physical contact.

Booming over loudspeakers, the rising tones of *Allahu Akbar Allahu Akbar* call to prayer, alert the security guards to clear the room of tourists. Abu exits with them and turns right back into the fountain square to find his crew standing by the octagonal water tank.

Bahtiyar and Tola are dressed in modern garb but Rabi approaches wearing a long, creme colored *thawb*, sandals over wool socks and a tight, white skullcap. His smile is peaceful but his tense eyes measure his mate's emotional responses with prejudice. He clasps Abu's hand and says "Brother, can you feel the excitement? With every step towards Rakka we go closer to Allah! Come let us take our ablution."

Bahtiyar is smiling deeply and laughing as he washes his feet and toes. His joy is lifting up the hearts of those around him. The water refreshes their blood through the thinnest membranes of skin behind their ears and on the feet. By humbling themselves through prayers, verses and prostrations, they feel they have near to absolute power. Allah is unknowable and infinite but through prayer they approach Him. Men can't touch perfection but prayer brings them as closer. Through faith, they become the subtraction from the Infinite, minus one still being greater than or equal to all other numbers, neither fear nor weakness. On sex and gender, business and money, behavior and dress, a consensus. Society is strong, complete with no where to progress, save paradise. Aggressive attitudes, if *halal*, are condoned. Mental problems are manageable through prayer and submission. In prayer, all are equal. Five times a day men connect at mosques and all of their uncertainties, dissimilarities and divergences are nullified.

The gang exit the mosque back into Sultan Ahmet Square and see tourists and stray animals, the world of grey emotion and abstract expression again threatening their sensibilities for a few more hours of earthly business until the next prayer time. Abu views this through the eyes that he's struggled his whole life to balance.

Bahtiyar's ability to flow and make friends impresses him. Through their language barriers, they accept him as a brother. Rabi's dominance displays, dawn on Abu that a man's disposition can be melted. The confidence from a conversation with one pretty girl is fleeting. Rabi's charisma boosts of leadership are often lost before it can materialize into power. Like sandcastles, they wash away, and they were never anything more than ornamental anyways. Meant to be looked at and nothing more. Past the beach there is an infinite ocean. Five daily prayers soothes a lifetime of hard eyes, and London gangster shit like melting block of ice; that is to say, mostly dependent on outside conditions. Abu wants to flow but finds himself frozen. He wants to live in a state with no artificial identities of Englishness, blackness or classiness. He's dreamed of doctors, shopkeepers and beggars treated with

the same respect and everyone agrees. Every question has an answer except for those posed by scholars and priests and people don't debate law or philosophy because Allah has definitively guided us.

Chapter 23 Walled Peninsula

Loneliness overwhelms Hayat in a foreign flat full of young women. She's on her phone absorbing a new news cycle that brings closure to the last phase of her life. She checks her social media and finds death threats from strangers and old friends. She ignores the reeling message counter and makes a slight presence on Rabi's page. She's looking at comments and scrolling through old photos, sparkling calligraphy, pictures of nature with Koranic surahs or demagogic condemnations of the west when an instant post catches her attention, a message pertaining to her destiny, *-Rabi alQatami says "The Greatest is all great things, love, truth and justice. What can compare to Subhan Allah if He encompasses all of these things?"*

Her neurons fire with the insane gravity of the moment. He's asking me. He's looking for his love. He's probably looking at his phone right now expecting a response. Her eyes roll around and she falls back on to her bed. -How beautiful life would be in Rakka with a husband like him. If I only talk to him and make him notice my feelings.- *Hayat Bournemeka responded: "And if you are in doubt about what we have sent down, produce a verse, and a witness other than Allah, if you should be truthful"*

Even here in Istanbul's walled-in peninsula, there's a danger she'll be recognized and apprehended if she goes out. She sits indoors as the night falls awash in the din of outside voices, motors and street noise. A loud siren blares, followed by the even louder voice of the Imam. Hayat's amazed to hear these verses outside her window as she sits inside and gets ready to pray. It's far more powerful than the cellphone alarms. There are many voices in canon, *Allahu akbar eschedule*. Multiple calls from the minarets of a half dozen mosques become so garbled and mixed as they're competing for the soundscape.

She rises and looks out her window and remembers that she's in the house of war on a busy street. People are moving about, having conversations. Rap music booms from cars. 'Don't they hear? Aren't they Muslims? Rabi might be rising to his knees right now.' She goes to the washroom, expecting to see the other women in the flat line up at the faucet. They're asleep on the couch, watching drama on the television, painting nails. She scoffs and goes to the bathroom to wash her hands, head and feet. She returns and prostrates herself at the edge of her red and gold rug and bows to Almighty. Praying alone as night falls falls in line with Hayat's recent history and last few months in Paris. Amidst the heavy haze of her own dogmatic judgments she finds a thread of sense in Allah.

She spent her nights on the phone with Zeyneb, Ayshe and other house wives desperate to build a community. They'd three-way call with ideas of *Iftar* feasts and prayer gatherings that would last into the month of Muharrim. One momentous, but late evening, the topic shifted to discrimination, gossip and righteous vengeance.

Hayat had married Amedy a year earlier with as much sweetness and she had. But Amedy'd got fired from the factory where he assembled farm equipment and was angry at the whole city. His trust

fund had gone to credit and his failure was very much her problem. When he came home drunk with a black eye on the seventh day of looking for a job she knew that he'd lost control.

The feeling of life spiraling out got worse. He couldn't explain where the black eye came from. Why, then, had she positioned her lap under his swollen head as he fell in a drunken blackout? He coughed and wheezed and she stroked his fuzzy cheeks, kissed his face, and stayed awake telling him "Good luck my love," as he bucked back to semi-sleep. She looked down into his eyes and he blinked, cringed and fell back asleep. She cuddled him and whispered sweet secrets, "Kill the jews, I love you Amedy, I love only you and we'll be together forever in heaven after you join jihad in Paris." His black eye healed slowly and made it much harder to find work or even a modicum of respect. He felt entitled to a good job and if he couldn't work, he'd drink.

One morning she made a phone call to the local Imam, "Abdul, my teacher. I fear for our fate. Paris is eating him up. He's lost his job and given up. He doesn't get out of bed until mid-afternoon. He drinks at night and comes home with bruises. I fear I've already lost him."

Aghast, Imam Abdul silently imparted, "He's using alcohol? Speak truthfully my child. Allah knows."

Hayat can't lie and feels righteous in her truth. "Yes my teacher, I've always only comforted him as his wife. But I can't go on like this. Amedy's life must be repayed."

"Yes, indeed. Please visit the mosque as soon as you are able to. Can you come tomorrow afternoon?"

"I will visit, if God wills."

Amedy woke up groggily, ate, searched online for a job, made rapid love to his wife, put on a shirt and tie and left to visit the unemployment office across from the old cathedral. Hayat took a shower, put on her *hijab* and took the metro to meet Imam Abdul at the Islamic Center.

When she rose from the Metro Line, he was speaking to the purveyor of a café, "Welcome my child, please sit. What would you like to drink? Coffee?"

"Thank you."

Abdul ordered two coffees and asked some personal questions, "Are you healthy?"

"Yes, *el hemdula ile*,"

"Good good, you look healthy. You know prayer lifts the face, and your face looks bright and lifted, perhaps from praying to Allah, "

"Of course my teacher, five times daily,"

"*el hemdula ile*, and not Botox. Would you like me to make any special prayers for you?"

Hayat closed her eyes and exhaled deeply. Her memory of the restaurant, next to the kitchen door, Abdul spoke rather quickly, "*Shaytan* can creep into the hearts of men easier than those of women. In many ways women are stronger, more resilient to the influence of djinn. Allah made men's hearts for bravery and women's for love. You love Amedy loyally but if he cannot provide for his family by Allah's will, than he must fight for it."

A knock at the door preceded a woman with a bowed head and a tray carrying 2 cups of coffee.

She set them down and backed out of the room. Abdul noisily stirred sugar into his coffee said, “The prayers of a man who drank alcohol are cloudy until he repents for his sin, and that can take no less than a month. For forty days the alcohol flows through the body and pollutes the soul. Show Amedy these surahs,” he took a gold marker and wrote on black paper, **2:219**, **4:43** and **5:90**, “and if he fails to repent and follow the rule of Allah, return to me. You are a true and good wife yet we are all Allah’s slaves and our lives are in service to the House of Islam. These sins of alcoholism are against you and Islam.”

Chapter 24 Bust

“See that tram?” Tola chirps and points as it's coming to a stop up a block, “let’s get on it.”

Bahtiyar nods excitedly.

“That tram leads to the House of War,” declares Rabi. “I'm going to the house of Islam,” he gestures, back to the hotel.

“Oh come on old boy. You’ll have plenty time to soliloquize on all that when we get to the State. When are you ever gonna be in İstanbul again? We’re not going out for *ihım*, we’re in Turkey, let’s see how the Turks do Islam.”

Rabi glares for a second than blinks, smiles and snorts. “You go ahead on,” with a stiff upper lip, “I’ll see you later,” and turns away without allowing them a chance to respond.

In mimicry, Tola straightens his back and adds tension to his face, “You boys go ahead-why not? I'm just gonna have a smut wank back in the rooms.” Tola, Abu and Bahtiyar saunter off laughing to board the next tram. It shuts its doors and slides around the seashore and over a bridge. They pass some more splendid Ottoman buildings before stopping at a strip of grass and trees by a cement harbor spotted with tour ships.

They walk quickly by the beggars and sellers, moving swiftly with the street animals, and pedestrians through constricted spaces. People holler and rush across traffic. Abu, Tola and Bahtiyar just watch and manage their way to the funicular railway that climbs the step hill towards Taksim, the European center of İstanbul, following signs up the escalators into Gezi Park. It's only after they've emerged to the small green space and look among the masses that they start talking. There's police everywhere.

“It's like the Arab Spring.”

“When was that 2012?” queries Tola.

“2011.”

“And now it's full of police

“And what over?” It’s such a nice little space, it’d be a shame to see it all beaten up and blood soaked.” replies Tola.

“Is that how you imagined it before you got here? The hillside is all demolished. There are

puddles and bags of acrid yellow piss.

“Do you think much for Erdogan?”

“Not really. I’ve got nothing for or against him or any other Turk. Turkish government is neither here nor there.”

A few young boys walk by vigorously huffing on clear bags of formless yellow inhalants.

“Heh we should follow them lot,” suggests Tola.

They do. A few threatening glances are traded but nobody cares and before long they find themselves walking down a cosmopolitan avenue lined with designer clothing stores, divers street musicians and embassies. At the end of this long avenue is a big cobble stone tower in a wide square on the edge of a hill overlooking the Golden Horn.

They fit in with a global group of people playing guitar and dancing in the street. Bahtiyar, with his jovial, bad attitude, attracts the drunks. Another guy who's about a meter-and-a-half tall pogo into the air, sometimes like playing guitar and singing loudly and passionately with a bottle of Jack Daniels. Bahtiyar smiles and also sings songs by heart. Pretty soon they're drinking and jumping in lockstep like old friends at last call.

Abu is leant back sidling widely and staring at the high buildings and cloudy sky. He notices the ladies in the square. “Oh my goodness.” It’s like an outdoor club with no doorman. Across the way, a scruffy American follows the smile of the girl he's talking to across a cobblestone court. They all go towards the center. “Might be in luck,” as the same European girls he met outside the Blue Mosque noisily greet them. They all start up a conversation real friendly and inclusive by widening the arms, bowing graciously and nodding in agreement about their splendid atmosphere.

“These Turks’ve made some brilliant architecture,” starts Abu.

“What's that?” the American boy tilts his head and flops his long hair towards the imposing tower. “Galata Tower here? Built by Italians,” snide. “In fact all of this that-a-way down from Istiklal Street right?- everything along Istiklal street was either built by Armenians, Italians or Greeks.”

“Well I’ll be damned Hadji. But the Ottomans built the Blue Mosque right?”

“Nah man that was hamdi bey. Ya know their best architect was an Armenian who converted just so he could live and work. They killed his family.”

“Well, yeah it’s was an empire, right? They did Imperial shit.”

“Sure,” the American rolled his eyes sarcastically, “yea, sure, and if your peanuts had worms in them you could still feed an army.”

“What the fuck are you on about! Why don't you lay down.” Tola leans into a hard push and knocks the long haired American to the ground. Tola’s tone changes to jokes, “Show some fucking respect to your hosts.” Abu does absolutely nothing and shows no expression.

Bahtiyar, already drunk, notices the debacle and comes over aggressively shouting Slavic curses at the Americans. “Problem?” he says to Tola?

Tola looks and says, “Bahti’s got spirit eh?” than back at Tola. The American scampers away. Another American slides into his place, “Hey, nice push man,” to Tola. “That punk’s no good. I never get on with other Americans. You two English?”

“No we’re not fucking English, we’re Islamish. Where you from? Doesn't matter, fuck your country.”

They stand like eastern kings around the cobblestone tower with night falling. Souvenir shops, kiosks and vendors take in their wares and shutter their stores. It's time for their proprietors to stop by the pellet gun ranges and sex basements that are just opening for business. Waves of euphoria spiral out and nudge them into conversations with strange, new people.

A tough, sexy woman, with bleached hair. She’s shorter than him with a grave voice and a curvy body, bulging with cleavage. She makes fast, charged moves towards Bahtiyar and they’re drinking and kissing. Quite a few others are cheering. She’s keen on his punky attitude and winks to leave together. He’s got the bottle in one hand and the other around her waist as she walks him away.

“Hey,” Abu slyly slips 20 pounds into his pocket, “hey, don't fall down. And come back here. Don't get lost!” Abu grins, swipes the bottle and tilts back a bit of whiskey. Bahtiyar grins and swipes it back. She grabs his hand and leads him out.

The American guy introduces himself and starts up a conversation in a sing-song slang, “You guys are funny but I just met a guy who didn’t sound so funny. A friend of a friend, the guy’s come from Miami, name of Stevens. He said he was the first journo to go with the soldiers into Gadhaffi’s Palace with the Americans back in eleven. Said he'd done news all over the Arab spring. He’s in the hotel room right now I reckon. But I wouldn't wanna be on the same bus as him on my way to Aleppo, that's for sure. They hacking everybody’s heads off over there. Said in twelve, when the elder leaders were negotiating he was snooping around in Gadhaffi's personnel reports from Gadaffi’s secret bunker. I mean the NSA is already leaking this stuff on world leaders, terrorists, weapons and sensitive deals. Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and the world bank. Now Libyan Gadaffists ties to ISIS and the documents he could find and record in ten minutes.” He's swaying back and forth, and takes a long drink from his beer can. Most of his audience has lost interest.

“Wow man, cool story,” says Tola. People aren’t so interested. No-one really wants to give their 2 pence about Gadaffi. People are eager to change the conversation topic.

The American segues effortlessly, “So what’s it like being an Islamist?”

“Oh easy man,” says Abu ironically. “You just pray and Allah answers all your questions. British life is tiring. Going to Uni takes a long time. But terrorist bomber? Piece of fuckin cake.”

Bahtiyar’s drunk too much whiskey and walks with. She puts hers in his pocket and feels his swelling shaft. They speak sexy words to each other. She puts a little pill on his tongue and he’s hers for the night. She brings him into her nearby flat. It's small and dark, but warm. She lights a candle and undresses immediately. He does the same and they get into bed. Her breasts are pale and bulbous with blue veins. The dark nipples puff out and the rest of her body is plump too. Bahtiyar’s smiles, laughs and complies with her every suggestion. Her ass is in his face, her titties swing over his skinny, moon pale chest.

After a few minutes of foreplay, He lays on his back and focuses on her swinging breasts. He grins as he feels the pleasure start to build to a few pumps and a druggy climax. As soon as she sees his face contort she slides off him and tugs the last few drops out, then goes to open the window. A breeze blows through.

He lays and she cools down. She grabs his clothes and digs the money out of the pockets. After

throwing the clothes on the bed she comes with her mobile device and prods him to connect on social media.

He accidentally links to his Jihadi profile. She takes one look at the the black flag and spits at him. She puts on her clothes and throws Bahtiyar his. “Terrorist. Fuck off kid!” She manages to get his pants around his ankles while he's still absorbed in her phone. He stands up and slaps her face.

“Bitch, whore, fuck your family!”

Bahtiyar, out the door with empty pockets and balls, heads back towards the square with the grin he would consequentially wear for the next three days.

Chapter 25 Rise to Kneel

The rowboat was approaching continental Africa. Over his shoulder, an ubiquitous arrow of light shot past the horizon and forced Simbat to squint. He lowered his hand and looked back at the sunny side of Sayeed, slicing mangoes and trying to slip them into a pouch before Maymun could snatch them away.

“Africa yani, what’s to say ya? Africa.” A rhythm was roiling. The oar strokes, the sea birds, Maymun’s funny chatter were starting to form an accompaniment in Simbat and Sayeed’s ears that was just begging for a song. Sayeed sang boldly,

“Oh Africa we’ll strike your shores, assail the bandits and steal their whores. They sleep with their backs against the wall, passed out drinking that alcohol”

Simbat took his cue, slowing down the tempo, “Ey Africa open wide, we’ll split your beaches and crash inside.

Don’t get us wrong we love you dear, and towards your shores we're gonna steer.”

“Ey Bandits we’ll take them back, hold em too tight and get a smack.

Not much else for us to say. No more warnings, on our way!”

“Ey Africa, la la la,” they played it for laughs until entering the estuary. Many more ships with nets full of fish were passing through the harbor. A catamaran was trolling out slowly.

They moored their little dinghy in a marina on the South shore. A longshoreman approached smiling saying, “*Habare Yako*. How long you gonna be here man?”

"Until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Ok let’s take it out of the water and put it up on blocks.”

“Sure man.” Sayeed grabbed the caged monkey, Simbat got the bundle and the shoreman stepped into the water to hoist the light craft from the stern. Simbat grabbed the bow, and they brought

it ashore to a metal rack.

“It’s three-thousand shillings a day.”

Sayeed levered Maymun’s cage up above his shoulder with a stick. The left-hand path led to the city and the right, into the park.

“I prescribe a minute for Maymun to get accustomed to the mainland.” He untied the knot that kept the cage closed. Maymun chirped and opened the door after the latch was opened. Sayeed handed a piece of fruit to Simbat and then to Maymun who snatched the rest of the fruit and scrambled up a tree. The sun was rising and so were the homeless denizens from park benches.

“These bandits are absolutely scum,” remarked Simbat, “we’re among kings now so let’s engage our right to parlay.”

Against a tree, a youth in a shabby robe was past out next to a tree with a with a brown bottle a short distance away. Without concern for his prosperity, Sayeed opened up the bag of mangoes and tucked a slice into the cloth of his tunic. He whistled and the monkey came scrambling down a tree. The sleeping man’s shoulder and arm were wrapped tightly. The little monkey jumped on his belly and reached it’s paw into the sleeping man’s half-tunic to find a small, clear glass bottle. He spilt congealed liquor. The rising sun stirred him.

He opened his eyes slowly to the monkey on his chest, without acknowledging the tall Arabs and scowled. A moment later he jumped up rather quickly, coughed a mighty, throat clearing cough and growled, “So what? Who’s that peeking in by bottle? Sailing in on a fruitbowl.” He sat up and began to unwrap his shoulder wound, than scowled again. “Why I ought to,” and threw the bottle hard.

It whirred past Simbat’s right ear and fell in the dirt behind with a chink. Keeping calm and glancing towards other bottle in the dirt, Simbat noticed that he didn’t speak smooth and fast Swahili. His native language was probably some Bantu tongue spoken inland.

“My good sir, pardon our intrusion.” He knelt. “We’re only here to ask a question and we’ll be on our way. If you can answer, we’ll gladly provide you with another bottle of booze,” said Sayeed cordially.

One of the drunk’s eyes came to attention, “Well, whadda ya wanna know? And I guess I’ll take that bottle first.”

“Why have you fallen on hard times? Is your arm broken?” Slumped against a tree now, he bit his lip and looked toward the sea.

“They trampled it when they took her.”

Sayeed saw the dread in his eye. Had he known of love and loss, he might not have asked but when he saw the danger and lack of caution, he saw what had already happened and what was continuing.

“Hey man, I’m sorry for your pain. I feel for you,” comforted Simbat, “What’s your name? Maybe we can help.”

“I am Ignatio and my village was attacked by bandits.”

“Bandits eh? Well I, Simbat, have been called a pirate, and I’ve certainly acted like one before, but I’ll slay anyone who raids a peaceful village to rape and murder. Might we find a drink to share, but only after we first share our vengeance.

“And I say let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.” he bowed. “I am Sayeed. Please, join us for breakfast.

Ignatio was impressed by wits. “Alright, I will go. Where’s that bottle?”

“First, breakfast, then I think we should go wash in the stream, then we'll get some coffee.”

Minutes after dawn. Simbat and Sayeed walked in a yeasty congregation from the park to slum the city for coins, a few tasty morsels and more bottles to drink back into the park again. Simbat stopped at a payphone, popped in a coin and dialed. It answered *OG Mbito* “Good morning, it's Simbat. *Hello Simbat. How are you? We're good, brief is belayed. If you have the will we have the way. We indeed have the will. Allah protect you.*

Chapter 26 In Scope

Rabi rises to his knees, palms pressed against belly. He focuses on the small leather case on the desk and thinks, Allah has given me another chance to repent, and to reconstruct a Caliphate between the rivers and I follow Him. His mission is recruit and transport but once he arrives, it will be extort and command. Against these locals there's no trust. They didn't see their tyrants statue topple. There's only short trust from experience and guiding him. With compulsive regularity he checks his status. He thinks about some other ways to describe his mission; the carrot beats the stick, by any subtle means necessary, stay alive, push in the pawns, throw up the board. Contingencies like these are less favorable. His plan will skirt Abu and Tola into the Caliphate like a well cast net. Every present response is approved and sent from a future he's already waiting in. Working with old friends had been an honor to keep. The roaming rights and chain of command include heaven. Rabi sees his sword to the sky. He looks forward as a dim glow of friendship fades behind him, seized by the intuition that Abu and Tola are conspiring steal away anyways.

As the trio return from their livacious night out, Abu and Tola listen to the story of Bahtiyar's first lay, complete with thrusting gestures, loud grunts and lewd exclamations. They enter the Reşadiye Hotel with no small degree of rabble, aping fanfare past the marble soldier at the front desk and plodding heavily into the elevator.

Dim streetlight casts oblong shadows through the open window. Rabi squints and tips his head into a pinprick gaze at an empty parking space. He brings his fingertips together and considers that Abu's company brings a kind of beast rage to awe by his physique and boxing. He'd be a fucking celebrity too. As for Tola, maybe he could be explosive in battle but those fucking tattoos will be revealed soon enough and after that, no one will take him seriously.

He unzips the case. There is an unlabeled medical vial, half-full of orange serum, a syringe with a depressed plunger, a screw-on hypodermic needle and an eyedropper. The four items are secured with elastic band.

In addition to this drug, Rabi received an array of social media hacks, cameras and mini-microphones along with the words, Allah has created powerful tools but this one has a unique history in modern jihad. It was found in the jungles of Colombia and has been used by true demons, American interrogators to put the mujaheddin into an altered state, to extract secrets. It works as a truth serum, allowing even mind control. It arrests brain activity in the frontal cortex allowing the user to speak, and move as normal, but given any rationale whatsoever, the user is immediately open to any suggestion, even suicide. If he isn't told to drink water, he'll simply go thirsty.

Rabi snaps the case shut when he hears laughter and footsteps thudding down the hallway. The door shoves open. He zips it up and turns on the TV. Bahtiyar comes in and tries to maintain sober composure. "Wahsalaamun Ealaekoom Rabi Afendi."

Tola and Abu are less drunk but act drunker.

"Aleikum asalam"

"Hey Jack, I heard a *zzziiiiip* . We weren't interrupting anything, were we? Watching TV eh?" he grins and winks. On the television are well dressed blondes with black holes of eyeliner on disinterested faces and curvaceous bodies dancing without moving around a middle-aged man with a brushed beard and a tiny rabbit. He nods approvingly.

"Yeah having a wank were ya?" Tola rings in.

Rabi flatly shake his head, "Nah son, it's *you* mates who are wankered."

Abu bumps in and sits down on the bed. "Woah boy, is that a revolver in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" On the TV, the women sit and the man speaks as Arabic graphics fly at the screen.

"Ah, *Türkçe biliyon mu? Adnan Hoca tanıdın mı?*" said Bahtiyar looking in his eyes and pointing from the TV.

Rabi tuts his tongue and says. "It's a good time to split up."

"Oh baby give us another chance!" Jests Tola.

"Nah listen mates, between here and Rakka three men from England, you might as well put a neon sign in the top of my car. The bint's worthless in a Turkish prison. I'll wire you the money tomorrow if this goes right. But, you're gonna go oversea and for these reasons. One, your passports have no marks against Turkey or Cyprus and you'll travel smoothly. Two you'll get fucked with in southern Turkey by all sorts for being black, having tattoos or being a English. You'll be safer island hopping. And three, you're gonna be on beautiful Mediterranean beaches. Take your time in Cyprus or Latakia. Enjoy what's left of your anonymity for a week. "

"Oh you were serious? Two less scalawags in the car? That's the idea eh?" jabs Tola.

"Don't forget mate, this is a ground mission. And that's exactly where you'll be if you don't pay me," says Abu.

"You can trust my networks. You'll make it there and you'll have 5000 pounds when you get there. These two passengers are a priority right now and you two ain't. I've I've got to whiz," says Rabi and walks them out.

Bahtiyar has grabbed the TV remote from the drawer. A short while later Rabi emerges and offers Bahtiyar water, who drinks the whole glass and falls asleep.

Chapter 27 Greenbird Main Man

The teapot whistles as a young toe-headed boy sprints through his front door. It's got dark and he's back from wooden sword games down by the river, tired and thirsty. Marbles and jacks fill his pockets. He goes to the kitchen and turns down the kettle, bringing a high pressure jet of steam down to a noiseless puff. His father is out and his mother's got milk. Her voluptuous breasts are heaving as she sits on the couch watching TV. Bahtiyar crawls up her shirt and nuzzles in to the good stuff. The power.

He's between two watermelon breasts. They're so sweet and milky cocoa cream. They're the size of timpanis. He spreads his arms and slides across the smooth skin, taught as a drum, letting rub against every pore on his chest, tickling his nipples and bumping his chin. He's searching for her nipple but it's receding. He thinks he's found the source but a man's face pops out from the smooth skin. The face is the photograph on the mantle. The image freezes as a young man and speaks. "My son," gasps the face. "I love you. God is our protector." He soon grows a beard and ages into oblivion.

The healthy skin cracks and Bahtiyar feels the pull of gravity against a lifeless riverbed scattered with dry bones. He's stranded and still so thirsty. He's given up on milk and searches the wide valley for a trickle of water but there isn't a drop to be found. He feels alone, exposed and thirsty. As a miracle, a trickle of water begins to flow a short distance ahead of the approaching green figure of a cloaked man. Small animals crawl out of holes to perch on rapidly growing vines. Flowers and all shades of lush greenery come to life around the Green Man.

The small trickle widens into a river of crystal clear water which Bahtiyar rushes to and drops to his knees. He bends and takes deep draughts from the stream. "I guard this valley," the green man addresses him formally. Bahtiyar, still on his knees, looks up to hear, "but it isn't safe. You must escape. Run! Don't look back. There is no fight, only fear." The Green Saint's gaze imparts danger.

With the boom of his voice, a viscous torrent gushes from upstream, changing the valley from lush green to sticky red.

Bahtiyar rises to his feet and runs down the valley. He's about to fly when he feels the flood behind him. His feet stick. Viscous fluid laps up his back sticking. The blood dredges soil. He looks back and his spinal cord crystallizes into salt. He feels its crunch first from deep within his bowels and then up his esophagus. By the time the acrid drought hits the back of his mouth, he is paralyzed. He watches as the bloody flood waters, necrid with arms, heads, and all sorts of gushing parts flow past his apostatized form. Paralyzed in fear and rapidly eroding the fascination of his spirit, he watches his body forfeit.

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High up, at the level of domes and minarets, tree tops and sulfurous chimney exhaust, green parrots squack and flit about. They avoid buildings entirely. They are another inconspicuous group of immigrants in Istanbul. Few notice their beautiful green plumage because they choose to populate the highest branches of the green spaces along the Bosphorous Strait. Most people don't notice and nesceintly pass under through the cemeteries, mosque greens and parks of Istanbul. However shy, they

are however, quite social and expressive among birds of a feather. They nest high in Linden trees and call shrill and inquisitively. They're quite difficult to photograph but their zig-zag flight is easy to recognize.

Some popular theories about their origin are, a petshop's accidental release, an Ottoman Sultan's import from India, or a flight from zoos in Falluja after the 2003 US-Iraq bombing.

They have been identified as belonging to the genus *Psittacula*, native to Asia with small eyes, down-sloping orange beaks and rings of black feathers around their necks. Their plumage is green and quite smooth with long tail feathers. They are Turkey's only wild, green bird. Despite their feral nature and modest population, they have spread across a very small but heavily populated region in the heart of Istanbul, between two of the densest land developments in the world and open seas to the north and south. Observed birds are rarely eating but one would assume their active lifestyle requires a lot of food.

Prayer is better than sleep, is called softly in the still moments before dawn. Green jungle birds are very high energy and have managed to adapt to Istanbul's four seasons of urban life. Bahtiyar's body bends and sits on the bed upright. Deep red eyes in his head turn to the window where the hushed tones of the pre-dawn *azan* command him.

His vocal chords pinch out "Allahu Akbar," and his spine snaps and crackles as it activates his core. Feet swung over the edge expect to touch the ground but hang vacantly off the tall, white hotel bed.

Prayer is better than sleep

Towards the window, the source of the commands, his eyes are struggling to focus on two small greenish blurs of color outside. They appear to be reciting the verses and dancing along the windowsill like puppets in a shadow theater. His organs outgas as he goes to the sink to wash. Strychnine and methane seep out of his mouth. The pancreas activate from the bends at Bahtiyar's waist and knees and he drops to his knees. The cold, low-pressure air balances the blood pressure in his extremities as the drug permeates his mind and muscles. His head aches, bumps and implodes to a singularity. The eyes manage to focus and the mind is fascinated by two feral parakeets nuzzling and preening each other outside.

Rabi'd intended to get up first but slept through first call that woke Bahtiyar. As he opens his eyes and sees the boy sitting on the edge of his bed, looking through the gap in the curtains he notices the two green creatures fly off. -Djinn- he thinks and also recites "Allahu Akbar". Bahtiyar is in last night's clothes. The room is silent and dark. What strikes Rabi as a possible error in judgment is played off as a lazy morning. He yawns.

Rabi uses Arabic to address Bahtiyar and bids him good morning. He takes a set prayer beads from the night table and hands them to him. "Recite Bismillah, ninety-nine times," he orders.

"OK" The recitation is begun and he notices the red, sunken eyes recoil into the skull. His hair is greasy and spiky and he smells like brimstone and honey. Rabi goes to the toilet and looks at himself in the mirror while urinating. He beard no longer has the crisp edges and the hair above his ears is starting to curl. Two opposing feelings of guilt and pleasure rise behind each shoulder whispering congratulations and condemnations, but above all determination. "I am a slave of Allah," he cracks his neck left and right.

Bahtiyar's reciting "Bismillah al rahman al rahim", when Rabi emerges with a glass of water he watches the boy and says, "That's ninety nine. Now, drink until I say stop."

Bahtiyar takes the glass and starts to gulp it.

"Stop."

He stops.

"Tell me about Maocha camp?" as Rabi speaks he notices Bahtiyar's eyes, facial muscles and shoulders, "What's the name of the commander?"

"Abdullah al Qasami."

"What's his position? Where's he from?"

"Mujhadeen from Saudi Arabia."

"What's he done in the Balkans?"

"He fought Serbians and hid in Albania. He brought weapons, fighters and money."

"Where in Albania?"

"I don't know, somewhere on the coast. But he left Albania and went to Bosnia."

"What happened?"

"He was exiled by the government. He he had an agreement at the port but it was canceled."

"How many people live in his camp?"

"In Bosnia? More than 50"

"How many wives and children does he have?"

"Four wives, and lots of children. At least a dozen."

"Where is he going?" First Rakka, than Siirte."

"In Turkey or Libya?"

"..."

"Where is he going after that?"

"Mali."

"Why?"

"..."

"Bahtiyar, pour this water on your head."

He lifts it over his head and drops the entire glass upside-down on his head.

"You and I are leaving Istanbul today but first, answer my question. Did Abdullah al Qatami swear you to secrecy?"

Bahtiyar gives a little laugh with a slight grimace and nods his head "Yeah, he did. How do you know his name?"

"He's my old friend."

“Come to the Mescit.”

“Ok.”

Chapter 28 Kimbillo Coffee

Tippu- The bus rumbled over the uneven road. *Tippu Tippu Tippu* the name clunk and clashed around Simbat’s mind as the bus kicked up dust. He was the history that Arab traders in Africa rued. This Dar gangster must be trying to invoke the noteriety of Tippu Tip.

Tippu Tip, born in 1840 Hamad bin Mohammed bin Jumah bin Rajab bin Mohammed bin Said al Mrajabi was a slaver who worked for King Leopold II. He gouged into the dark continent in betrayal of Islamic values in search of ivory and people. Through his ruthless family business, a linked network of slave prisons through Central Africa. Ostensibly, Tippu Tip owed allegiance to the Sultan of Zanzibar, but in reality he acted as an independent ruler with control over much of the eastern Congo. He was loyal to the sultan of Zanzibar. His name was onomonopiac with rapid gunfire.

Simbat kept his left eye squinted against the sun, claring in the bottom half of the open window. He too sailed for profit in Africa. On the city bus, his right eye was wide, aware and filling with dust and tears. Maymun was chattering happily in his cage on Sayeed’s lap. They’d watched the waves, and the greenery for nearly an hour. The coffee roaster was past the sandy beaches. They crossed four creeks, slums, resorts and slums again, and again still past the suburban mansions. The new roaster of coffee had to be watched in the neighborhood. Simbat doubted they were connected with the bandits but he’d heard some stolen beans were being sold so he’s looking for information about their suppliers.

When the bus finally stopped on the side of the highway and the driver announced their stop, to stretch and breathe was a relief when they followed their noses through a green suburb.

Sayeed tried to buck up Ignatio, “You know, once upon a time in Mexico, in a city near the American border, a young hotel manager named Ignatio, Nacho for short, had four hungry American guests arrive late at night, after the kitchen was closed. The young hotelier went into the kitchen, opened the fridge and made a meal with whatever he found in there. He deep friend some tortillas, cut up some peppers and melted some cheese over it all, and that thing, my friend was the first nacho chip.”

Ignatio kept his eyes on the dirt and dragged his feat a few steps behind as the sharp, sprouty smell of new beans first hitting the fire graced their nostrils. Ignatio mused, “oh, I could die happily.” They saw colorful paint on an old, wooden house. Orange, red and green blinds let the curtains blow. The front door was a beaded drape rustling lightly in the wind. The earthy aroma of roasting coffee brightened Ignatio and soothed his sleepless night.

With a rattle, the pushed through the bead-cord door and into an eclectically decorated cafe. It was empty but a haughty woman stepped out of the kitchen immediately. She was holding a knife and said, “Welcome, sit down anywhere. I’ll be right with you,” and went back to the kitchen. Their wooden table they chose was small and sturdy. They asked for breakfast and sat quietly until she brought out fruit and pastries. While eating, the men talked little of topics and much of food. Over coffee Simbat

and Sayeed began to question Ignatio about the details of the attack.

“Please, tell us your story sir.” Sayeed requested. “Who were these bandits?”

“Ach,” he mimed to spit at the empty plates. “Like those American gangs who ride motorcycles?” he growled. “They were covered in strange jewelry, bullets and spikes. They drove vehicles right through our village center like a stampede.”

“How many vehicles?”

He sneered. “Five. And they were fat and drunk. They broke all of our homes.” He slammed his hand on the table and the coffee cups jumped and splashed.

The waitress shouted quickly from the kitchen, “Don’t come round here looking for trouble.”

“Why did you leave? Why not stay and rebuild?”

“I joined a walking party to the city to buy food and medicine, but Feride and I were travelers from childhood. We wanted the benefits of village life for our first child.”

“Here's your bill.”

Simbat, not wanting to leverage what he suspected Ignatio was capable of, first complimented the coffee, then interjected in his defense. “My friend's angry at someone else.” Ignatio seemed a loose canon. Simbat needed to keep him aimed in the right direction. “I beg your forgiveness,” Simbat took out his wallet and stood up to leave.

Instead of standing up with them, Ignatio sobbed and buried his head in his hands. “Our friend is really in a bad way. His wife was kidnapped.” He looked down at him. “Hey, come on, let's go get them.”

Ignatio looked up and pleaded, “We farm and herd animals in the mountains. We were poor. What devils would take what little we have? I was going to start a family. But when they came, I ran. I hid and Fariha was taken. It's me.” Ignatio paused, everyone expected him to bawl uncontrollably, but he didn’t. He just squinted, changed his tone and said, “But you! You’re here with gold jewelry and you want to help me? A poor drunk. Why?” he looked in the Arab's eyes with suspicion. “How can two foreigners hope to harry bandits anyway?” suspiciously.

“And we're fighting too. We want gangsters to see justice, slaves to see freedom and our partners and us to find lots of money. There's a rich network trying to stop us too.”

The waitress said, “Many gangsters and warlords come through Dar at this time of year and there aren’t enough police to stand up to them. The black market uses this city as a hub and there might be hundreds of slave girls here now. Girls always pass through Dar.” She put down the knife. “My name is Kimbilio and I know people who work to help women. You can go to a fundraiser this evening and maybe find help.”

Kimbilio’d often visited the veiled fortune teller of Stone Town and if she judges, she judges wisely but she wasn’t the only one listening to Ignatio's story. Another man had secretly followed these men from the little harbor and was dropped below the eaves. While Ignatio said, “If I die to save her, I die happily,” the spy ran off.

“On the surface, Dar es Salaam’s prostitutes seem outspoken and independent, and indeed some are free workers. Dar is a trade hub of East Africa. Dar has more women working in brothels, than

driving taxis.”

Simbat wiped the sweat from his brow.

Worse still, there are slave dungeons where women from the countryside are repeatedly raped and groomed for prostitution. These girls are usually younger than thirteen and poor. They are sold into slavery by their own families. Thousands of girls each year. And the average price paid to the families for their young girls?” She paused for effect and looked around inviting guesses. No one spoke. “fifty dollars.”

The visitors exhaled in disgust.

“That's right, and on that fifty dollars, a village family can eat for a year. So would you have enough money to feed your other children?”

Simbat's English was failing him. He felt out of place in this room full of white and blue-haired Europeans feeling too guilty to fan their blushing faces. They were all on vacation, between safari and their husband's diamond mine. Simbat wasn't sure why all the white people gasped and shook their heads. He turned to Sayeed and whispered, “50\$ for a girl, what the fuck? Is this England?”

Sayeed whispered, “Shut the fuck up.”

The woman squinted an eye towards Simbat, “It is the business of evil men to haggle over the price of human lives,” The uncrossed her arms and continued, “the Godgiven namesake we're blessed with. What number of Shilling, Dinar, or Dollar can pay? How many pounds for a nine year old girl in Mozambique, in the prime of her childhood, exploring, ready to honor her mother and father and learn from the world, only to be ripped out of her home, subject to rape, beatings and blackmail, unable to seek help, in a foreign land far from her family. Dar is often the first stop before they're sent to Asia or America.

We use local and international law to bring these men to justice in the cities and villages in which they operate. Your money can return these girls to childhood. You can give aid to those at risk and offer social services in Dar es Salaam to find and free these enslaved women. Your assistance will give so many women a second chance and keep many others from meeting the auction block.”

The applause was slow and steady until people started standing and opening their checkbooks. 2 fifty pound notes flew from Simbat's pockets and he approached the speaker.

“Your speech was intelligent and detailed Madam...,”

“Evginia”

“Evginia. I'm at your service to solve this problem. Your speech was detailed, but you didn't mention the slavers. Can you give me a lead so I can destroy their nest?”

She raised her hand and took Simbat's shoulder squeezing it and saying, “They're everywhere, driving the buses, running the government, in our midst. We don't want threatening men in the women's shelter,” she replied.

“I do not threaten your shelter but my path will cross the bandits on their worst day.”

She looked deep into his eyes and saw no lie, “Make no mistake, many bodies are found in the mornings by the street sweepers.”

“Perhaps carrion provide an ample meal for the vultures, but we come as lions that eat first.”

"I'm afraid I cannot be of much help to you. I don't know the current news and I doubt you'll find anything without one of the bandits help. It would take fewer than enough hot coals against his feet to make him sing like a kookaburra."

Simbat interrupted his own laughter, "How many women have you saved from these kinds of dungeons?"

"Enough to know that most pimps would rather see their girls dead than free." She widened her eyes and went away.

Night was falling. The trail was as cold as leftovers in the creek. Outside, they followed their nose and ate some fried turkey not far from the women's shelter. They sat down at a low table, gnawing on a wing and watching the philanthropists' taxis pass.

Behind them, the last volunteer was walking home when she noticed the loud Arabs speaking angrily. She reminded herself that Arabic often sounded like that. These were the men who told a joke when Kimbillo said a teenaged girl's life costs 50 American dollars. As she passed he smelled like terpetine and blew raspberrys at his friend like a boy who'd just stolen a piece of cake. She reversed and stomped over keen saying, "Your people stole from our country and enslaved us for years. Tanzania's taken itself back. We've been a black nation for more than twenty years. We don't need Arab heroes or English guns or anything. We are black Africans and you should act with respect in our country."

"You're right," he said. "And we are violent men, but I promise that we respect the freedom of all women. We are bounty hunters, and if there are slave girls with our bounties, they'll go home."

"Ah, well now your motive is clear. Go here," she quickly wrote a street name and walked away. Simbat threw down some money, Sayeed stole the cutlery and they moved on towards the location.

On the crowded street, the posed as grifters. Maymun placed a napkin over his furry lap, picked up the fork and, with impeccable table manners, ate rice. A crowd gathered but Simbat noticed a small phalanx forming at one end of the street and after flipping a few coins, the spectators sensing danger, walked off.

"Maymun, cage," Sayeed commanded. The monkey jumped up onto his back. Sayeed took the cage and opened the door. The little monkey slapped his master with his tail as he jumped in and fixed his own door latch.

The goons, vying to lead, outstepped each other. They got nearer and nearer until all three were right up in Simbat's face. He stood eye to eye to eye to eye. When one spoke, "Everyone in town knows that there's a tax to play a street trick," the other goons scoffed back. "But you're not from around here."

Simbat composed himself a moment, "I guess the vehicle blocking our exit will take us to the the wolf of these parts. Whom do we owe the pleasure?"

"Come find out."

They were shoved into a van at gun point. Maymun, still in his cage, screeched as he was jabbed with sticks and the goons weazed and cackled.

"Shut that up!" the driver said as the van was approaching a bridge. He chucked the shaking cage out the window and over the bridge. It splashed into the river like a bottle and flipped Maymun under. He reached for the latch but the cage flipped and he lost his grip, and the pocket of air above his head. The river wasn't giving any second chances. His narrow fingers were grasping through the bars but he couldn't find the latch. The torrent of the white water disoriented him. His little lungs were running out of air. Something brushed his hairy arm and he grabbed it and pulled towards the door. He pushed through, pawed the latch open and busted out.

The flow was raging. Maymun, a small black faced monkey from Western Africa, was alone in the dreadful river. He struggled to keep his tiny head above water thrashing and was eventually drifted to an eddy along the banks. He passed out and dreamed of the forests in Western Africa so far away.

Chapter 29 Maymun's Dream

Broad shadowy foliage blur past in the gangrenous night. The monkey's arms stretch forward, grabbing branches and swinging at staggering pace. He reaches a leafless space upon a high branch with a view. He pulls up to scan the forest floor. Danger's not climbing so the next priority is to shriek and howl like a good monkey boy, wake and warn any brothers in the community. He's got to look out. Ya don't want to be a lone monkey wandering through the trees at night, unable to sleep without some slithering or growling thing creeping up for a meal.

Through the looks down, and sees the predators. He hears their grunts. They sound like hungry carnivores with arrogance and malice.

Snap! Thwoom! The monkey's reflexes are a hair too slow to dodge the the dart that stabbed into his abdomen. The force knocks him off the tree and he falls. Gravity takes him down. His thorax is paralyzed and arms are flailing as branches transfer descending momentum into spin with each hit. The monkey splashes like a sandman blasted by waves. He hits the ground, springs up and stumbles back on the ground once again. A big man grabs him up and throws him into a net on top of a warthog's hairy belly, which inhales slightly. The warthog's tufted head has a skullious visage but he takes a breath. Monkey hears a low rumbling raise to a muffled voice singing clear.

"Upon this mortal coil I cling, slipping to soft oblivion. The grass grows over me sweetly blowing in the breeze" with a voice as soft and sweet as pollen-rich bee departing a flower on a soft breeze, he said, "Ah Monkey man, it seems we've met at the turning points of more than a few lives."

A pangolin's hard scales are scratching up against Maymun as the bag swings in darkness. Fearful whimpers squeek from the coil which Maymun can't make head or tail of.

"Please pangolin, are you alright? Are you wounded?"

"What? Who's speaking? Is that you warthog?"

"No, there's a monkey in here with us."

"Anyone else?" asked the pangolin?

"Just the paralyzed young leopard."

In the dark the monkey is taken out and caged. He finds the cold hard material of his surroundings vibrating. There's a little light directly ahead. The monkey jumps up and screeches. The pangolin pokes an eye out to see the warthog, motionless and breathless beyond the pernicious barrier that won't allow him to escape this box he's trapped in. The warthog is bleeding.

Sounding over the mysterious din emitting from these unnatural surroundings is the purr of a large cat. The monkey believes it to be the most fearsome, the climbing leopard which can eat three monkeys for a meal. There is no flight, only panic. He rattles around his cage.

The leopard pounces onto the dead warthog, picks it up as meat and jumps over the monkey, spraying blood as he sweeps the ground out from under him. He looks through the bars and says, "Caught in a trap, little monkey. Luckily for you you're also caught in my dream, and when I wake up, I'll be on my favorite branch of the nicest tree in the forest surrounded by flowers. That's the only explanation for this fractile trap we're bound in. Some kind of seed pod I reckon. Eventually it'll coil its sides back and send us plummeting down." The leopard opens a lucid eye which fade to disappointment as nothing happens.

The monkey brain is on haywire but eventually he can't help but watch the leopard eats bites of the warthog on strange flat, dull and smooth ground. The creeping vibrations beyond unknown barriers and the manic ravings and the leopard and it's theories that these were dreams of his, the pangolin or perhaps the dead warthog.

Sounds, in quick succession follow. Clang, creek, growl, thwip, and thump, then familiar sounds. The big hunters who shot for the treetops have returned. They enter the upright and dressed, carrying black sticks and speaking with the aggressive confidence of hyenas. The spotted cat lies motionless and barely breathing on the flat, vibrating ground. One of the men approaches with malace.

Cat springs up and swings its claws at the beastman's face. It shreds ribbons of blood against the others. A flash of movement and the next sound is far louder than anything the monkey ever heard, an extraordinary claim for a forest monkey. It claps like the biggest rock falling flat, and from a great height.

Chapter 30 The Slip

Abu and Tola's phones buzz simultaneously. A miasmic hangover rises with the dawn. Abu reads *We're leaving. Not you.* He gets up, drinks some vile water from the tap, and returns to his starched sheets, phone in hand. Tola has reached beyond the curtain to open the window to a cold morning.

"You see this?"

Tola slowly opens his eyes and checks the message in silence. When he'd normally be dreaming, he consider Rabi's brief text and the actions it calls for. Eventually they're stirred and begin to converse.

"Do you recall that bird from the race?"

“Yeah the Turk right? What was her name? Dugong?”

“She's here, in Turkey right now. Left London round the same time we did.”

“Have you called her?”

“Nah mate, this isn't a romance story. I've got no mind to get her mixed up with Rabi or that French bird.”

The city buzzes though the open window.

“Let's get breakfast.”

“We're leaving.” Rabi waves over the valet. “Wait for the car here.” Bahtiyar exhales a noxious breath into the wind as he waits under the heavy concrete awning. Inside the hotel, Abu and Tola are slumped over their breakfast. Rabi approaches and says without sitting, “I hope you shirkers appreciate the favor I just did you.” He flips down two plane tickets onto their plates, *Departure: Istanbul, Turkey - Arrival: Erbil, Iraq*. Rabi places his upright finger in front of his lips and winks ostentatiously, “When you get to Tripoli, Visit al Mansouri Mosque and tell the Imam that you're a stranger.” Rabi sucks his teeth and spins a square of paper onto the table.

Phones are bugged

Lives are in danger.

He motions to Tola to turn it over.

Go to reception.

You are a stranger here.

Rabi gives a little bow and walks out, leaving Abu and Tola speechless.

“Listen mate, I think Rabi's manipulating us.”

“Or course, but I've got a mind to collect that gold.”

“I think he's full of shit about the heat on our tail. Something's rotten. Look at this ticket. How did Rabi get me a ticket? I never gave him my passport number. This feels like our last chance to turn back.”

“Fuck back, ”Abu guffaws, “But fuck these plane tickets the most. I swear. I'm sick of his noise. He talks so much and says nothing.”

“People here, just on and on enjoying the sound of their own voice.”

“Yeah, if you're thinking of leaving. Let's not tarry around. Has Rabi still got your speed?”

“Yeah, well paid, but I'm after that gold. ”

He exhales and shakes his head. “Listen man, last night was nothing. Rabi got the wrong idea if he thinks we were pissed. That Bosnian boy, on the other hand. I wonder what's his deal. Do you think Rabi's getting paid to deliver him too?

“I dunno.”

“Listen mate. It's good the speeds dropped. Cold turkey can be tough. Have you had the itch?”

“Yeah, for sure. That feeling right? Scuttle up some beak and ride the train.”

“Right, right. But for what it's worth, no one escapes drugs without a chase.”

“Ya know...” Tola shifts positions, “When I was a boy I took my first hit of X and just fell right in the deep end. I stayed high for weeks, just pill after pill after pill. I'm basically a reformed lab rat.

“London culture, alright. Stuck in a maze, and they just keep feeding you and feeding you.”

“Right, might not know when to stop, but I know not to start back up.”

“Right mate, keep it together.”

“Yeah, easy. Anyways, let's let the time pass.”

“Or maybe not,” Abu's eye shimmers. “Tola, you're my oldest friend, but you don't know about my father. I told fuckin Rabi but not you, and that's a crying shame because you're twice the man he is. My father...” Abu brushes his hand across his eyes lightly and they turn inward. “I know him. Well, I knew him.”

“Yea?”

“Look I've kept those three years secret”

“Yeah, sure, at Summos.”

“Well, I was actually nineteen when we started high school. I'd spent from two-thousand until two-thousand and tree on a ship, with my father.”

“Orphan boy Abu was just a fairy tale? So you were... nineteen when we were in geometry class?”

“When my mother died, I just stayed in the house in this really white neighborhood, ducking the civils that came to check on me. I didn't have any friends either because my mom was weird. We didn't have any family. I was just a skinny kid, home alone. I stopped going to school and just stayed round the house, drinking myself dead. One night I went out and I came upon this gang of English boys drinking lager. I just walked up and said hi. They were like, 'Oi! Who's there?' these white boys said, 'I hear something talking, but I can't see through the shadow', 'Some dark piece of dog shit talking', 'haha yeah fuck off!', 'That's England, the land where even the shit talks!' And they chased me off.

“I didn't know how to jape, I was scared of everything. I ran back home, as kids do. And yelled at the walls, 'You pale wanker, go drink piss.' 'Ya limey kike, you shit out your dick!' and I shadowboxed them to a pieces. Before long I started smashing up the furniture and tearing the wallpaper off.”

Abu huffs, grabs his phone and taps social media. It loads. He continues talking, “His name's Simbat by the way, and he just showed up out of nowhere. I guess he heard that mom died. So I open the door and it's like looking in the mirror. It's like, Dad, no question. And he spoke some awful English. For some reason he was surprised that I couldn't speak Swahili, or Arabic. I asked him why he left. He said something about money. He hung around the house trying to get me to come to his ship and eventually I did. My father and me at sea, my little boy fantasy granted as a wanker teen.”

He looks back at his phone. It shows an error message. He shrugs and chalks it up to location interference. They go to the lobby and get the package, a big yellow envelope. It contains a cell phone

and a handwritten note. *Mate, I went ahead. You can do this, go to Rakka. This phone is safe, can't be tracked. Ditch your old ones. Your fortune's here. Trust each other and Allah.* -Rabi

On the top floor of Ahmet's apartment building, some elders sit crossed-legged on a low couch next to a drawn white curtain, under a black flag. Bahtiyar's urinating in the bathroom. Ahmet says in a low, deep voice, "Brainwashing a citizen in my city. Bringing him to my home. I am worried for you soul. Djin will follow you to Rakka." Rabi keeps his head low. "This substance is poison. I know what you've given him. Furthermore, it's entirely improper for you to chauffeur a woman. Nevertheless, I must not impede her safe arrival in Rakka. So leave at once. There will be Kurdish gangs. You will pass inshallah. If anyone tries to stop you south of the border, shoot them immediately. If it's a battalion, speed to Rakka."

In the apartment stairwell, Rabi stalls Bahtiyar outside Ahmet's door with instructions to recite seven *salah*. Hayat meets him in the hallway. Rabi's blood pumps down as he descends the staircase and sees Hayat's hand appear through a crack of light. A milky-shade-of-tea face peeks through the doorway. Her; right eye's full of support with upper eyelids arcing like rainbows overflowing thermal waters underneath some smoky glint off of her lower droplet ones; nose suggests such wisdom and storytelling skills; mouth is small with slightly deflated lips; face appears as an opening to exit the door. She walks up close to Rabi as a cat to a sleeping dog.

"My sweet friend, will we really leave today?"

"Yes my seed, we must drive all day and half the night"

"Good, I want to plant a garden right away. There will be so many sunny days."

"We're ready for anything. Rakka is our city but we must spend time in Tabqah first. It's a suburb and there is no fighting there."

"Will there be peace for us in the future?"

"Allah provides for us," he gestures with wide arms, "we will always find peace." Bahtiyar begins to thump down the stairs. He jerks upright when he sees them. An unctuous mix of brief training and a broken chain of command causes him to straighten and salute.

Hayat laughs, looks at Rabi and says, "after you Major General!" she blushes and grips the handrail as she follows them down.

Rabi says to Bahtiyar, "Our mission is to acquire a target at the English Embassy, a medic."

"Yes sir!"

He takes a white cloth out of his pocket and holds it tightly against Bahtiyar's mouth and nose. "Hold her face like this until she falls asleep."

It's a late morning outside the Reşadiye Hotel. Abu and Tola walk into the bright morning with fidelity. Tola scopes the block and asks Abu to finish his story.

Abu leans his broad shoulders against the wall and continues, "So, father and son took a taxi for like three hours to Harwich port. I remember a seagull shit on my head when we got there. He said it was good luck. His ship was old but he had this badass helicopter on it. I'd never been out of London. The ship was live, everyone on board was wild and crazy and I got on with everyone, except

for my father. I was too old to get my childhood back and he never said he was sorry. No problem though, I found father figures, Ali for example. He was real religious, like the Imam of the ship. He balanced the crew out I guess. He'd slap their wrists when they acted greedy or spiteful but he was always real kind to me. The other sailors never listened to him but he had a cool head and he helped me make up my mind to go back and finish school.

Abu takes up the phone and dials ten numbers from heart. Tola's at his side "Hello Ali, this is Abu."

"Abu, *habari yako*? You scarecrow! What news from the frozen North?"

"I'm in Istanbul."

"Well that's novel! What are you doing there?"

"Visiting and traveling. Where are you? At sea?"

"No, I am in Hadramout. What are you doing?"

"I've just come to visit a friend."

"Well my son Hamza lives there. He's a lawyer."

"Ahh, so I'll call him if I get in trouble."

"Haha, he's the best!"

Abu asks, "Do you know where my father is?"

Ali answers, "Father Simbat? He's in Kuwait, you should visit and meet your new half-brother Khalid, and your half-sister Berdina, and your other half-brother Qathoum and the rest."

Abu thanks him for his son's phone number and says goodbye. He pockets his phone as the tram approaches. "The ship was my first education, which is probably why I couldn't finish university. Anyway, Ali Hodja and Sayeed and his little monkey..." Abu reminisces, "this fucking monkey used to leak all over the crew when they were passed out drunk somewhere. Funny little beast. We were at sea for years man. They had no idea, Ali was the only guy who qualified as any kind of teacher, but he only had lessons in Islam and common sense I guess. He used to say, 'a second chance is like a fish with a hook stuck in its mouth.'"

The black bull, illuminated under the apex of my looking glass, drives through the streets of old Istanbul's, over the ridge of the peninsula at the southeast edge of the European side. It rolls down a long hill. I think Rabi feels the glare but he's the one with the power. Past Anit Pasha Park and the Roman dormitories, under the aqueduct where Ahmet Hodja taught us of foreign dates, *riba*, and the Prophet Muhammad—*peace be on his name*—'s moustach hairs. The black bull charges down Ataturk Boulevard, across the low bridge. Far off to the left across the dark waters of the Golden Horn, a cemetery rests on a ridge, flanked with small houses. Up a steep road, Rabi takes a right into a narrow street continuing to ascend towards a thick urban neighborhood. The same neighborhood that set the sneer on Bahtiyar's face. Perhaps some part of his mind recognizes the streets he prowled last night but not the conscious part.

The black bull arrives at the Embassy. An inexplicable shade around the building chills Duygu as she starts to stroll down the street. The apex of focus under my cosmic lens fried Rabi's soul as best as I could but he approached her. "Where's Tola and Abu?" They speak a few words and then the

window rolls down and a hand comes out to cover her face with a chloroform rag. Rabi is behind her, pressing her head into the open door. She slumps into the car seat and falls unconscious in vehicle.

A huge ocean liner passes underneath the Bosphorous bridge and blows its horn. There's a small island with a single building and a high tower off of the Asian shores, a five-star prison fit for a princess. Mosques, ferries and seaside teashops burn hot-air lanterns and colorful lights down on the shoreline. They drive more than a hundred meters above the seawater straight and pass an electronic checkpoint.

Europe's in the rear view mirror and Rabi intentions came to pass. Fewer arrogant men, and more useful slaves. Never looking back, not slowing down, he thinks about which one's better off, Abu or Tola. This future they've chosen is rife with action and trouble but they're immature and lack idealism, hence they must be drawn into the Islamic state by an act of Jihad.

Chapter 31 Dog Domain

With his hands tied behind his back, Simbat was pushed into a trap staircase. He twisted shoulder down, breaking his fall and rolling backwards, bumping his turbaned head as he flipped backwards with bowling momentum and landing on his feet. Sayeed and Ignatio, also cuffed, jumped in behind. They were in a dirty prison cell in a sprawling basement. There were other cells filled with men and women. In the center corridor from the metal bars were gunhappy gangsters. They threw some coins at them and shouted, “ keep dancing.”

Simbat lurched at the cell door shouting reptilian curses and running aggressively amok. Sayeed joined in making a great ape of himself, latently riling up the guards. Ignatio grunted, paced and they played musical chairs until a guard yelled “shut up”. The prisoners echoed it and chanted “Shut up”, back which was echoed by more guards who joined in the chorus. One of them took a no-look shot and didn't see the bullet fly through the keyhole. Some shadowy figure silently choked a man out. One guard looked up and saw Simbat's smiling eyes roll around in his head like a chameleon's. He charged forward and thumped his head against the bars, falling back to the velvet floor.

Sayeed had been picking at Ignatio's cuffs with a hat pin. Now unshackled and concealing his bare wrists, he checked Simbat, who was face down on the dirt floor. He mumbled “three”. By snickering and pointing, Sayeed'd lured a guard near enough for a headbutt between the bars. Ignatio said “four”, planted a foot firmly, skipped, jumped and dive kicked the door. It swung on its hinges, knocking one guard back and pinning another one against the bars. He held it there while Simbat flipped a handstand out. He took a bullet in the back of the leg but managed to connect a wild kick on a guard's head. Sayeed rushed past and slammed the pinned guard's head against his knee and another one against the wall. He was shuffling out. Ignatio'd took a bullet too, high on his shoulder. His hands were held and another was slamming him with the butt of a gun but he struggled free and slammed headbutts on jaws and noses. Simbat and Sayeed managed to get guns and shot a few guards, but must we languish in the gory details when something utterly fantastic is happening just up the beach?

The dream of the forests had distilled a deep sense of loss in him. Since those days, he hadn't seen another black faced monkey with white fur. A ray of sunlight woke Maymun up from his forlorn homeland and he found himself on the river bank with a dog nudging him. Incomplete feelings were rising from his unconsciousness. He was coming to the staggering conclusion that he was no longer a beast of the forest but some kind of human-animal like this dog that was licking his face. What purpose was a man-monkey in a city? Or on a ship? Or on a man's shoulder? His instinct to hoot at the treetops as had become an urge to seek out shops, friends and the sound of the big ship.

At that moment, the deep, bellowing foghorn of the ship Mashallah blew! He leapt ontop of the dog and gripped its big ears with tight littlefingers screeching, "Go!" The long-legged steed and rider took off down the grassy flat above the beach at windy speed, dog tongue flapping and the monkey squinting tight against the wind and sand. The little monkey relaxed and reclined back against her erect tail lazily enroute, expedited through the dog's domain between the deltas.

At the stern of the ship, Mkaash peered at the shoreline with steady eyes and binoculars. Mbwana was at comm center, readying the radios and blowing the horn. Ali was unstrapping the rowboat.

The dog was distractable. Every time they stopped, Maymun would get a faceful of some stinking thing, either waste or wasted, here a putrid pile of rotting fishparts, there another dogs flea-bitten crotch. They'd dashed into an alley-end and joined a motley pack. Most of them were thin, brown long-legged mutts with short hair and pointed ears. Others distinguished themselves by being shaggy and miniature.

Maymun was familiar with dog culture and knew that they would need a shout of support from the Alpha to pass through. He jumped frantically about, looking to find or be seen by the top dog. He tried to follow the hierarchy to the top. Dogs gathered and saw the monkey riding a kinfolk and uproared. Maymun was screeching back at them. Their howls and cackles raised. He was looking for the one dog that could represent the pack and grant passage but all he found were yapping hounds. The dogs domain was a fisheyed expanse that bunched up in the corner and he was drawing near to the stretched center with hundreds of puppies bumping about.

A regal black snout's tense, quivering upper-lip twitched once, then rested on a meaty bone. The canine sat and radiated first-take with enchanted power and commanded fierce obedience as he gnawed a bone. A scent passed through its nostril. -Smells like monkey- Alpha thought and licked its chops. As they rounded the corner, Alpha stood ready to pass judgement and eat.

Upon seeing that Maymun was mounted on a comrade, Alpha glared, asking if he barked for the monkey. The steed nodded, yawned and knelt. Then, like a mastadon's trumpet, Mashallah's foghorn sounded again and Maymun sprung up, flipping and shrieking in its direction.

Half escaped and injured, the infiltrators stayed in character. As loud as possible Simbat announced, "I'm gonna find myself a bitch. This place is filled with bitches." He nabbed a set of keys and opened a prison cell whispering, "Just a hard push will open it, but wait for the dust to settle before you sneak out. Best of luck."

He popped a pistol up the staircase and hustled past. A chaotic stampede was approaching so they passed into a narrow hallway lit only by a slit window. He broke it and they boosted each other out. In a moonlit court, some noble spirited grunt with a wide mouth and dreadlocks approached saying, "Don't shoot, and keep quiet." Simbat raised an eyebrow. The grunt said, "In a moment, you'll

be you'll be outgunned, word to the wise. When you meet Tippu don't look him in his eyes." His timbre raised as he told them to make love to the floor but as they he whispered. "Hey slugs," he hollered, "I found the pirates!"

More thugs ran in and thrashed the three in a ostentatious manner. Simbat twisted to meet the kicks with his injured leg. -Knock the bullet loose- he thought. He wailed as the fiery lump singed.

But as suddenly as it began, the beating stopped as a man entered the fray, mouth first and wearing a feather emblazoned turban. The guards looked at each other's shoes. His barrel chest was strapped with bullets. "What do we have here? Pirates posing as street tricksters are actually trained killers. Do not try to fool a gangster like me." Tippu's menacing glare was like a red shadow. "What are you doing between the deltas?" He fumed through his mouth like a furnace grill, jutting out under his long curly moustach. "And what kind of pirate is lap-licking Kimbillo at her coffee shop?"

"I am Simbat of the Sea and I'm looking for a girl or two to stoke my chamber fire. Not too pretty, less that a king's ransom and one you don't mind loosing to a far off port. Hey, just release us three and we'll keep it kinda shady. I'll go fetch money if you offer me a bargain," he sang and he sputtered and he spat blood.

"What of me? What scraps from your funny little dinner table are mine?"

"Heh, funny. It seems there's a hole in my pocket."

"Hey ho, pish posh for pocket change," Tippu's face unroiled. "If you're looking for goods or services, I invite you to my night club. There's going to be some real monkey business tonight!"

The goon from the van said, "That one will be happy to do his business with monkeys," and pointed at Sayeed.

"This is all I can afford right now," and slammed an elbow into his nose. Tippu's trigger-happy men filled in the gaps in the courtyard and tried to beat the prisoners but six gunshots rang into the sky and Tippu's nasal voice rose above, "Which of you dogs can answer me this... How did these men get out?"

"Thank you for your hospitality, but the dead man at the cell made the error," said Sayeed.

"Who let these men free!" he flared.

"We were your grateful guests, but... he aimed to scare us but his bullet flew straight through the keyhole. On our way to fetch our billfold? No hard feelings?" piped in Simbat. The question hung on unanswered. Everyone looked at their toes. Simbat and Sayeed looked at each other and shrugged.

"Hmmmmmm." Tippu buzzed. He harrumphed and cocked his head to part the sea of goons, strolled ten paces and said, "follow me through the gallery. I'll show you the bitches."

"Let me see my shadow in hell before I reach heaven." said Simbat quixotically. They hopped up to follow him across the yard to another building. Iron bars "Pleased to join you this evening, with heavier pockets." They were allowed to exit of their own volition through the front door. All their money and jewelry had been stolen by random thugs, only to have it stolen again by tougher thugs. Sayeed was given a sheet to wrap around himself and they left with nothing more than an invitation.

Sayeed, uninjured, walked ahead looking out for more incompetent thugs. Ignatio face looked like a bowl of bruised plums. He braced Simbat who encouraged him as they walked, "It's ok, I have a doctor to help us on the ship."

“In the harbor?”

“That's right. Keep going straight my man, we're almost out of the woods.”

“We're about five miles from the harbor,” and with that, they caught up with Sayeed and laughed for their lives, in the light of dawn. They felt like tourists returning from a salacious night of partying, Simbat draped over the other's shoulder humming as they stumbled down the street. They'd escaped from Tippu with no useful information and lost their beloved pet. This was no time to rejoice in their lives, but their presence had attracted the attention of a few teenagers dressed to whomp tourists and steal their clothes. At the bridge the three remembered Maymun and they whistled for him, only to be confronted by a two teenagers holding knives. They looked skinny, and too confident to threaten grown men, “Hey! You freaks lost?” said a kid with a mohawk haircut. “We cut up tourists for breakfast. I like your clothes.”

Five miles away, Ali scanned the shore. Vo, the High Noon Captain was in the rowboat nearing the beach. What came next marked celebrations with coconuts and rum, and dancing with low heads and high shoulders for decades. These mercinerries sat on a ship with a helicopter full of missiles and gas bombs, jeeps and motorcycles, ready to not-back-down. Ready to die!

The rowboat ground into white sand. Vo rose into the space above the bow teeming with flies and birds, and twisted over his left shoulder with a handvisor. He saw Maymun vault off the dog and over the sand dunes. “Ho” he shouted as he leapt off the boat and trudged up to where Maymun was closing the gap. For Maymun, it wasn't difficult to explain and urged Vo to follow him inland. Vo called for the helicopter. He saw the dog striding down the grassy ridge above the sands. It turned and beckoned Maymun back on. The gracious local, guided the trio back through his domain.

The cadre of three species raced past Dar es Salaam's seaview resorts and continued on until the buildings became derelict. The sun rose on them and spurned them on They ran and ran for nearly an hour until approached a bridge.

Before Vo saw a couple teenagers wielding blades against his friends he saw a dozen more crouched below the bridge. If he hadn't noticed the rest of this precocious gang waiting under the very same bridge that Maymun had been thrown from, they might've successfully waylaid shot-up Simbat, vengeful Sayeed and furious Ignatio in the early hours of the morning. He stepped down the embankment with two pistols. “Each of your names are on these bullets boys. Fuck off now or loose your lives.”

“We're not looking for trouble,” Simbat said, trying to stand tall on his injured leg.

The mohawk kid in front whumped a chain against a gloved hand. “Oh it won't be no trouble, we'll just take and be off.” At that instant a low bullet whirred, kicked up a cloud of dirt and Vo stepped in, “Maybe if you boys'd ever seen a real fight, you wouldn't be so eager for another.”

Maymun swings in and hands a gun to Sayeed, as he was trained and rewarded with tasty seabirds. Simbat takes a knee. The teenage gang shrinks and scampers away. Before any greetings or news can pass, a motorcyclist with long dreadlocks covering his face approaches.

“Fuckin hell! Are we gonna have to go through every gangster in this city?” He gets off, “What do you want?”

“A new job,” he jests and sweeps his long, dreaded locks away. This guy must have ran away

from Tippu's courtyard fast and he approached the trio. "My name's Mosi. I know you guys are looking for bandits. I'm a mercenary. I want to be a trader too and I'll trade you something great."

"And for you?"

"Try me out. Here, look at this," he shows paper, torn from a map. It's the western shore of Lake Malawi. "These are the bandits you're looking for."

"How can we trust you?"

"Someone told me about you. I wanna help."

Simbat held eye contact as he approached and snatched the map.

"Trust me on her word. I was there, she said you weren't pirates. Anyways, I won't work for Tippu anymore and I won't stay around Dar much longer."

Simbat, Ali and Sayeed nodded and sidled off.

"His laugh quelled the gangsters back there."

"Even at Tippu's I sensed a genuine trickster."

"He seems alright." They all looked back. He definitely shoved a gun barrel in my belly and he was smiling just the same then, but I can forgive him for that.

"How long have you worked for Tippu?"

"Five months, ever since my mama died," Mosi hung his head.

"And why did you start?"

"Mostly money, a bit of fun, but I won't touch these young girls they bring here."

After another moment of deliberation Simbat employed, "Alright Mosi. Welcome aboard."

The fucking Mil-mi's propeller cut the air at 301 and rising RPM. Its heft sent the ship roiling up. Bigger than any beast, the chopper chucked off the platform once, twice and lifted into the air. The ship slammed tsunamis towards Mbizi beach. Ali ripped ahead of the wakes, and loud on the radio to obtain his compatriots positions. "Third delta north of the harbor, past the second field, on the road west of the rifle range"

Shortly after it took off, from the air Ali saw the crew in the middle of a dirt road and dropped the ladder. Two more than he'd expected entered the cabin, large enough to fit fifty soldiers and two and a half vehicles. Looking down through the trap door, the ground raced away speeding back to the ship.

Chapter 32 Red Ochre

Pump pump—pump pump—pull open the space. Breathe in the...air, into my... chest. The air smells like mom's room... cigarettes. Pump energy to my...body...legs, arms, head. Feels weak, feels

like kneeling waiting for a gunshot. No, I'm not ready for the surface. I'm going back, and down. Bullets would shatter my teeth and skull. I can smell something cold and blue that was once endless fantasy and beginningless conversation. There are also... eyelids... sight, wow. Not easy as snapping awake to the *azan* at Maocha Camp. *Praying is better than sleeping!* Open the eyelids to receive light. Close them. Heart... beat. Like when I was under the river, looking through blurry water, keeping my breath, saving my energy, staying still, listening to my heart beat syrup, mostly me and something else. And something is lost, not from the part that moves, but from the tissue that grows in stillness, green in the spring. But it's black leaves now, disguised as a stranger it throws its hood up and walks away now. And now is forever. The cloak was lined with pockets full of mangled crystals that shine back light through this fabric. And grandma's grinding them and mixing a solution that tastes like river water... something, something coming, coming back. Behind my eyes, and the pressure that's throbbing with each heartbeat. And to think what I want to think, and to see what I notice, that there's comfort and light pressure in my back. I'm sitting. My hands hurt. I am sitting. Where am I sitting? Ok, eyes again... open. Wow, people. We're waiting for... something. We're going somewhere. A place I've dreamed about. A place with... Allah... who is greatest.

There's movement and texture outside the... windows. Inside, it's mostly smooth, black surfaces and a voice... It's poetry. It's magical powers echo and turns verse to truth. The rhythm pulsates and synchronizes heartbeats and gives protection.

Bid them farewell with bullets, just as you received them
Bid them farewell with rockets, just as you received them...
Strike them and curse them and curse those who ally with them...
Destroy the palatial mansions and destroy them
Flog every wrong-doer, flog them
Bid them farewell and scatter rose petals on the ground where you fought them

I close my eyes again and am transported to a collective dream with rivers of sweet water and jewels and sensual female forms. The humming poetry promises I'll return and snaps my eyelids open again. "Praise Allah!" There is a mirror posted high on the front windshield and a curious eye looks at me. I don't feel like I have any control but I came here for freedom and power. I chose this life. The isolated noise and the steady shake... Yes, we're in a car. We're driving to the Caliphate. The rebirth of a legendary state.

I dig to find the name of the companions. Tola... Rabi... Abu... Hayat... Who is this other woman next to me? She's tied up. Did I do this? Ask Rabi. *-Zašto je vezana?-*

"Arabic"

"Is she your slave?"

"Yes."

"Am I?"

"No, you're a slave of Allah."

"Abdullah. Is that my name? No, my name is Bahtiyar."

"Do you remember where you were last night?"

An entanglement of memories; throat clenching whiskey, bawdy songs, cobblestones, wet sex, a pill, swinging breasts, gyrating hips, money, open hand strikes a woman across the face, deepening

intoxication, foreign friends, open mouths, more bottles.

“Allah knows.”

Rabi reclaims the silence. “You're wondering where Tabu and Olaf are. I sent them ahead to make contact and weapons training.”

“Who is this woman? Where did you get this slave? Where are we?” I feel a confidence and clearness of purpose.

“We're in the Caliphate. We'll be in Rakka in twenty minutes. We're all slaves but this woman is needed in the State. Do not touch or trust her.”

-Ok, it's clear now. I took drugs and alcohol and blacked out. Allah knows, and maybe Rabi knows. For forty days Allah will ignore me. Rabi might blackmail me. Allah, I'm losing control, I pray for some distraction, a car crash, an explosion, a g— Is that a donkey? Whoah! That old man's running fast. He's greener than a forest.- Green flows in through the window tint and into my iris. He nods and shrinks away in a bang.

Bang! Shock and internal awareness, then deafness, then something wet dripping down my neck, then heat and then dizziness, but no pain. The rear view mirror hangs by a spiderweb of glass on the windshield. A phantom memory of a noise that I didn't consciously experience throbs on the left side of my face. Following the course of events and their logic isn't coming naturally but between my throbbing brain and the empty bloody space where my ear should be. I get it. Death's whispered in my ear.

Chapter 33 Flee

What if the border's attacked while we're crossing the river? It could be Turks, Daesh, rebels, Americans. Anyone would team up against us. Our soldiers are there to defend us from Daesh, the group most likely to come with guns blazing. The others will be there too, if only as spies. There will be Turkish and maybe American soldiers to count heads, ask questions and report on what we're bringing across. Anyone of them would betray us, with no warning. Anyone of us would stay here in Kobane. We're all together in our misery. Who's going to help me stuff old dad into a sack and haul him across the border if he's stubborn?

Nobody wants to flee, not my wiry father nor my thick mother, a rare agreement. Transport will come before Daesh; busses in an hour or two, Daesh in a day or two. The whole village goes across into Turkey. We've never been refugees before. Most of us won't come back, the strong men, the beautiful girls, the wealthy will all go to Europe. This border never meant a thing to us. Kurds, Arabs, Turks and a few Christians on both sides. Farms, quarries and a few factories on both sides. No difference between Turkey and Syria, until recently. Now everyone's an enemy. Turkey has agreed to allow our soldiers to regroup and plan strategy. I guess we're finally useful to each other. The elderly and children will enjoy Turkish hospitality for as long as our little ceasefire holds out.

Mother hastily bundles a towel around clean underwear and snaps soap holders shut, “Where's Seyfettin?” Is she the only one who doesn't know his plan? “I'll check the stables.” She nods wearily.

Outside there is purple twilight behind a black silhouette where brother Seyfettin is probably packing his donkey. Irrigation canals trickle in from the Euphrates, which has watered the wheat and supported the family since we built this town a few generations back. The land is ancient but the city isn't. A new mole on an old man's forehead. Kobane wasn't built to stay, not like Rakka, or Diyarbakir. It's a company town for an old German railroad that doesn't run anymore. Why should we stay and fight for that? Give it to Daesh and let the Americans use it for target practice.

Seyfettin can reach the border before the caravan, if he leaves soon. He's in the last stable with his beast. There's a rifle leaning against the wooden walls. The donkey is loaded with packs and a red, green and yellow flag is draped over. "Brother it is too dangerous, go with the group. Daesh is out there. They'll spread out and dig, stay away from the hill, they come from the southeast. Hundreds, thousands of those maggots will scatter soon. The American's will play them like checkers. How many guns do you have?"

Seyfettin grabs the long gun "Just this, and a pistol." The glimmering moonlight illuminated the silhouette of his chiseled jaw. Sal huffed and snatched up the rifle. It's loaded. "Ok that's a good gun, but you need one for close range. And this," he takes the flag up in one swoop, "Your colors. Here," Sal took a wooden pole from the garden tools and wrapped the yellow, red and green flag around it with string. Then he wedged the pole in between the pack straps and the donkey. "Show your star high to the checkpoints, just keep an eye out. To walk defiantly with a beast on a night journey across country is an ancient tradition. You have all of our blessings." "Thank you brother."

Sal holds Seyfettin's eyes earnestly "But blessings aren't bulletproof. Your pistol is that glock? Listen to me. If it you use it, shoot it all out at once because it'll jam when you take your finger off the trigger. Leave me that Sig Saur in your pocket. That'll jam too. Take my revolver instead. Here, that's three guns. This one has seven shots in it, and it won't jam. Shoot it straight and slow, body head, body head, body head." He handed Seyfettin a cardboard box full of bullets. "I don't envy anybody you meet out there who isn't waving our flag. Just shut up your ass when you pass the checkpoints. Do you have your ID? Boy you're crazy, but I'm jealous."

Sal hugs the breath out of his younger sibling, than walks him and his donkey outside. "There will be fighting soon. And brother, I'm not talking about mortars and tanks. I'm talking about death from the heavens! Yeah, that old American trick. Mistanour hill will glow with laser beams, and whatever's left of Daesh'll swarm underground, but the Americans can see through earth like water. Do you hear me?" Sal held his brother's forehead against his. "Don't fuck around. Go straight for the border!" He kisses both cheeks hard and slaps both his and his ass' ass.

Death is not something to be feared. It comes and goes in the blink of an eye. Death is walls crumbling. Death is a border crossing. It's only a moment, like a photograph. We pray for those who came before us. When giving thanks, we call them 'Those Who Died', not 'Those Who are Dead'. Death is a flash. It's over and we meet our God. If we thank God for life, then He thanks us for living and rewards us with the only gift richer than life.

To walk through a war zone, for the sake of a mule and a chance at heroism was a shot for a better life. There will be other shots, and other travelers fleeing through the farmlands with pack animals, saving them from rape by Daesh.

Towards the shimmering moon, Seyfettin walks slung with enough guns, knives and gusto to boot, smoking garden tobacco and looking for soldiers, spies and snipers; occupiers. -This land is Kurdish, even if we don't give a fuck about Kobane, we protect the people! *We* organized *our* soldiers when that Alevite despot lost control and Kurds call the shots now!-

Striding along the ditch watchfully and slowly, step by step scratching his ankles on shrubs, Seyfettin's red, yellow and green flag stands high under the vivid moonlight. The first checkpoint is three fields away, maybe an hour. The local protection units give him security to pass as they've kept this land free and safe for three years now. Daesh has demanded that the farmers stay and work their fields but they burned the fields. Nothing will new will grow.

Seyfettin approaches a perpendicular row of cypress trees ahead on the narrow path that connects dozens of long fields to the Euphrates. He picks up his rifle, steadies it on a branch and peers through the scope. There are people across the next yard but it's not the checkpoint. He looks out for footprints on the path and finds a bullet shell. Seyfettin picks it up and it's hot. To the east, Mistanour hill rises sharply to an outcropping just south of Kobane. There are flashes of fire atop it.

Seyfettin mistakes the fighting as the reason the ground rumbles. He strays from his donkey too long to call it near when he notices a black vehicle approaching from the west. Seyfettin hides behind the row of trees with his hand on his Glock and thinks, -If the car stops, seven seconds and come out spraying all the bullets through the windshield.-

His donkey chews a dry shrub as the vehicle approaches. The weapon is circumspect to Seyfettin's pricked ears. The approaching noise is quiet, clean and powerful and he's never heard an engine like that before. It slows. The donkey is silent -If that dumb beast wanders into the road, they might stop-

The vehicle crosses and Seyfettin keeps the tree between him and the falling, accelerating sound of the engine speeding away. Seyfettin peeks between the trees. It's a kind of military vehicle, but the color is black. -Probably someone from the military, a scout of Asad.- He grabs his rifle and steadies it on a branch to get a look at the vehicle with the rifle steady on his arms. Even the windows are black. This is definitely the type of vehicles that politicians ride in. -Maybe it's Asad himself, if he's in there, he's not driving. He's in back.- Without much thought, Seyfettin flips up the trigger guard and fires two shots through the back window into spiderwebs. The vehicle speeds out of his scope's target. Seyfettin lowers the rifle and looks out, feeling satisfied he may have taken a rare opportunity to make a important kill, but also terrified that he'll die right there.

Chapter 34 Versa visa

By night a hundred eyes scan the sea. They've come to the beach on foot, old scooters or horse-drawn carts and abandoned them. New dawn is a hemisphere away. They've seen its reliable sliver and pray. Now they'll sail from the approaching day, away from creeping death, away from no-future. They come from Damascus, Tartus, Homs, Palmyra or Ramadi with the clothes they wear, an extra track suit and a few changes of underwear. Someone signs on to a Lebanese mobile network for news of the boat. "It's on time!" The journey costs half a million Lebanese pounds per head, and half that for babies. The questions that led them there—How much for a family of four? When does the boat leave for Cyprus? Where does it leave from? How big is the boat?—received cagey answers from an avatar that nevertheless led a hundred people to the same point at this beach, at this dark hour. The boat approaches and they doubt that they'll all fit onboard.

An inflatable raft, roughly the size of a bus, skids high over the water skipping over waves and across the bay with four men and a tin rowboat full of life vests. Two of the men are passengers, picked up in Turkish Cyprus. They're sleepily slumped against the front tubes. They claimed to be contractors on their way to Qatar for work but it's obvious that they're second generation westerners, mercenaries going to Syria. The drivers don't care. They exchange population for money. Civilians for warriors. Families of modest means for violent extremists. It's a circus of profit and still illegal so this is a fly-by-night trip. In the back, the smuggler turns down the motor to yell the complex instructions at his young driver.

"Search them all, bags, bodies and pockets. They'll be used to it, so check them all for weapons. They're scared and tired, but some of them are still holding their kitchen knives and family pistols. If a fight breaks out, and the raft gets a hole, that's it man. Everybody drowns. So take an hour to check everyone's bags. Don't let them onboard until you've checked their receipts and their bags."

"Ok"

Now about the actual drive, navigation is easy with the GPS, just a straight line two-hundred and forty-five kilometers. Get your bearing west, two hundred and eighty degrees. Anywhere south of the east peninsula is the landing. If the gadget fails, anyone with a cellphone can help you. If that fails, keep your bearing on a compass. Just go to Greek Cyprus. Anywhere south of the big park. There's lots of British bases there. They'll bring you straight to camp." He showed a map on his mobile. "This place is good here on the peninsula, Cape Greco. It's the nearest piece of land. Don't go to Turkish Cyprus. Ok? I have to leave you with the rowboat. I'm going to check the raft. You go ahead with Daesh and bring the life vests. Check their bags."

"But won't they know who I am? Won't they tell the European police?"

"Probably not. There are four other workers and seventy-five travelers. You're all the same. You're the fifth navigator I've hired. Want to know what happened to the others?"

"Drowned?"

"No, they're with Katrina, and Jessica, and Britney, and Natalia... Can't you understand boy? They chose to live in Europe over the million pounds. Your salary? That payment's collateral for the boat. It's your choice, come back for your salary, or go stay with Valerie." The woman's name dissolves into the waves.

"Is Valarie a white girl's name?"

The middle-aged man gave the slightest nod and kept talking. "Either way, don't let the police know anything or you'll wind up in jail for questioning. If you decide to stay, throw your passport in the water and *boom*, you're a refugee. You've come to let daughters out of their homes. Any other refugee is just as credible as you. Cyprus will offer a European passport to know who the smuggler is, to the smuggler. Don't believe them. They'll throw you in jail if you confess. If you don't, they have to set you free. They can't prove anything based on the testimonies of these Arabs. You just volunteered to drive. And by the way, the four other workers don't know you and you don't know them. Everyone's a refugee."

"Wow. This is more complicated than I thought."

"Yeah, well. The boat's aren't cheap. But if you can manage to bring it back, leave it on Rabbit Island and row to shore for your wages plus deposit for the boat. Two million Lebanese pounds! It'll take about 4 hours at full clip. Now c'mon we're almost to shore. Go wake up Daesh. They're going to

help you search everyone.”

The passengers they call *Daesh* are second generation English. They're looking out at the waves at a green man standing atop a fish riding alongside starboard, who isn't registering as odd, suggesting that they're dreaming. Weather-worn yet regal, the green saint glances and raises an eyebrow at the shoddy sailors. He holds a second, smaller fish, which also looks forward. And then he speeds ahead at twice their pace. In a moment, all that remains of him is a thin wake.

The kid shines the light at the approaching shoreline. A hundred people, close to the splashing waves, reflect. The spot light illuminates their worn out faces and casts a wide shadow that undulates with the swell. They lick their lips, shoulder their bags, and shuffle. Some of them form a line two-by-two while others are stepping into the water. A pencil scrapes little marks across paper, four side-by-side and a fifth across, again and again and again. The rocky beach clicks and clacks.

“You can lay your blanket next to mine in the center for the children to sleep on.” “It's good that it's an inflatable raft, it will be more conformable to my back.” “Look at the stars” “My nephew has been looking at maps of our route and he knows how to navigate by the stars.”

The amassed press against the shoreline to see the approaching raft. It's as big as a bus. They watch and take note that a tin rowboat pushes plunges off the back, and the raft speeds away. It is an hour early. Older refugees sit back. The tin boat drifts ashore with four men. Some are intrigued to see a black man, and a white man working for a Lebanese charter. Others guess correctly that some of these men are mercenaries.

The rowboat grounds into shore and the kid hops out. “People, we're all going to Europe before the sunrise!” Cheers and high pitched hollers fill the air. “Shut up! Ok, how many women and children?” A few people look around and start to count but the group is too large. “If anyone has weapons, give them to these two men.” He steps out into knee deep water and starts to unload life vests.

The black man and the white man ask if they can help. The boy thrusts a bunch of life jackets at them.

As they're grabbing the orange vests, Tola and Abu mutter, “I can't believe all these fucking people. Do you think they're escaping the Caliphate?”

“Nah mate, probably the regime.”

“I wanna help them.”

“How? What are we gonna do? Bring them to Rakka?”

“Yeah, let's bring her.” Tola points at a stunning young girl with a loose scarf blowing with her chestnut hair. Many brothers with similar hair and features stand by her. Aloof, apart and very tall, the foreigners stand around idle and waiting. “The Caliphate needs wives.”

Some of the keen eared refugees mark them, and try to understand their English. “I don't think this is our opportunity to wife snatch,” Abu jests.

“Alright, alright. Maybe we can get some weapons.”

Abu seizes the attention of the refugees with loud, vulgar Arabic, “No weapons in the boat! Give guns, knives and acid to Tola for safety.”

Young men squint and murmur at Abu. “Who's this?” “Big men don't die any harder from

bombs and bullets” “Are they Europeans?” “They probably control the boats.” “I wasn't stupid enough to bring my gun here, I sold it in Beirut.” “I've still got mine but I'm not giving it to these jackasses. They're the reason we're here. I'll bury it under the rocks. They're godless mercenaries” “Soldiers of fortune” “They think they've come to defend us against the bombs? They're weak, and too late.”

The kid approaches and says, “Don't ask for weapons. Find weapons. In their bags or in their pants. Any gun you find is yours. You can sell. Watch this,” He approaches a woman standing with her kids, tells her to lift her arms and he pats her hips, upper thighs and trunk. He opens her bag and rummages through the clothing and toiletries. “Check their bodies, check their bags,” he takes out his cell phone and walks away.

“We're off track,” says Tola, “miles from anywhere and we're supposed to check these people for weapons? I'm really not in the right mind for this job. Put me in a battle, goddammit.”

“They smuggle humans for profit. They're scum. But if we leave, we're marooned on this beach. Here, have some nuts and just search bags. I'll pat down a few people, and we'll be in Tripoli by sunrise.” He pumps up, “Let's do this!” and the kid opens his camera phone.

By now everyone is anticipating security checks. They sit in their groups and fall quiet when Abu, high as a horse says, “All your bags in the center. Everybody line up.” They're fearful, silent and agreeable. It's just another checkpoint, typical for a Sunni in Syria, or a Syrian in Lebanon. They're going through customs. It's Abu and Tola in the role of the oppressor, rudely policing those they came to defend.

They approach a family with five brothers and a sister. Before starting to frisk, one of the boys says to Abu, “If you touch my sister, I'll kill you with my hands.” “Mate, I'm not your enemy, but I am running security. Unless you want your whole family stuck here, hands above your head.” He pats down one brother but two of the other brothers refuses, “I don't think these pigs drive the boat. They're just scum looking for guns.” “The boat's not even here. Fuck them. Fuck you!” he spits in Tola's face.

Abu charges but Tola's wild right hook misses. He's nailed with a left-right combination loaded from each foot and a second older brother had drawn a knife. Abu closed that distance, and grabbed and crushed the older brother's knife hand, and pounded his head with the hilt. Another one has raised his fists but keeps a meter away. Abu turns his left foot in, drops his upper body down, raises his right leg behind and over, and windmill kicks the collarbone of, crushing him into a third brother standing next to him onto the smooth rocks. Abu steps towards the instigator who gets up and runs. Tola's moaning on the ground. The fight is over.

The kid is filming. “Wow, you just beat up a whole family. How do you feel?” Abu squints his left eye, picks up two rocks and bangs them together. The smuggler comes over with a gun in his hands.

“Alright, we're all done here. Hey, all for Cyprus, get the fuck in the boat,” Tola sits up moaning and picks up the knife in the rocks next to him. It's long and serrated. “You'll get nicked in London for that, eh?” “Mate, it's just an old kitchen knife. Toss it into the sea.” “Yeah. Alright.” Abu approaches the teenage girl looking down between them and tacitly pats her shoulders, hips and back. Her brothers scowl and mutter.

The thick crescent moon drops over land as the still waters start to glimmer. A gull squawks, leading to a chorus of sea birds. People's attention idles until a low hum of a motor steals it back. It's cutting fast through the smooth, still water. The boat approaches with only two passengers. It's as steady and purposeful as a tomcat and shuts off its engine, drifting into the rocky beach. In the front of

the boat, a man with a sun marked face and a flannel paunch tucked into tight black jeans stands and address the crowd.

“Travelers! Our departure is on time! Guns, knives, razors and other sharp objects are forbidden, so leave your can openers and shaving kits behind. You too will be left behind if you don't comply. Smoking is forbidden. Believe me folks, these rules are for everyone's safety.” The driver swings a black plastic sack over his shoulder. He hobbles over the thick pontoon and soaks his sneakers plodding to the shoreline where he reaches into the sack and pulls out a stack of orange cones to cordon off a square. The other smuggler joins with a metal detecting wand announcing, “Final check, all, kiss the Levent goodbye.”

“God has called us here to protect the faithful and likewise, He calls them to the soft shores of Europe for protection. The difference between us and them is purpose. I reckon they know nothing about Europe except that it's safe. May they have peace on Earth.”

“In Europe especially, peace comes after jihad. But it doesn't matter how comfortable we are here, we're judged in heaven about how right we are.”

“It's not enough to be right if you're not strong enough to answer to wrong. They flee their Alevite king as the caliphate rises again. Let their wretched souls escape to the West.”

“It's dangerous times. We're drawn to it.”

“Right. To fight the murderous tyrants!”

Tola takes ablution in the seawater to wash the blood and they pray on mats they bought in Istanbul. Travelers pray one last time in their native land. Soft waves accompany hushed verses. Novelty drags them from task to task, women and children board first. Everyone is tired but aware, scared but brave. Dawn's rays push the last few passengers on the boat. Abu's staring right through them. Abu says, “So... or maybe because that part of my life, as a faggot. When I was a kid, this guy made me do it. It fucked me up inside.”

“Typical upbringing mate. You won't make it out of any London orphanage without getting diddled by some pedo. Demons mate, even in the East London Mosque. My father beat me, that fucked me up too.”

“I didn't even know my father's face until after mom died. I tried to remember it from before I left but I just couldn't. So I just imagined that he was the guy on a picture book. When he showed up at my front door, I expected him to be a badass pirate. He took me around the world but all I remember is a bunch of greasy guys and endless ocean.”

The boat is full. The two smugglers have a stack of cash and each carry a pistol, “OK Bon Voyage!” and push them off, firing a few good luck shots. Then they turn and yell to Abu and Tola, “OK Daesh, you need a ride? We'll bring you to Homs but don't cut anybody's head off until you get to Rakka.”

In Syria, the Land Rover is leaking fluids. Its four windows lower and the silent heat simmers in, Bahtiyar sighs and whimpers in agony, holding a wad of red paper towels to his head wound. As Rabi slows to stop he opens the driver's side door triggering the all the lights and signals. He gets out and looks in the back window. For the first time in two hours he opens his mouth, "Slavery is something different here." He's holding a glistening knife next to Duygu's window. She's stiff, bound. "Men and women are empowered by the gifts of Allah... strength... reason... protection." He brandishes the knife and she shuts her eyes. He slips the cold blade between her cheek and the cloth gag in her mouth. He cuts it. "You're under my protection. I promise you won't be raped. You'll work 6 hours a day in Hospital. Follow my instructions and you won't be beaten either. You'll be sent home in a few months, I swear to Allah."

"You have no reason to tell the truth and I have no reason to believe you."

Rabi nods and glances towards Bahtiyar, "Is he going into shock?"

She looks. His breathing is ingressive and shallow.

"I learned about this kid, his father was killed in the Bosnian genocide along with all the men in his village. Should die now for escaping a country that's still full of people that want him dead? And it's not just Bosnia. Last year 25,000 people fled here. Ask anyone named al Balkani, al Rohingya, al Uygar or al Checheni. Then there's al Afghani, al Somali and those who flee from American bombs. They're strangers in their own land. The only thing this boy's guilty of is wanting a better life. Maybe he'll die without you."

"Is this a government sanctioned kidnapping? Who gets the money?" Rabi opens the door and jabs her below the ribs with the blunt end of his knife. It tenses her core. He opens the door and she looks out. "Get out." The flat, dusty earth is faded as yellow, brittle chalk. There's an empty street with a row of shut businesses. Beyond them, the outlet of a pale blue reservoir funnels into a massive dam structure made of thick masses of solid concrete. White rushing water cascades from fewer than half of the turbines and down the embankment into the Euphrates where the river resumes its might and waters the grass on a scattering of islands that connect to Rakka. Across the turbines, reinforced concrete extends out into a strip of trees around the reservoir and an arid plain gradually descending to the east.

"You rat fucker. This is a nightmare. Did you mark me in London? At the race? Where did you follow me from? Where is Abu? What am I here for? Ransom? Rape?"

He jabs her in the ribs much harder this time. She winces but keeps stoic. "Get out of the car," he orders. "Abu doesn't know your here."

The rising sun pitches hard shadows over the landscape, pale blue and faded yellow. Rabi has a black hood in his hand and the knife in the other.

"I won't keep you in the dark. Shariah law shines on everything, punishment, lashings, stoning, amputations and beheading. It's your responsibility to cover your head in public and your chaperon is from al Khansaa Brigade and her name is Khalisa. Your home is here, inside the dam structure. Around the corner is the hospital. Keep good company and keep your freedom."

She looks out from the rim of the dam. The sun grows from an embankment down the the mangled Euphrates valley. The horizon is a gouged out pit and the sun's down in it. By level accounts, the day shouldn't have begun yet. "You're going to save the lives of innocents. In a few months you'll be sent back to your family."

“No.” -This is a nightmare-

“Does your Hippocratic Oath apply here?”

“Keep your dogma and roofies away from me. What did you give that poor kid? Chantix? Sodium Pentathol? What are you gonna do with me? Are you gonna give me drugs or take me to prison if I refuse?” -Calm down, one question at a time. You need help. Learn his secrets.-

“Do what I say. Help Bahtiyar. Afterwards, train doctors. In three months you'll go home. Don't make this difficult to live through.”

“*sigh*” -play along for now.- “He needs a skin graft, anesthesia, forceps, staples. Is there a wound vac? What about his ear? Was it blown apart?”

“No, one piece fell on Hayat's lap, the other's hanging from his head. We need to get them on ice, right? The hospital isn't far, there are supplies inside.”

“Alright, bring me to the surgery.” -fuck-

-Is the Islamic State online?- “...It's six-oh-six a.m. July twenty-third, two-thousand fifteen. Patient's name is Bahtiyar Alivuk...” - I need to send an email to the Turkish police.- “...partial avulsion of the lobus from the auricular oblique muscles...” I guess Abu's here, I should make him kill Rabi, and then kill him- “...avulsed segment is comprised of the helix and antihelix...” -If anyone rapes me I'll go on a killing spree until I'm dead.- “...examination of avulsed segment shows entry wound in the cartilage of the concha between point-five and one centimeter...” -Maybe someone can help me escape- “...ear canal appears undamaged...” -and then I could kill him too- “...temporal bone appears intact, no skull damage...” -Three months is a lie, I'll escape before that- “... a piece of metal appears to have partially torn the lobus and antitragus from the auricle oblique muscle...” -I wonder what my ransom is? I'll spend twenty years paying Daddy back- “...lining of the ear canal is intact...” -Where the fuck is Tabqah? I thought we were going to Rakka- “...inner ear bones may be dislodged...” -Maybe if I were an athlete I could run or fight.- “...prepare the avulsed segment with a plastic prosthetic to replace the damaged concha...” -The Turkish military can't do anything. What the fuck is wrong with the world when a doctor can be kidnapped outside the English consulate by Jihadis!-

“Sister, we don't have prosthetics.”

“Then cut a piece off a fucking water bottle, I'm not taking out rib cartilage for this little terrorist...” -Daddy's gonna be worried sick!-

Duygu finishes washing her hands, turns to leave and sees Hayat standing in the doorway with her arms crossed. She gives a long look before unfolding them, “My English is not good but please listen. I don't know who are you, or why Rabi took you.” She steps into the room and approaches her eye to eye. She looks up and down pausing at the spot of blood on Duygu's sleeve. “But I know that you are a Muslim,” She hugs her and whispers in Duygu's ear, “What appened in Istanbul, it is not Islam. If I can help you, I will.” She stuffs a note into her pocket and they leave together.

Outside the hospital, Rabi's sitting on the hood of his car speaking with a tall woman. He's gnashing and gesticulating angrily. Duygu and Hayat approach and he announces. He snuffs, “This is your chaperon Khalisa, she's from al Khansaa, the women's brigade of the military. She will instruct you on how women should act.” Khalisa shows dark, piercing eyes through the narrow slits in her garment. “Think of her as your guardian, but do not test her. She is a trained soldier.”

Duygu minds every step from the hospital to the dam, looking for security cameras, inconspicuously trying to find spots hidden from view, briefly privy to a gaping view of the Euphrates valley with its eddies and islands rushing towards the city of Rakka. It's a stunning horizon, along the rim of the dam but Khalisa hurries her down a covered staircase with an iron bar concealed in her sleeve. When she's locked in her room, she looks at the note in the pocket of her jeans. It's written in a hasty, loopy cursive. *I can't believe what happened in Istanbul, call me +9630758706673*

Rabi legs are stiff, even after walking from the hospital to the dam. He paces, hops, stretches his waist and shadowboxes. There are a dozen men sitting against a cement wall overlooking the lake. They're drinking water from tall plastic bottles watching a black bearded poet musing and clashing a sword against the plaster corner of a building. *Wake up to the song of swords, and when the cavalcade sets off say farewell.* Side by side, men line up at the waist connecting like a chain of chemicals.

Rabi's opportunity lies in pharmaceuticals, and he takes this moment to remember the formula for thyophyzine; 60 kilograms of tea, 20 kilograms of sugar, 100 liters of water, and aspergillus fungal culture. Sit for 15 days which breaks a methyl group from caffeine, and creates thyophyzine. Lastly strain it from the tea leaves and press through an activated charcoal filter. The fluid on top of the filter should be evaporated off, leaving 85 grams of theophylline.

He quivers with anticipation to have so much chemical courage. He knows that all the generals seek it out to motivate their troops. He also knows that recently sources in Lebanon have dried up and that this supply will sell faster than oil. The generals are going to want to keep the price low, but he'll gain so much clout, he'll be on the fast track to general himself.

He squints at the lake, strokes his emerging beard and introduces himself to an engineer by asking for a drink of his water. "Do people fight here?"

"Of course, we fight Shia, we fight Americans, we fight pagans and infidels.

"What about sport? Is there a boxing league."

"No."

"Right," he steps forward along the dirt edge of lake Rakka to get a better look. "How much power does it make?"

"Well, the turbines are off now and half of them are damaged but that's not the problem. Brother look at the water line. On a good day, this dam makes eight-hundred kilowatts per hour, but we can't make half of that because of Turkey. There are thirty-nine dams in this valley, and Turkey touches all the water first but we will destroy them and remove all the dams on both rivers. When the people are free, the water will flow freely again." Other men echo his sentiments. "All the dams have been touched by Satan. The Islamic State is green and we will send the water to gardens and farms." His words catch attention. "The dams are cursed and we will break them all when we bring Islam back to this valley. The rivers will have no borders. They will crash upon the infidels like a tsunami!" The men break into boisterous poetry and he says quietly to Rabi, "but we were operating at a net loss."

Rabi nods as nearby gunfire blasts and seizes the sound. "By God, We'll send bullets and shells down like rain, on those who reject the Koran." He breaks into a popular verse, and others answer,

Bid them farewell with bullets, just as you received them

Bid them farewell with rockets, just as you received them...
Strike them and curse them and curse those who ally with them...
Destroy the palatial mansions and destroy them
Flog every wrong-doer, flog them

Rabi asks another question, "Do people use drugs here?"

"What drugs? No... not really. You lived in England right? Nothing compared to there."

"What do people use?"

"Nothing really. Medicine maybe, for focus and courage."

"Ah, chemical courage."

"Haha yeah, that seems to be the street name."

"Who uses it?"

"Everybody really, all the men. Some even give it to their wives and kids."

"It's safe for kids?"

"Well, I don't know. It's not very powerful. It's medicine for attention and focus. Our soldiers use it to stay awake on long vigils, but now it seems that even the shopkeepers are using it."

"Is it addictive?"

"Ehhh, I wouldn't know. I'm a civil engineer and a soldier. When the operator of this hydroelectric plant was killed for heresy, I took over."

"Curse his wretched soul. By Allah, this facility is ours." The many men standing around chant victoriously. When the excitement quells, Rabi asks, "So does this facility give power to Rakka?"

"At the moment only for Tabqah. But this lake irrigates farms and provides drinking water for a million people in the region. There's still poetry in the air"

Take it back with fire. Shoot them as they burn.

Soldiers, workers and citizens feel the meter, and shout with the rhythm

Now is the time to rain flames down on them and their allies.

We'll strike them with bullets and they'll tremble.

Their lamentations will be drowned out by the rumble of our weapons.

The call to prayer booms from the minaret and the men smile and disband. -We're very predictable.- Rabi leans into the corner of a wall, waiting for his turn at a washbasin.

“What is your name?”

“Abdel Kamil al Anbari”

“Why have you answered the call?”

“For opportunity to serve the righteous Calipha Abu Bakr al Bagdadi under Allah.”

“What opportunity do you seek?”

“To contribute to the State of Islam.”

“*Allahu Akbar*, what do you have to offer the *ummah*?”

“I’m a chemist, and I’ve brought courage,” Rabi says it clearly, raising his left eyebrow a hair.

The minister of labor pauses for a moment and takes a drink of water. He sets down the glass and resumes eye contact.

Rabi continues, “With the permissions of our mullahs I will set up a pharmaceutical laboratory in Tabqah”

“Have you come here in an excited state brother?”

“No.”

“You know the punishment for intoxication and corruption, is death. Have you come from Europe?”

“Yes brother, England.”

“Is this substances illegal in England.”

“Yes brother, but we can not hold ourselves to the same standard as the English. It is much safer than alcohol.”

“Have you ever used alcohol?”

“No sir, even in London I nourished myself with milk and dates.”

The answer is not good enough for the mullah, “Are you're familiar with Surah five, verse ninety?”

“*Satan wants to excite enmity and hatred among the faithful with intoxicants*. No disrespect to you, but I request the advocacy of the Minister of Health and Medicine.”

The interview shifts gears as the Minister of Labor stands behind his desk and walks towards the closed window. He opens the curtains and says, “New citizens come here every day, from all over the world, Argentina to Yakutsk, all with different experience. Almost all of them come from extreme poverty, violence and oppression. They are strangers until they come here. They praise Allah humbly and they are persecuted for that. Our country is justice, fairness and the Shariat. If this medicine is an intoxicant that causes an excited state—”

“Brother, what I've brought is not an intoxicant because it does not cause euphoria. It improves focus so it is no more dangerous than tea or coffee. It doesn't change the mind, it focuses it. If the one who takes it is a Muslim, he will praise Allah.”

“Yes, perhaps.” he sat back down behind a desk. “Certain medicines, used for focus and bravery on the battlefield, are permissible by Allah. I am neither a soldier nor a scientist, but our Mullahs are

wise in both science and religion. I leave this judgment to them.”

Chapter 36 Outpost

Abu and Tola sit in the back of a rusty old Renault sedan, crossing a heavily militarized border. The smugglers are chummy with the guards at first but when questioned about their passengers, they get angry. Abu and Tola understand nothing of the Sham colloquial Arabic. Their English passports lead to more suspicion. Eventually, money passes hands and Abu and Tola each pay for a visa into Syria. The smugglers says, “Money can get you a lot, including killed. It’ll be easy to find ISIS guys. Go to Uqayribat.”

The other smuggler says, “No, you should go to Salamiyah,” which starts an argument.

“No! Salamiyah is FSA. The soldiers there are al Nusra but the people are Isma’eli”

“That’s not the same thing! And isn’t ISIS the same as al Nusra?”

“No no, not yet. ISIS are those Iraqis who are fucking all the Yazidis.”

“Ah right, the Shariat guys who claimed caliphate, the ones who set up gallows and slave markets to punish infidels.

“Holy fuck, you heathens wanna join *them*?!”

“But they’re everywhere now. They’ve been trying to fuck Homs for a while but can’t seem to push in past Salamiyah. Don’t go there, that’s not your city.”

“Now it looks like they’re pulling out of the Homs province to cum on the Kurds up north.”

“Still, Uqayribat’s always a frontier town, right on the edge of the mountains.”

“You stupid pricks picked the wrong side, but if you’re looking for war, ISIS will provide you with some fantastic violence. Take the minibus, go to Uqayribat. ”

In Homs, they end their ride with the smugglers and stock up food and water. They ride the minibus to Salamiyah and the driver stops, “Well, this is as far as I’m going. Your *ribat* is a couple kilometers down this road,” he parodies the archaic word that’s come back into fashion since the war. “This is your city now, I’m sure you have friends here,” the chauffeur reaches into his jacket and cocks a gun from under the thin windbreaker, “pay me Euros.” Tola reaches for his wallet. “They’ll steal them from you anyway. One hundred pounds, each” and you might as well give me your passports, they’ll steal those too.”

“Take sixty,” as they slowly move to their wallets, the thought of bullets flying through the bus occurs to all of them. Abu breaks the tension, “Well, easy come easy go,” and rifles through a stack of colorful currency until he finds the lavender papers that he’d coveted to collect; a queen on the right, a very busy middle and 20s in a white space on the left. On the ride, Tola’s swollen brain has dulled to a pinprick headache. The hard ground, white sky, dry vacuous air, and empty road ahead of them leads to dark smoke rising. They start walking into the wind as the minibus speeds away.

“First thing, I'm gonna do is learn how to shoot. I want to be a sniper. What about you?” Abu asks.

“Mate, look at you. I don't care how straight you shoot, you're a bodyguard.”

“Well I'm a body guard with a sniper rifle, and I'm not working in Rabi's cadre, that's for sure.”

“He's on a scheme. Something to do with weird drugs.”

“Who can believe that asshole, I didn't come here chasing money and believe me, I can smell a bad egg.”

“Yeah me too,” Tola sniffs the air, “I'm here to exercise.”

“Likewise. A state is more than a set of laws, but I don't want to see people enslaved. I'm sure you heard.”

“Yeah, what? We're at war. Men die, and what of the women? They learn Islam and submission. And the Christians and Jews can become Muslims, or pay *jizya* tax,” Tola stops and grabs a tall dry stalk of a plant. “War spoils.”

Abu's eyes wander away from the road. Unaccustomed to fear, that feeling creeping up his spine is cold arousal.

“Mate, it's proper to earn what you work for. Ahead are the gates of war. I'm sure there's some nastiness by the outpost. Time to raise the black standard,” Tola reaches into his bag and pulls out a flag.

“Wow, proper colors mate. Where did you get that?”

“Mullah Mulligatawny. I brought it all the way from London.” He snaps the stiff stalk off a tall, dry plant and ties the flag to it. The air is rotten and there is no wind. The flag makes a narrow, black triangle and showing white marks in the middle as they walk. A roadblock comes into view. There are gallows at the concrete barriers. Fifteen more minutes in silence towards the foul boundary until they are near enough to see three hung soldiers with flies around their faces. *Infidels* is spray painted across the concrete.

Chapter 37 Usama & Moaman

Day after long day, Usama Bin Yaqtin's childhood chipped away in a salt mine, but he was an ambitious slave who dreamed of freedom. When he wasn't getting salt, he was earnestly imitating the Imam. Through the high valleys of the Afghani North, Usama and the other slave kids walked to the village mosque at the foot of the jagged mountain on Thursday evenings. They finished their day early and wrapped blankets around their shoulders to begin the trek down the winding road. They usually arrived around dusk to greet the Imam. His upright demeanor and proper language was an inspiration to Usama and the others. He would talk about the prophet and heaven and genies and all sorts of amazing histories. Usama would fall asleep and dream of beautiful ladies, glimmering gems and winged horses. On Friday mornings they woke up leisurely and ate fresh bread and eggs outside the mosque.

It was dangerous to try the call the prayer in his presence. If sung clearly, he might notice and invite you up the minaret, but you also might be punished for making fun. Usama wouldn't try it this time.

Late one Thursday evening, crusty from the mines and anticipating the smooth fountains, the kids happened upon a caravan at the water point. A young man saw them and stepped forward, "We're going to the Caliphate, and you all can come. We'll protect you on the road and you can beg or steal bus fare when we reach Kabul." They were mostly Uygurs, with thin beards and narrow eyes. They came from villages between the high peaks. Their caravan had started in Kashgar over a month ago when a group of siblings, fearful they would be sent to deislamization camps, left their village on foot with a few pack animals. They'd been walking an entire month already. More and more pilgrims joined at each village along the way.

Here, at dusk, on the outskirts of Warsaj village, where one would be molested if he wandered too far from the mosque, 6 slave kids, carrying only blankets and a few grains of salt, joined a caravan to Kabul and then, Mesopotamia.

Usama started fantasizing about finding a family there, a mother with a sweet face and big breasts. When the long walk was over there was a long ride in a very nice bus. He was too small to see out the window. As soon as he sat down in the bus, he tried to imagine himself happy. He wanted to relax in heaven with a family but thoughts of the masters kept invading his fantasies. The vibrations of the bus felt more like the trucks in the mine than a winged horse. The masters told him that he hadn't got a mother because he'd been born from a pumpkin, but he remembered the woman who sold him when he was just starting to talk. He even remembered the taste of her milk.

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This shopping center will become a battle field. The basement will be a hub of tunnels and the empty palates will hold crates of explosives. The rooftop terraces will be sniper posts until they're hit by mortars or airstrikes. The exterior walls will be punctured with loopholes and the interior walls will crumble too. The shops will be abandoned and filled with soldiers who will lay in wait for the advantage. Moaman sees the future, but he's sure that war won't come to Uqayribat today. Today, people are here to shop, not to shoot.

Moaman is a commander and part of the extended bodyguard to the Calipha and a general of a reserve infantry troop. His official title is treasurer of war and he sleeps on a bed full of cash. Each evening after sundown he seals it in vinyl laminant and packs it under his mattress.

The usurper who led his tribe to Saffir Shopping Center in Uqayribat to give them all jobs reselling war spoils shares honor among crooks and give good standings to dishonest men. He had known the lay of the land at the onset of the current war and was poised to migrate with opportunity. He was in a party of hundreds of lower Mesopotamian villagers who set off towards the Levent, with an envy towards Palmyra. International businessmen were the first to smell the war, second were the bankers, and third the military. His band call themselves refugees in spite of supplanting the people who'd lived here. He hires poor refugees from other countries to sell mobile phones and artillery in Saffir Mall. He sells burners; short plans that's data gets deleted after a month, but until the plan's end, the SIM's unlimited. He believes his business helps regulate good government under Shariya and frequently cites the Afghani Taliban as a poor example of politicians who don't regulate trade and had to resort to drug dealing.

On their war march, when widows would lie with pistols or knives, Moaman would holster his

weapon when he entered their bedrooms in cities of spoils, It was usually debutantes or student girls whose lives were most valuable. Once in a while, like everything else he'd ever done, he cheated. If they didn't stop struggling he would unholster his weapon and take their sex at that moment. To Moaman, poetry and sex is his act of creation. Kidnapping, rape and ransom is his job. He was intimidated by Shia women, but he knew that Yazidi women were powerless. He hated those devil worshipers and had been waiting to siege Sinjar, had been watching it. As a child, his uncle taught him to pray before breaking, entering and restraining. As a politician he taught children to write poetry. Many jihadi poets use the conceit of a child speaker.

A man should have a large family to build his tribe. When the day Moaman saw the slaves from Warsaj Village wandering near the bus station, looking for shelter and it was kismet. Slaves, escaped from the Taliban north were welcomed and he opened an orphanage in Saffir mall, uncontested by any judgment save the complicit watch of Allah.

His open eye falls upon two strangers, al Ifriki, and al Britani, both speaking English. He touches them and says, "Stranger, we're all brothers here," he pointed at a salesman with a plexiglas box of phones on a collapsible wooden pedestal. "That man selling phones is my brother," The guy smiled sheepishly trying to draw passers by to look at his wares, "and I must kill him for raping his retarded cousin." Abu raised his right eyebrow slightly. "Because she is my cousin too, and family can be a liability as well as a blessing. Friends are the family that you can choose, but if your family commits a grave sin, it's family that must ensure justice." The affluent shopkeeper said it slowly and watched the travelers nod in judgment. "And, it's better to save the souls of those who are born retarded, than those who willfully defy Allah, but enough of my family's dirty laundry. You guys look exhausted, and right off the horse. From far? Please drink a cup of coffee with me."

Abu and Tola nod slightly.

"I insist."

They accept and sit down at a low table. The talkative man continues, "Our military is looking good, Jarabulus is realigned with the caliphate."

More nods. They sit and he orders 3 coffees. "It's a wealthy city. There will be goods and property available. You men look ambitious. What would you do with a shop? What products or services would you sell?"

Before they can answer, a boy arrives masterfully balancing three saucers with small cups of aromatic coffee, sesame sweets and glasses of water. He thrusts the refreshments in front of each man with professional determination. They smell of cardamum rises. "Any cigarettes," he asks.

Moaman takes out a pack, puts one in his mouth, offers one to the travelers, says "We'll quit tomorrow", and lastly gives three to the boy.

"Usama son, if it's in your heart, please recite one of your original poems for our guests."

His eyes brighten and Usama straightens his posture. He looks at the wall between the listeners and clears his throat to drop his voice.

A Taliban Shura enslaved me from birth

They said I was born from a pumpkin

And only in Islamic State do I find

My brothers, the strangers, my family.

The small audience applauds and gives him a few copper coins.

“Please sit a moment. What is your name?”

“My name is Usama. What are your names?”

For the first time they state their taken names, “Abu Simbel al Masqati”, “Abdul Tola al Britani” they shake hands.

“I am Sheikh Abu Moaman al Badia. Pleased to meet you. Now about my question. What do you want to do here?”

“We're here to fight for the Caliphate.”

“Ah. Good.”

“But we're both mechanics by trade, and I'm a semi-professional boxer.”

“I'm also a stunt motorcyclist.”

“Very good, every squadron will want you. Of course, the mujahideen duty is to the Caliphate and you may not choose your *shura* but shall be assigned where your skills are needed most. Welcome to Uqayribat, truly an outpost town. I invite you to train with my squadron. As it happens, I'm a reserve commander and I can begin your training immediately. Uqayribat is the rear base of our operations in Lebanon and Homs but operations there are slowing down. Soon we'll go North. It's no secret that the main campaign is against the Kurdish armies concentrating on the Turkish border.”

“We've been following the news with pride. Our State is reborn, we're here to support it in battle.”

“Your training in my *shura* includes shadowing other soldiers in the field so you might get that opportunity by the end of the week. Between battles, there are other opportunities. Our State's economy is thriving. We don't engage in villainous usury and we're rich in war spoils. ” Sheikh Moaman claps as he stands, “glory to Allah, contact me this afternoon and I'll find you comfortable rooms. May Allah provide for you.”

At the opportunity, Moaman will mobilize his soldiers into Palmyra where he plans to dig up two thousand tons of dolerite from the surrounding desert for concrete aggregates. He will ship it to a factory in Rakka. There've been at least five tribes vying for control of the concrete factories in Rakka and he would claim one. He had enough vehicles, machines, laborers, warehouses and fuel to strip mine the desert between Palmyra and Abu Hamam and afford his full retirement, but there was one more deal that could get enough money to send the brightest of his kids to school abroad, and it involved those Yazidi girls that were waiting in the back of one of his trucks.

He had four wives and ten children, in two towns. He procured weapons and destroyed buildings. His concrete would be bagged and ready about a month after they controlled Palmyra. Iraqi Kurds didn't give a fuck who sold them oil and concrete. Moaman's first few truckloads would earn enough money to pay his army to obtain the remainder of the minerals between battles. He groomed social groups and bought their orphans. Taking kids from the defeated had prevented much bloodshed. Albeit Moaman kept his conscience clean by steering away from mortal violence, he'd certainly trafficked it on the frontier. He prayed tense and clenched to chase away the transitory arguments and sinful terms under the foundations of his business and life.

At one time his dungeons were a celebrity tour. He'd captured a teenage pop-star named Jiřia and her friends and ransomed them for tens of thousands of dollars. The girl had written an anthem for

Homs to her sisters, *we have our pride as diverse as we are, we have our freedom to support the stars*, and released a salsa video that showed a disinterested tigress, heifer and mare leaving the bull and stallion behind at the zoo to go to nature. The video was funded by a central banker in Damascus who happened to be Jiřia's father and the director of this clip. She was sold and Moaman lost his anonymity.

These Brits are the kind of prestige immigrants that Moaman could use to draw in business and shield his reputation. That famous guy, Jihadi John's face was all over Dabiq. British Muslims had a certain flair for oration and maybe these guys could be professional speakers. English Islamic education was good, one of the best foreign education systems for young men to learn Arabic and the Koran. These young men were strong, smart and ambitious. As the determinism of Islamic youth rages and concentrates in the streets of Rakka, Uqayribat was a quieter town where business could be done. Sheikh Moaman recruited them to his squadron on the spot. They would train nearby and travel to the battlefield very soon, to get a taste.

As the Syrian Army amassed in Damascus. In Homs, propaganda blistered the business of the Shiites and their wounds spilled pus all over all the Sunnis. In Islamic State hands, Uqayribat's market stalls inexplicably fill with fresh vegetables and men with contagious smiles encourage one another to follow the example of the Prophet and stop smoking. They look to the Elders, sat low at store fronts, listening to their words and mimicking their examples for posture and voice. The main square has a small congregation of robed men and boys to simulate the *sunnah* of the prophet Muhammad.

8-year old Hamza's poem is patriotic; father why this life is full of hardship? And why can we never stay in one place.

The event has been captured on glistening video, a clear picture to pride and new nationalism. But they're all actors. The elders, arrived that day with a group of traveling poets and will leave to the next town as soon as they're paid. They camera crew are Islamic State propagandists who chased the actual elders into their homes. Tacitly, this state will rise and fall. That it's a proxy to reverse the flow of warfare is liminal, and thanks to the influence of Captagon, allegiance beyond the last battle when the Islamic State is reborn into the minds of all sworn to defend the newest and oldest nation and Caliph is established.

Abu and Tola both recite the shahada, "Lah ilaha ilallah Muhammadur rasolu ilaah." They swear their loyalty to the Islamic State with original prose. Abu begins, "Almost a hundred years after its collapse in a war between infidels, the Caliphate is once again established following the line of the Umayyids, the righteous Calipha Abu Bakr from Baghdad, may his reign endure."

The evening illuminates with fire. All beautiful and grotesque displays of masculine assonance masquerade. Horses, motorcycles, market goods, children and the news crew means labored showmanship, bravado, and smiles. Brothers squint and exhale after the cameras are turned away. The men whose beards have been growing since the fall of Saddam Hussein have an evil mischief in their eye and are the first to exhale and the last to look away.

Upon exhalation, a very select group of warlords make their way to the ancient temple outside of town. They unleash all their personal ticks into the shadows with growls and water splashed into their anus with a cupped hand. Ancient Byzantine mosaics display deer and peacocks, the animistic roots of one of the great empires of Abraham. The ISIS crumple its history with prayers. They prey quietly on the dirt edge of archaeological pits. There are tents in the pits.

A lorry stops and two men wearing flack vests stride the length of the vehicle to lower a ramp. The doors open and there are women and girls. One charges forward with a scrap of metal. Two more

women also attempt to rush the guards. They are knocked and held down. The first woman is struck hard across the forehead with the stock of a rifle. "It's time for school bitch." The other two women are choked out and slump into the dirt. All three are dragged away by rapists.

The remaining women stare at the dark metal floor of the truck bed. They can't make eye contact, can't vocalize their thoughts not to cry out, to mutilate their rapists genitals, to feign enjoyment and perhaps shorten the rape. They trudge down, black out, out into the dark pits, down to endure their worst fear, each step willing their soul to leave their bodies, finding solace in some memory.

These men are being rewarded for acts of holy war dating back to ISIS' dovetail with al Qaida in Iraq. Soldiers who had led raids on American squads were offered these women. Gunmen who came back from surprise acts of terrorism were promised young virgins. Mullahs decided and announced in sermons that girls who worshiped idols were fit for slavery, and any man can buy, sell or fuck his slave. American troops had stopped patrolling the villages full of young girls who worshiped a fallen angel.

Moaman set up a camera, and pans to the girl, stripped to her underclothes, "look up, show your face," she raises her eyelid slightly. "Hard to say the devil worshiping bitch isn't beautiful, eh?" He pans down to reveal an ancient mosaic of a peacock. "Some kind of pagan image. These are the birds they worship," he spits. He puts the camera in the corner and grunts, "get in the bed." When she doesn't respond, he grabs her arm and pulls her to the cot, aroused by his own power. Sadism courses through his veins. "If you move I'll hang you while I screw you. I'll keep you right at the edge of life. Are you a virgin? I don't want to get my clothes messy. What's wrong bitch, don't you understand? Did I get a Kurdish speaking one? Well, I guess we'll find out."

He laughs as he disrobes." Mutter your heathen prayers if it pleases you. No? Last week, I raped an American soldier while he sang his national anthem. Something about stars and stripes. I made his white ass red and blue." He rubs his erection and gropes around before tearing her remaining garments off. He spits on his hand and slaps it under up against her genitals and exhales a few guffaws before thrusting his penis inside her. Pain shoots down her back, clenching the walls of her vagina. Her nerves snap at their failure to tighten and he foists her into shock, which rushes up her spine to turn off her consciousness.

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Tola shares a tall bottle of water with Abu. "Mate, I gonna pop that pin head of Rabi's when I see him," Abu grabs the tall plastic bottle, "I'll wring his complex. If he thinks his drug factory has enough guards to stop me and my brothers-"

"Mate! Can't wage war within the State. You wanna settle something? You're gonna have to set him up, and make it look like friendly fire."

Black and white, slow motion, explosive videos of decent quality produced with Japanese equipment feature camels and falcons, an awful lot of expensive motorbikes, vehicles speeding through the desert, hatred for national boundaries, empathy for Muslims who feel like strangers in their homelands, fighters relaxing, reciting "let him with the wretched soul taste humiliation, strike him in his home and scatter his body everywhere, let him let him with the wretched soul taste humiliation."

On the radio, *It's the last Jumada of al Awwal, 1441. Breaking news about Jihad in Europe. We've been following the location and actions of two Islamic State brothers who attacked the headquarters of blasphemous media outlet Charlie Hebdo. We've just heard that our brothers' stolen*

car has been found, by Interpol in Northern France. Islamic State brothers killed an entire police squadron after avenging the prophet Muhammed—may peace be upon his name—. The heroes Sayid and Cherif are in a village north of Paris, continuing their jihad which has been ripping through Paris for three days. Whether they return home or welcome the lions to Europe, their martyrdom strengthens our resolve, as we build the Islamic State and bring honor back to our religion. May Allah curse France.

Related to this, we have here in the studio the wife of brother Abou Bashir Abdoullah al Ifriki. Sister welcome and thank you for making the difficult journey here. «Thank you for having me.» El hemdula ile. What was it like to grow up in France. «It was like a desert. There are little oasis of propriety. Islamic centers and Mosques, immigrant neighborhoods but so much is vile and viscous, and the big problem with that is that the Muslims living there are subject to incredible temptation.» What advice would you give to Muslims there? «I can't even explain to you how vile and vicious their sins are there. It's worse than you think. We all know France encourages homosexuality, but they even allow them to fornicate in public. I swear to Allah. I visited a McDonald restaurant there and they were fornicating inside. It's horrid.» Wow, They'll burn in hell for their sins. «I would advise all Muslims who have the energy to make their pilgrimage to come here. Europe is getting worse and worse.» Your husband—glory to his martyrdom—was participating in the coordinated attack. He was part of a sleeper cell right? He trained and fought together with Sayid and Cherif. How long had they been planning this jihad? And when did he meet the heroes who attacked the blasphemous magazine? «They met in prison when they were both very young. They were serious about Jihad for nearly twenty years, since the American invasion of Iraq at least.» Did you meet any others who waged Jihad on France? «Yes, we broke our fast together many times during the holy month. And we traveled to meet with elders whose history of Jihad in Europe goes back generations.» And what were they like? «Well, they were very serious, but polite.» France and Europe has famously strict laws on owning guns or other weapons, How they able to collect machine guns and rocket launchers under the nose of the Interpol and the French police? «Haha, that I don't know. They had another apartment across the city and some friends in the French military» Wow, el hemdu. After he escaped the Kosher Market he martyred defending the honor of our prophet in street combat. Was he training with weapons in the house? «No, not in the house. He kept those parts of his life separate... secret. 'You're a wife, not a soldier', he used to say. Then, he told me to pack a bag... that friends would arrive in the morning. He said that he would meet me here, or in heaven. He told me nothing until the day he came with weapons. It explains his strange behavior, staying out at night, new friends, different phones. It all makes perfect sense now. He kept secrets, but I know now that he's with Allah and I am jealous. His heart burned with desire to join his brothers and fight the enemy of Allah on Caliphate land. His eyes gleaned each time he would see Islamic State videos and he would say 'don't show that to me' because he wanted to leave immediately.»

“We always execute our prisoners and every soldier needs to practice combat killing with a knife. These dummies are anatomically correct. Plunge your knife into their abdomen and it feels the same that it will feel like in battle. We need to know the feel of the kill, because our battle marches are so successful, and we take no prisoners. We follow the standard of the prophet Muhammad—peace be on his name—and *subhan* Allah gives us victory even when we're outnumbered. Our soldiers are the Strangers, reunited after difficult lives and long journeys. The future armies of the Caliphate will look back on these battles for inspiration and further transformation.

*Your blood is a red bridge to victory and a passageway to eternity
Your blood is a storm of resolve and zeal
a fire that consumes our enemies a fire that purifies the soul of doubt.
and tomorrow it will liberate Jerusalem.*

“Brothers! At arms! You are soldiers of the Almighty Commander. Your training has made you fierce warriors. You have been selected for your unstoppable devotion to the Jihad. Target the enemy and show no mercy.” Sheikh Abu Moaman al Badia paced across the front line of his squadron, addressing them under the bright midday sun.

Abu stands at the field commander's right flank and shoots a wide eyed glance at Tola who stands behind with the mechanics. -Anyone who's showing fatigue, or not paying attention is a goner, blown up by the first few booby traps.- He says a prayer for the soldier with drooping eyelids. Tola looks whose shoulders slump and ears twitch and prays that Allah accept their martyrdom.

-Withdrawal symptoms- Tola sees in the listless soldiers, diminishing returns on dopamine re-uptake leading to lack of focus, head aching, irritability and restlessness. Just like the East London Mosque, he sees brash, young teenagers with different mother tongues say *brother* together in Arabic. They're ideologically bonded because they trust their orders and eachother's oaths. Tola thinks again about the pack of speed he sold to Rabi. He plans different outcomes when their paths cross again. It'll likely be very soon on the battlefield.

“Moaman my friend. How are you?”

“Abdullah, thank you. How is Bosnia? I hear the government is moving in on your camp.”

“Yes, I'm in Croatia at the moment with all of our assets. Of course we left a few retards and broken guns behind so that Interpol feels like they accomplished something. This is the week of the Zagreb conference.

“That's right, the conference.” Moaman knows that diplomats, spies, businessmen and representatives from various Western and Middle-Eastern powers will meet to discuss deals. Abdullah is an experienced diplomat who is able to represent the Islamic State without direct ties and his mission is to try to funnel Saudi and American money towards ISIS in the form of weapons, training support, oil and cold hard cash.

“There's plenty more to offer here. In fact I have fifteen white slaves to sell.”

“Are they young? Virgins? In Libya, they're worth fifteen-thousand dollars each. Send them to Sirte, they already have an auction block set up. If you can get a load of white girls there, their wallat's will explode faster than their dicks.”

“Can you arrange a transport?”

“I will look into it.”

Chapter 38 Theophylline

“My God in heaven and hell! Save me from this pit of suffering!” Alone in a windowless room, a woman wails, seized by her birthing contractions. Linoleum tiles echo her cries in the basement of the hospital. Duygu looks towards the midwife, a lean, middle-aged woman with deep set eyes. “She's only at six centimeters, we'll check on her in six more contractions.” Duygu nods at the attending midwife then notices that Khalisa is staring at her. This is Duygu's first overnight in the emergency gynecology. Her mind struggles to remain vigilant amidst birth and afterbirth. It's getting close to dawn and she's been working for seven hours already. The emergency gynecology is a wing of the sub-basement of Tabqah hospital, a square hallway with ten birthing rooms on the outside and a nurses office, neonatal incubation units and break room in the central block. This evening, the staff is a single Nurse-midwife, two Attendant Midwives, Duygu and another apprentice.

Consciously she knows what's happening. She feels her heart softening with each baby's first breath and tries to harden it against Khalisa, knowing that she keeps a metal pipe in her sleeve, and a gun in her locker. The maternity ward is a sacred place and here is this jail keeper, using violent coercion against the midwives. They are welcoming, kind and matriarchal. Khalisa mostly sits silently writing in a notebook. Ayshe, the Nurse Midwife has been in this hospital for thirty years. She says to Duygu in English, “I'm sorry dear. Not the best days, but we're lucky they don't bother us here. You're a young doctor and I'm an old midwife. Our responsibility is to mothers and babies. I would send you home if I could, but your purpose seems to be here. After you can travel and marry and earn money and raise a family. I'll be here the rest of my life.”

Some things she can't help but get used to; the howls of women in labor, the absence of men and the friendly sorority it creates, the five daily prayers done collectively. Other things are a surprise every time; the segregation of faces, Khalisa's bipolar reactions, public discipline. She sees culture, stripped down of any meaningful image, allowed only to decorate itself with words, a living poem expounding on a beautiful and terrible god. She keeps her ears pricked for minuscule sounds; an electric motor, the sound of someone breathing, voices behind a closed door. She holds a stethoscope to a pipe in the bathroom and hears a Rabi's voice, ... *worked like ... kid. Yeah, hypnotized ... Columbia... believe...*

She thinks about the surgery. It wasn't perfect. Any other hospital would have a real surgeon on staff instead of a hostage. He was awake the whole time but didn't flinch. His eye was active, darting to focus, keyed in and responsive to every word said. When she finished, he thanked her kindly. “Get some sleep”, she said. He closed his eyes. Like a dream, nothing is strange, anything is possible. Duygu suspects he was on drugs. Maybe drugs can yok Khalisa and she can ride her out of this place like a flying horse. She recites the phone number again 075-870-6673

For the time being, her duties in hospital are a comforting bridge from the life she was torn from; the scrubs and other sterile fabric, beeping machinery monitoring pairs of heartbeats, her duties are all comforting and familiar. Through the throes of labor she learns to direct women's breaths. The midwives teach her to listen to the rhythm of their contractions and help them use their lungs and diaphragm to push and stretch their birth canal and perinea.

Duygu and Ayshe are alone in the nurses office when another wail booms expectedly down the hallway. “Oh God, tear this demon from my belly! *Aieeeeeee*”. Unphased, Ayshe says, “Let's go. By the

way, this woman is Turkman. You can talk to her. You're ready. Breathe, push, rest, repeat."

It's 3 am. By the time they enter, she's asleep between contractions. Ayshe announces herself but is met only with snores. Duygu follows, pushing a metal cart with umbilical scissors, compresses, a box of gloves, and surgical masks laid out. She looks at the woman, lying on her side with her knees curled up towards her chin, a fair amount of pre-birth fluids dripping from her portal. She sleeps for a precious moment as Duygu gives a last check to the heart monitor, 80 bpm for the mother, 160 for the child. Duygu arranges a place to lay the newborn, and turns on the overhead lamp. Triggered by the moment, the woman rolls back and groans. She's young. Her temples and cheeks pull back and she opens her mouth and eyes to exclaim a sharp, angry shout. Duygu approaches her and says, "I'm here. I can help." comforts her, "You're close. A few pushes and you'll be through. Okay now, a deep breath."

In the kitchen that serves the military barracks, Hayat prances and muses like a dreamy princess. "Everything must be clean and wonderful. These plates are used by mujaheddin." Breakfast is finished and the soldiers have returned their dirty dishes through the mess portal along with few random notes of love poetry which are read, shared and cherished with giggles.

Hayat's new life fits her. She took a civil examination and was put to work immediately. She calls Rabi, "Hello dear, I hope you don't mind, I'm calling to ask a favor. As you know, firstly I'm Muslim, but I am also a woman and I feel a responsibility to protect others." *Yes, that's great. Hey, just a second... do you know Dabiq? ... well, I have a friend there and, it's just, your words are so proper and poetic, he could write a beautiful article about you. May I record this conversation?* She pauses a moment, "Alright, you may record." *Great. -tap tap click- Ok, start again please* "I said, I want to protect the women of the State so I took the exam for al Khansaa, and I joined a meeting to show my interest." *I can't think of a better career. You are strong and virtuous. Have you met anyone from al Khansaa? They are the deadliest women in the world. Are you sure you want to join the military? You might be sent to Kobane.* "Really?" *Haha, maybe. All soldiers in training visit at least one battle, even the women.* "I'll shoot straight at any Kurdish women's brigades. Those sluts show their public hairs to distract the mujaheddin. Excuse my language. It just bothers me that they use themselves as bait like that. Such a dishonorable way to fight." *Yes I agree.* "So anyways, I received another proposal today, hand delivered from a field commander named Emrullah Ismail. I watched him from the window. He's very handsome, but I think he's too old. I want to marry someone young," *Listen Hayat. -Tap Tap Click- "and powerful."* *I'm going to Kobane and...* Hayat interrupts, "a mujaheddin, but also a businessman." Rabi talks over her, *...when I return...* She continues, "Brother Emrullah devotes his life to jihad, and has two wives." *May I ask you to...* "My husband should give me ten years before he takes a second wife." The line goes quiet. "Rabi?" — *Yes... I think five years, and he should swear it to Allah.* She pauses and takes a deep breath. She thinks, in five years half the men here will be dead. She says, "Look Rabi, I'm a widow, so I know love. Maybe we should wait a year. If we're both still single," *Look, I'm meeting some rich donors. I've prepared some remarks. Would you listen and give me comments?* "Ok, I'll listen." *Ok... Our state is complete with civil services, law and an economy under shariah. Our hospitals are the best in all the Levant. But all of our courts, hospitals and ministries are operating through embargoes from the infidel nations of the world. Buying medicine is difficult and expensive because our supplies come through their black market. We've just opened a laboratory to make some essential medicines but it's only the beginning. To operate independently, we need funding so we're not at the mercy of foreign suppliers. Our emergency clinics, doctor's offices, maternity wards, pharmacies, laboratories and medical supply station are funded from private donors.* "Sure it's good, a little wordy. I'd change the part about being at the mercy of foreign suppliers, we

don't want to come off as weak.” *Right, ok. I'll just say... We're expanding our production.* “Keep it simple. By the way Rabi, it happens that al Khansaa has a very important prisoner, a kind of Shia princess who was married to a general. She has information about Assad's spies. Do you have a truth serum that could help them?”

From the opposite side of the locked door Duygu listens as she deposits the nightly report into a drop box. *Wow, look who's moving up the ranks. Ok, I can make the order, who's it for?... Ok, yes I miss you too. I'll call you when I return from Kobane.* He hangs up.

He calls Duygu on the hospital phone “There's something happening here that's within your control. If you want a good life, you can take it now. Abu, he's not like me. He's an orphan, a good man. He came here to start a family. You would be a powerful family. If you refuse, I hope your family will pay fifteen percent of their assets to see your safe return.”

“Is Abu here?”

“I left him in Istanbul.”

“Why? Isn't he your friend?”

“He had to find his own way.”

“So he's here?”

“Inshallah.”

“None of this makes any sense. Why did you kidnap me? You really think my family can afford a princess' ransom? Did you do it for clout? Did you think I'd stay here?” she spits. “You're worse than the English. You wanna be a kingpin mujaheddin, but no one believes in you. If they did, you'd be here with Abu and Tola. They'll pull you under the dirt with the worms. Fucking around with mental drugs. What do you expect is going to happen? You'll be tortured before you'll die betrayed, and you'll go to hell. Your sins will leave you there for a dozen lifetimes. When you kill me, look me in the eye, I want to remember your face when I see you there.” She hangs up the phone. Rabi flicks a message to Khalisa.

She enters in a pink headband with a gold kalishnakov. She approaches Duygu who sees the golden machine gun and marks it, reads the letters, and gets a unexpectedly hard forearm to the belly. She's handcuffed and pushed back to the dam complex. She descends the staircase with upward pressure on her back cuffed arms. She's pushed into a cell with the other hostages. Two of them are sitting on a couch reading magazines. They barely flinch. She gets up. There is a barred window overlooking the Euphrates valley, spotted with green islands, all the way to Rakka.

Duygu's on the floor. She looks up visualizing the badge. She puts her hands on the ground, bracing and raising, slowly. Exhausted from the torment of observing botched pharmaceuticals, unnecessary surgery, and sick women get checked up without understanding a word the doctor said. She knows there's a drug within her grasp, that she can use to shackal and ride Khalisa like a winged horse.

At hospital, Duygu's watches a woman writhe, shake and cry out for her husband and then, in his absence, Allah. She curses the demons clawing out of her anus. Duygu witnesses her lamentations and breathes through her teeth. There are sharp instruments all around.

On her late-shift break, she tries on the forged al Khansaa headband and tests her boundaries

past the maternity ward. Some areas are unisex by necessity; supply depots, the courtyard, the pharmaceutical desk and a few hallways between them. While wearing a burka, she's surprised by her near invisibility. People avert their eyes at a distance. No one approaches her. One day she tests her luck and tries on the forged headband. People turn the corner.

In her office as well as the dorm cell there's an intranet of articles and Islamic literature in dozens of languages. There are pages and pages of poetry...

*Father, I have traveled a long time among
deserts and cities.*

*It has been a long journey, Father,
among valleys and mountains,
So long that I have forgotten my tribe, my
cousins, even humankind.*

-Osama bin Laden

Sometimes she considers herself lucky. She's a prestige hostage. The other hostages in her room trifle about the price of each other's ransom. They all share stories about their kidnapping and the treatment of other captive women. -Thousands of women are enslaved here. It's unthinkable. - You think it's bad for us? You should see what's done to infidels. - I hope our captors are all killed by Kurdish women!-

They narrate the life of a slave girl named Melek, a Yazidi girl from Sinjar who sits in a dungeon, staring at the rainbows in an oily puddle. She's seen her husband executed with a knife, and chose that moment for her death, a suicide of the spirit for the body to follow. Never to show kindness to her captors, to Islam, to bear children, only death. In a dungeon with with kindred strangers, she stares at oil stains for hours, reaching down and picking up the swirling patterns, drinking handfuls and tasting sensations she'd never experienced before. She's fed strange green leafy vegetables that were forbidden too, but what does it matter. She's already on her way to heaven. A group of women, some older villagers, one or two soldiers, recite their holy stories in Arabic or Kurdish and even through the language barrier, they hear and understand the stories of their shared culture. They're daughters of Adam but not Eve, and the Peacock Angel is leading them to heaven where no tongue can confuse their faith. They'd fled, hid on a mountain and waited for salvation that didn't come. Melek's village however, didn't evacuate. They knew there was no where to run, so they just prayed. Melek's husband gathered the kitchen knives and waited by the door, but in the end, they all just knelt down and prayed together. The latch outside the door opens and the smell of rice arrives with it. "You're going to be released, eat dinner first." When the door opens, a girl lunges at the intruder and is slapped to the floor. Rabi looks at his stinging hand, "You bitch, eat off the floor." and throws a handful of rice onto the dirty ground. He slams the door and walks past a group of heavily armed, young men reciting poetry. He pauses and listens for a moment,

*Ask Mosul, city of Islam, about the lions—
how their fierce struggle brought liberation.
The land of glory has shed its humiliation and defeat
and put on the raiment of splendor.*

A brother sees him and jumps up, "Peace and greetings Brother,"

"Greetings and peace."

"Rabi, what about the chemical courage?"

"Well, the first ingredient is here. Let me make a phone call. A brother in Rakka is extracting theophyllene from tea leaves. In a few days," he gapes his eyes and raises his brows as he takes out his phone, "wow."

"Hey Abdul, how's it going." *Yeah, good. It's in a big container. Starting to stink.* "What's it smell like, does it smell like a cafeteria?" *Eh, more like pussy.* "What does the fungus look like? Is a black fuzzy layer?" *I don't know, you told me not to open it for 6 days.* "Well, when did you start it? Friday." "Okay, it's Thursday. Go open it. I'll wait." *Okay... Yeah it's black.* "When you took off the lid, did it pop?" *Take it off? I ... It was already off. I think the wind blew it off.* "How long has it been like that?" *3 days maybe?* "3 days?" *Yeah, I mean. I couldn't really watch it. This week was my sister's honeymoon and their room is right next to mine, so I've been out camping.* "Brother you're forgiven. I'm coming on Saturday and we need another day for the filter. Strain out the tea leaves now. This is the most important part! Don't spill any. Pour it slowly through the strainer. Don't slosh it around. After Friday we'll remove the water and maybe, with Allah's blessing we'll still get the substance." Rabi hangs up, nods at the brother and calls commander Abu Kahtab al Kurdi, "Sir, we'll be ready for anything at the end of this week."

Duygu sees Khalisa fall asleep at the end of a shift. She grabs her phone. 0758706673 She starts texting. *This is Duygu, please don't respond. I'm deleting both these messages from this bitch's phone. Show the next one to Rabi.* She can feel her pulse in her fingertips as she texts. She hopes it's plausible that Khalisa would send Hayat a message in English. *This is Khalisa ;) just between us girls, do you know anything to help with an interrogation? I hear you've got connections at the new pharmaceutical lab. I can pick it up tomorrow.*

Chapter 39 More bad guys

Titus Memon Zekomo, TMZ Samsom crawled backwards in a line, holding the ankle of the cadet in front of him. President Banda had ordered it. It was strange, but by no means unheard of for the increasingly despotic President for Life, now nearing his eighteenth year in office. He seemed thirsty for capitol punishment. He'd fired a senior officer because his uncle wasn't a party member. There were rumors he was going senile, that Banda was already seventy when he took power and was now approaching ninety but no one dared challenge the official report that he was forty.

In his career, TMZ took the chain from around his neck and swung it into faces. He'd killed cabinet members with a hammer – baby vipers, as Police Minister Tembo called them. But when one was severed, two heads grew back. The soldiers and the police were ostentatiously sycophantic. Torture was a necessary evil and it was lucrative. It was everywhere, interwoven into the fabric of politics. The

best chance he had to escape it was vicariously – to raise a child and send her away to university in America or England, so he married the most beautiful woman he could find and requested a transfer to a rural military base.

But rebels stormed it. Gun shots shook him out of bed and he grabbed his weapon and charged out. Behind him, his family was shot down and killed. He crawled under the bed that was slowly soaking with blood. That night, all the money he'd made, bodies he'd maimed, flashed through his mind. He could no longer justify the blood and the money nonetheless, he wanted more.

When the smoke cleared in the morning, the base was smashed and ransacked. The previous day all the trucks had been lined up in a row and everyone's top button was fastened. TMZ looked at all the smoldering rubble and bodies. The other survivors met in a pavilion and discussed.

"We'll be suspects. I won't be tortured again." "I'm sick of service! Shaving every day. Pthu!" "We'll go to jail if they don't find the attackers." "At least."

A decisive voice announced, "Countrymen! I have an offer, one for all. I have a hidden house next to the lake." They all listened. "You all know me."

"What was your name again?"

"Sandhi, ask me anything! I too want to live on my own terms and defend my country. Let's take the weapons to build a fortress. I have friends in Karonga. The government just shut down their business so now they protect the lakeside city. We could protect the countryside. We'll charge a little tax and strike at the rebels that killed our families. We'll charge a little tax, and steal from the rebels. We'll all get rich. Taking will be easy. I have a boat, a fort and local connections. The trucks and weapons are here."

"Don't you mean *you'll* get rich! We'll be like slaves."

"Yeah, and who's to say the government won't hunt us down and find us?"

Sandhi continued to convince, "The fort is really well hidden, and they won't go looking for us because we'll burn all the bodies here. I'll pay you fairly—kill me if I break my word—better than Tembo or Banda. And the work will be easy."

One man stood and saluted the tattered flag of Malawi. "We swore oaths to it. Green, the land we live on. Red, the fight to keep it. Black, us the people. This nation was our new dawn. We won this country with our struggle." The men's faces were stiff. "But it has corrupted us. Ok. let's take what we can."

They gathered all the vehicles, weapons, and supplies and traveled across the countryside to a road hidden in the woods, on the edge of Lake Malawi. They plotted revenge until it got cold. They said that maybe someday they would find the rebels, or overthrow Banda but they just terrorized the Great Rift Valley villages. Before long TMZ was glad he lost his family, and his humanity. Evil impulses were easier to follow than the mood swings of a beautiful woman. As a bandit, he could do or say whatever he wanted.

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TMZ was on the perimeter of their forest hideout with heavy weapons. He frequently lost focus to get drunk or masturbate in the guardhouse. The hard part was acting like a gangster, and not a fat bastard. He was always looking for ways to relieve stress. There was a lot of gold and dangerous men in these woods and sometimes he felt like they were all plotting against each other, all stranded

together in these woods, not even able to go to town. But life wasn't so bad. They had big guns, a salary and a visit into the slave harem if they did something useful.

He'd spent the last years as a lover but he found his hate again here. When the boss said, "Take this out back and flog her with nettles", he wasn't sure if he should laugh or grunt. The boss said that he lacked both humor and a spine but better to be spineless than a skeleton who told jokes.

When the attack came, TMZ was at lookout posts with two other guards, daydreaming about killing them, and getting away with it. He was in the guardhouse with the weapons cache, neatly concealed at the edge of a thick woods where a stream diverged into a dozen rivulets. The tree cover gave the ability to see without being seen... or so he thought.

A gunshot rang out. He looked to his partner in the tree lookout. There was no one. He grabbed a gun and slowly crept towards the north point where another guard was looking north with pricked ears. "Listen, do you hear that? A helicopter, coming over the hill."

They looked and saw all ten meters of the fucking Mil-mi loft up over a green hill, its trajectory straight at them. The other guard grabbed TMZ's collar and pulled him in tight, peeking out the window. He pointed a crooked finger "When that thing gets past that tree, shoot it out of the sky! I'm going to get more rockets. Where are the ones that follow hot engines?"

"In the locker. But watch out from the west. It's a squad." TMZ wonders aloud, "Could Bantu rebels have a helicopter?"

Rising up from the hill to the North, the helicopter was as big and loud as a rhinoceros beetle at arms length. When it increased its speed, its size and threat swelled. "Ok, nice big target," TMZ shouldered his weapon and set the rocket off. The helicopter returned fire. Bullets dug into the trees, and the rocket exploded in mid-air.

The other bandit ran back to the guard house, bow-legged with a box of rockets balanced on his belly, and another launcher slung over his shoulder. He set it down and got equipped. They shot two rockets, one a heat seeker. But from the west, an engine! Faster, higher RPMs, a motorcycle. Then it stopped, they looked back at the rockets, but a bullet ripped through his neck before he got the satisfaction.

TMZ was watching the rockets fly towards the aircraft and the moment before contact, the hook pulled yaw left, rose sharply and slipped over the lead missile. The second rocket followed the heat trail of the first. He looked down and saw his partner bleeding on the ground. The motorcycle was again speeding down the road so he picked up his last rocket and crawled to a seated position behind a tree to attach it.

The approaching rider had dismounted and was using the trees as cover. TMZ got his finger on the trigger, but too slow. He took a bullet through the neck. As he died, he managed one last clench of his finger. The rocket flew randomly into a tree.

The Mesopotamian winds used to tickle the grass and blow its seeds on the ground, now it blows its topsoil into dust. Until the 1960s, Syria had lakes quaking with fish. In between wars, empires neglect to reign and Kurds ruled it lax. Their militias rode through seldom, in casual uniforms asking for nothing but recognition and shouting, Kurdistan in Mesopotamia!

Kobane sits far between the two rivers. Although it gets little rain, it's fertile. There are no ancient ruins, no valleys, mountains or streaming water. Mistanour Hill sits to the south, connecting the city to a highway. The other strategic points – a forest park to the East and the Turkish border to the North – are controlled by Kurdish forces. Until recently, there were half a million people here, but for the last two years, seven different armies declared war on Kobane.

It was the same old sale that's been going on since the Assyrian empire. The land owners arm troops and convince the peasants that the homeland is rising. The regime retaliates, the Kurds flex, the Islamists shout Jihad, which perturbs the Golem who demands that the earth be watered with the salty, crimson blood of the youth. Shudder to think that more than half of the world's civilization, her religions and cultures came from this cycle of revelation, prophesy and conquest between the Tigris and Euphrates.

In this Syrian war, Kobane is everyone's strategy. The villages change hands like a board game, more than three hundred; Boxas, Donqiza Biçûk with its pistachio orchards, Êdîqoyê on the road to Aleppo, Telxazel's few dozen houses; each village, a hub for the sprawling fields patched together to feed the families and livestock to the east, south and west.

It's the breadbasket of Syrian Kurdistan. Part of the Aleppo governance, Kobane had long been overshadowed by the economy of Jarabulus. In the war, Assad's troops were focused on Aleppo itself. Kobane was low priority for the regime. They wouldn't leave armies enclaves against Turkey so they pulled out quietly, leaving a gap of power that the FSA moved into. It didn't take long for the hardened mujaheddin of al Qaida and al Nusra to claim it. The Free Syrian Army's troops withdrew to Afrin and Idlib, and the cowards defected. Al Qaida and al Nusra ceded to ISIS. Kurdish militants kept their backs against the border, trying to broker an alliance with the US while little by little, losing ground to the Islamic State. One by one, the Kurdish villages fell into ISIS hands. When they mustered to take Mistanour hill, things looked bleak for the Kurds. Mistanour Hill overlooks Kobane entirely, from the forests to the factories, threatening the Kurdish defense from a holy height on a hill. They suck their teeth and weather the storm with confidence that their regional influence is like the moon; even when it's invisible, it moves the tides.

Since both ISIS and the Kurdish militias benefited from mass-media, the siege was amplified around the world. Journalists embedded with fighters. The women's brigade, a fighting unit of young Kurdish ladies with dark, free hair and smoldering smiles gained acclaim for their beauty and bravado. Upon seeing them in battle, Islamic State fighters were said to have wavered in their faith of the martyr's promise. There are murmurs of a Kurdish women, who uses the black magic to hypnotize soldiers into killing each other.

Kurdish civilians flee north by the hundreds of thousands until a large group are turned back by border guards. Backed into a corner at the eleventh hour, journalists broadcast their distress in a media campaign that reaches around the world. Salvation comes in the form of a deal between Turkey, the U.S.A. and Iraqi Kurdistan.

In late September, 2014 the American bombers start answering to Kurdish generals. Turkey reopens the border, not only to an influx of refugees but also crosswise, to fighters from Batman, Diyarbakir, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Airstrikes against ISIS in Kobane increase drastically. It seems the

world has agreed on a redline. But ISIS changes tactics from distance shelling to suicide bombing. The siege on Kobane, which has already lasted into the winter, shows little sign of wearing out. Territory is reconquered in the city. Libraries and factories crumble more and more with each passing victory. The prize is torn apart.

Deep in a bunker under their stronghold of Mistanour Hill, Daesh Mullahs pray and gives order as a sermon under the hill, “Allah supports your Jihad and He will stop their bullets and protect you from their bombs,” but the psychoactive Captagon is in short supply and reality is sinking in. “Who does Allah support? We are His true armies. Only *we* march under the black standard of the prophet Muhammad—peace be on his name. Only we read Koran and answer the call to Jihad.” Constant drug use has worn nerves thin. No one rests easily through the brief lull in combat. Kurdish reinforcements though, continue to fatigue at this ceaseless siege engine.

Rabi and Bahtiyar are among new Daesh reinforcements from Rakka. The soldiers who have been fighting for a season are shaken by the increasing frequency of airstrikes. They suspect that this newcomer lieutenant with a short beard and poor Arabic is holding Captagon. Rabi has to keep his room locked and guarded.

Bahtiyar was a hero for losing his ear to a mystery bullet, but he's grown more and more despondent. He lost more than half his hearing and married a woman twice his age. He spends secret nights wandering the streets, hoping to find a speakeasy. Although many people give him accolades, he approaches no one. He had fun training on a motorcycle and his malnourished ego inflates a bit.

Rabi distributes Captagon to the commanders who notice their soldiers losing heart. They fear they're motivated more by the pills than Jihad. Regardless, with supplies and reinforcements comes motivation and renewed bravery.

Rabi talks to Bahtiyar directly, “Brother, you're my closest ally so I want to tell you first. You've been chosen for a special mission. I'm not a commander so I'm not briefing you, or giving you orders, but as you are a friend, I'm telling you that I'm jealous. Motorcycle combat has made you the most skilled soldier. It is your destiny brother, to lead the charge. And it's mine to make a motorcycle with explosives that will send you into the sky like a firework. We will equip it with an ejector seat to launch you into the sky! To throw bullets down like rain.”

“Allahu akbar.”

“Allahu akbar, but the explosives will not harm you. You'll fly into the sky, if Allah wills it.”

Seven miles south, Abu Moaman al Badia's squadron arrives to Boxaz. Moaman drives soldiers from Chechnya, Saudi, Egypt, Libya and England while his brother drives Iraqis, Syrians and Palestinians. They've been organized into three levels; those trained to rush in, foot soldiers for siege combat with rifles and rockets, sideline fighters and technicians.

Boxaz is flat and dusty. The streets are packed down like clay. The buildings are made of bare, cinder blocks. The village is empty as the convoy rolls in to heavily guarded barracks. The soldiers take formation after exiting the vehicles.

“At attention! This is Arab Punar. In English you might call it Arab Spring, but not that bullshit rebel uprising that the Americans are supporting in Idlib. This land was once an oasis and nomads would bring their sheep to graze on rich vegetation and drink spring water.” Abu yawns, “Today that water's not wet but if we occupy this land, Allah will reward us and the lands with fertility. Our frontier

is Kobane, beyond that hill,” he points towards a rounded highland. “After dark you’ll see our rockets fly at the infidels. Heroes from the Islamic State have squeezed them to the border. Now we are sieging their last few bases in the city! Our mission is to support the front line fighters with rocket fire, transport and information. Your unit commander will give more detailed orders. Your bunks are in the south hall. Go now and take your ablutions. Don’t walk far. Only the four buildings around this quad have been cleared. There are explosive traps beyond them. Dismissed.”

“What a shithole. These Kurds can’t even keep a village, how do they expect to establish a nation?” Tola asks.

“I bet they were pissed when we drove em out, fuck their cunts. Be careful in washrooms, you might catch something.”

“Hey, where are you going after the siege?”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about Rakka. People there welcome the Shariat, and strangers.”

“I’m with you brother. Uqayribat was alright as a jump off, but Rakka is like the land of opportunity.”

Rockets fly from the distant hill, Thoom! Thoom! And cheers rise up from the quartering soldiers. Their orders are to rest until midnight, then transport to the front line in. After a small meal, Rabi and Tola lie down.

They’re ripped from rich dreams to get into separate vehicles with their squadrons and file into a tunnel, dug into the wall of a subterranean parking garage. Lights are strung far enough apart so that it’s complete darkness every once in a while. It’s hot, and the motors groan and echo. The ventilation is sparser than the lights and pockets of diesel exhaust form. There’s nothing to do but drink water. At the south side of Mistanour Hill, they emerge to a depo with some old jeeps and trucks. It already smells like urine. There are a few mortar tubes and the scraps of homemade grenades. Abu and Tola chat while they walk up rough hewn steps towards the south side of the hill.

“Slim pickings. I think we’re part of an exit strategy. I didn’t come here to be a car bomber.”

“Yea, we’re reconnaissance and communications. We’re not ground soldiers.”

“Yeah, I mean... nevermind.”

“Mate, just think about it. I mean, our commander’s are everywhere, they can see the battle from every angle. We’re not meant to get anywhere the front line.”

“Would you rather be sniped off from a distance while trying to replace a spark plug?”

Tola huffs and looks around the flat farmlands below. The thin crescent moon hangs about forty-five degrees into the south, casting dim light on the silhouette of a hill.

“Don’t get me wrong mate. I’ll man up. And I trust our infantry. It’s just...can you believe they sent us to war already?”

“It’s just to get a taste.”

“A taste of what? I mean seriously brother, this battle alone makes my whole life seem like a game of marbles.”

“Remember what Rabi said at the Turkish border?”

“Yeah, public enemy number one.”

“Yeah, that's me. That's *been* me. I could live as an outlaw anywhere; Russia, Nigeria, hell there's a border half a mile away, we could go run guns across. Somewhere, there's a big score.”

“Easy mate, don't catch your shirt in your trigger. This is literally the only place for a hundred miles with eyes on the border. Take Rabi for example. Do you think he just drove right across the border like he did at the European border? We can find a better place.”

“Yeah, romantic road trip with his bitch and his boy,” Abu says, “Rabi's so pussy whipped. I bet he's already doing her laundry.”

“We could call him. He's probably here. I grabbed that burner he gave us.”

“And what? Threaten him?”

“Be friendly, he's got connections.”

“He's a psycho. Mate, if I see him out there, I've already got my finger on the trigger.”

“Yeah, mate. What's that gonna get you? I'm trying to rise up here. I'm not a drone. I liquidated everything to get here, went properly through the ringer. And not for nothing, remember that.”

“Either murder or tax evasion, you'd be locked up if we stayed.”

Gunshots crackle in the distance and a flare goes up shining red light down on the dark side of the hill. “Rabi knows what he's doing here. I don't like it either but if we don't even make a connection here, it feels like failing a test. He's got a strong hand, and maybe even our best cards. Moaman's a fucking psychopath too. He won't give us nothing but scraps. I'm calling Rabi.”

“It doesn't matter. The time to plan is over. Call him if you want. I'm gonna keep my mind clear.”

Tola walks off and sits on a rock overlooking the land of the State from its northern-most point, takes out his phone and types, *Muslim empires have always been judged by their north-western frontier. If Moors hadn't been driven out of Spain, the Ottomans wouldn't have had the armies to take Constantinople. And if the Christians hadn't been driven out of Istanbul, the Ottomans navies could have prevailed at Lepanto. If they'd won there, they might have lost Cyprus. How will history define this battle? We're in fast-forward. We blew up from blood vengeance in Iraq to a certifiable state within a few years. This siege has gone on for four months. What now? Those ancient battles took decades to plan, build ships, move armies and set the stage. Istanbul 1453 was Zion to both Christians and Muslims, and the siege took less than two months. Is this our North-West Conquest? Is this our flat dusty Zion?*

Over the hill, at the Kurdish base, reports of enemy reinforcements arrived. Kurdish generals are on the phone with American commanders saying, “we'll suffer mass civilian and military casualties without air support. With air support, we're ready to take back Mistanour Hill.”

Americans responded, “Planes will strike targets in the city to the extent of our capabilities,” but deferred to Turkish generals, “Airstrikes outside of hot zones will not be tolerated. This includes the border, Mistanour Hill and civilian centers.” Islamic State generals, well aware of the stubborn alliance against them, decide with unilateral determination, but they don't anticipate a renegotiation. It was Turkish generals that announced that a NATO airforce will strike Mistanour hill.

Lit by headlamps, soldiers creep underhill, belts full of grenades, knives, clips and pistols, with AR-15s slung over their backs, through secret tunnels ending in basements and sewers in disputed territory. They've lost everything, regained it and put their lives on the line to maintain their autonomy. Their families were killed, imprisoned and tortured. Their names and photos had **TERRORIST** stamped across them. Their eyes shine hot and bright with holy wrath. Their monolithic state builds them into a frontier assault and at that moment, they're the periphery of their empire, each individual a North-West boundary. Their fear is eaten up by stimulants and dogma. They believe their faith makes them bulletproof, that heaven is just a bullet away, unless their death comes at the hands of a woman, in which case they take their chances at the gates of a strange, red hell, or the everlasting love and pleasure that only Allah provides. Jihad of the sword is a black hole.

In the ungodly hours, men take position at mounted guns on Mistanour Hill. Infantry and artillery creep between bullet-ridden walls, past piles of cinder blocks and into positions around corners to fortified barricades. The missiles and large caliber bullets are aimed at the front lines.

Bahtiyar is in the passenger seat of a small pickup truck. It's driven by Field Commander Emre Ismail, who prays quietly as he pulls over. "Oh Allah, open your doors to the martyrs of Jihad, for their sacrifice is truly selfless. *Subhan Allah!*" He shuts off the vehicle, raises his palms to his chest and looks at Bahtiyar, "It's three blocks away. Ride straight and slow for the first one." "Brother, the jealousy I feel is not a sin." He puts on a vest and pats it with his hands gently, aligning two small rings. He slips a small lock through them.

"God is the greatest."

"God is the greatest." Bahtihar hoots. Commander Ismail rolls up the windows. Bahtiyar's tinnitus drowns out his hearing as Brother Emrullah speaks of truth and the next life, "then at full speed, past the cemetery towards the Black School."

"And you will know it by..."

"By the walls."

"High walls painted with children's cartoon characters. Our infantry is in position there to assist me."

"But if something goes wrong, ram through the wall and fly into the sky, raining down bullets!" the commander gestures his hands laterally and mimes shooting downward.

"Sir, My mission is my purpose. I lived to martyr to give the faithful a chance to live as God intended."

"You're ready. Allahu akbar."

Bahtiyar also raises his hands in prayer, "O Allah, I ask You for the longing to meet You."

Together, "O Allah, we ask You for the longing to meet You."

"O Allah, I ask You for the longing to meet You." His head ripples to the back of his neck.

The motorbike is small and Bahtiyar gets on. Commander Ismail points to the explosive packs at the bottom of the chassis. "These are aimed down and back, so you may lift off the ground when you strike the target. If you see Kurds, drive directly at them." He slaps his back. Then, Bahtiyar starts it and accelerates quietly towards an open square. He stays near the building walls.

In a moment, he's pattered onto a narrow empty street of closed, corrugated fronts when a startling, shrill whistle precedes an explosion of light and heat. He looks back. A fireball blooms into the sky. Commander Emrullah and the truck are out of sight. He snaps his head ahead. To the left, another bomb falls.

He twists the throttle accelerating up to the third block, right at his target. Bullets shake the air overhead which continues to be rippled by the line of bombs speeding towards the hill. Rocket shells whir and strike. He sees the wall of the Black School ahead, across from a smokey aftermath. Colors flash through the grey of night; red, yellow and lastly green sinks a dread feeling into his gut. His head and his heart take their radii from the back of his neck as a bombs pulverize pieces of buildings into the street.

Suddenly, cold pressure squeezes him and all the rubble hangs in the air. He glances at his speedometer. The needle points to 60 kph but he's trudging through water, running in a dream, eyes ahead of his shoulders. The air becomes water and some of the rubble transform into glimmering, silver fish. He glances towards the wall. Al Kkidr, the Green Saint, sits cross-legged on a raft, pulled by barracuda. He vocalizes into Bahtiyar's mind, "Bahtiyar, welcome now to my deathless place. Before the flood, I traded eternity for time and now I've come to offer you one. You martyr for your father but he wasn't given the choice. Now, I give you the same choice that I wasn't able to give him. You will join us in eternity as we travel with Elijah. He speaks now, from within me."

The Green Saint's face transforms into the over-saturated photograph that sat at Bahtiyar's bedside. "Son, in both eternity and life, we think more than we act. Our knowledge is a drop in the ocean but it's enough to guide our choice. You are my son and I loved you as only a father can for less than two years. Allah gave me few miracles and I act now to break this lock. Choose your path. Roll off now."

"Ok Dad," with a snap of inertia, Bahtiyar combat rolls to his left shoulder and hits the ground. He bounces, lands again on his head and a third time against the heel of his hand before losing consciousness for a brief moment of clarity. He sees his path. He must walk and hide. He must get into Turkey. The lock is broken. A divinely engineered green algae stamps its genetic marker in slot MC1R of his double helixes. He gets up, takes off the vest and puts his foot forward.

The defenders of Kobane have the upper hand. They hide around corners and halt ISIS' advance in the streets. Their snipers keeps artillery off contested rooftops. In the West of the city, seven armored vehicles are destroyed in the first wave of airstrikes. Trip wires blast high ground and cover on ISIS' flanks. Behind ISIS' last advance, both front line troops and those scrambling through tunnels lay their own booby traps as they retreat Kobane. The tunnel runs forty miles to Rakka with exit points in Halnj, Ain Issa and the M4 crossing.

Two units meet Kurdish offensive in the streets and exchange gunfire around corners buying time to scramble back into the hill base. Within minutes, forward squads are overwhelmed in a total rout. Kurdish forces outnumber ISIS on the ground and distance shelling from Mistanour hill can't touch the airstrikes that incinerate vehicles, artillery and soldiers with each load of bombs.

Abu and another soldier look out from the roof of a three story building on a block in the district bordering the edge of Mistanour Hill. Commander Moaman, a medic from Anwar, and a lieutenant are operating a comm station in a central room with no windows. Abu is posted with two experienced

lookouts on the roof, watching through the scope of a Barrett M95, binoculars and long range night vision goggles. His radio is tuned to the squad's channel and they hear Tola's unit, *In position 6, awaiting orders*. Abu relays that two jets unloaded a round of air strikes and are flying north. No planes detected.

The bombed out building provides half cover and an exit onto a narrow lane, cleared of rubble. Abu relays the order for Tola's unit to drive to the next position. "Copy", Tola replies from the passenger seat. Gunshots snap and rockets crackle overhead from the North and the South. Three soldiers in the back of the jeep, silently pray for retreat as they roll out slowly.

On the rooftop, Abu sees their reckoning, a multitude of jets approaching from the East, before the radar commander in the comm station. The lookout yells, "Get down!" and pulls the heat shield over. Abu reports to command, "Ten jets incoming!" A moment later the bombs start exploding, deafening and disorienting the watchmen on the roof. Through the ringing in his ears and the dreamlike slowdown of pure blast adrenaline, he paws the heatshield blanket off and looks out. "Get to command!" They run for the trap door and slide down the ladder into the command center.

Moaman calls over the radio "Incoming air raid! Take cover!" He then fumbles with the transmitter and changes the channel. Over the universal channel comes all the messages of the field commanders, *Pull back from the hospital! Hill base is in full retreat! We've sent our bomb—*, and cuts to static. Moaman changes the channel back to his squad and says, "All retreat to the tunnel. Regroup at Halnj."

As the bombs fall faster Moaman shouts, "Dammit! We've been bluffed. We have a thousand on the ground." A sharp whistle precedes the explosion that shakes the building out the wall throwing concrete across the room with a shock wave. The damage shakes the floor, and a large crack forms but the walls of the central room stand. "Let's get the fuck out of here." They hastily pack up their equipment and head out. Abu reaches for the door handle that leads towards the stairs and when a second whistle warns the moment of the explosion. It blasts the door at Abu, striking him in the face and knocking him unconscious. The wall around it blasts apart and launches debris into the room with a shock wave which puts the entire unit on the ground.

The order for the Islamic State to retreat comes less than fifteen minutes after the failed suicide attack on the Black School. Mistanour Hill empties and vehicles creep south under ground towards Rakka leaving behind a few broken guns, and booby trapped boxes of artillery. Legions of Kurdish troops march on the hill, the hospital and the southern suburbs. Before dawn, all but the factory district is reclaimed by the Kurdish Regional Protection Army. The majority of Kurdish casualties come from desperation attacks by strung out IS soldiers, stranded there, waiting and praying until their last standoffs.

A handful of ISIS fight to the last bullet and buy time for Mistanour Hill to evacuate but most retreat to recoup their losses. Memories of a Syrian flag over Kobane are long forgotten. The black standard comes down. Two flags of red, white and green, and a yellow star flaps high up of the flag pole, the Peshmurga and YPG colors. Quite a few more defected and like Bahtiyar, slipped around corners, behind the charge, staying small and looking out. He saw an open sewer in the middle of the road and hopped down it, for a momentary rest.

Halnj is the nearest village and the unfinished mosque in the center will be a field hospital. From dawn on the nineteenth of January, the Kurdish Regional Protection Unit marches on Mistanour Hill and claims it after four months under ISIS. Both sides suffer casualties in the siege, but ISIS loses a north-western front. The mine sweepers go to work and builders set up tents to repopulate and rebuild.

Chapter 41 Rift Valley

The Mil-mi 6 wobbled, suspended in the air from its four rotating blades, ready to heat up the battle. The floor hatch opened over the bandit's complex; little more than two buildings in a forest clearing by the lake, one with garage doors. The other, a large three-story cabin. Simbat watched the doors and windows from the cockpit. A few men poked out of windows with guns pointed upward and started a volley which was returned like rain. His helicopter had an array of heat seeking missiles but for guns, they were relying on hand held weapons and loopholes. The cargo hatch cracked open and gun barrels poked through as they descended into position west of the garage.

Vo the ground scout, over the radio said, "I'm north of the cabin, covering the front," to Ali, in the helicopter.

"Ten four... T minus eleven seconds to coordinate fire at the cabin. Mark, ten. We'll hit both buildings eight," The heroes shouted "Surrender!" in Chichewa, Bantu and Swahili from loudspeakers. "Come out now! five four, three-" Vo's eagle eye set off catlike reflexes to his trigger finger and let a early rocket loose at three armed bandits creeping along the wall of the cabin with grenades.

One guy heard the jet, and turned toward it. Vo stood and saluted as the shock wave tore their tissue to shreds. Ali lifted the trigger guard at the missile dashboard, "one!" He flipped it. The heat seeker shot through the door of the garage and struck a running vehicle. The first explosion blew a hole in the north side of the cabin and the rocket from the Mil-mi 6 set a gas fire by north wall of the garage.

The helicopter steadied, and descended, blowing away the dusty ground. Sri Ceylon, tall and trim with a red headband and Berfinber, short and shirtless came through the trap floor like weasels into a rabbit hole. They rolled to their feet, back-to-back with guns drawn. Ignatio grabbed a pistol and jumped through after them. Mbwana yelled "No boy!" grabbed and ripped his shirt as he fell through the unhinged trap door, slamming onto the ground from about three and a half meters up. He got up angrily looking for mortal enemies.

Four mercenaries were on the ground and the fire was growing inside the garage. An unknown number of bandits were behind it, as well as at the corners of the garage. Berfinber got hit in the back of the leg while running for cover. Sri Ceylon heard him shout and turned back to help him along. They kneeled just inside the bunkhouse as the helicopter missile array turning toward their cover.

It touched down and Mkash pulled the back hatch down for the mounted gun truck. A dozen more mercenaries kept low and close as it rolled down. Mkash leapt into the truck bed and grabbed the handles of the twin barrel weapon. As the truck rolled out, he shot 50-caliber bullets indiscriminately into the bunkhouse, dropping shells. Suddenly, a rocket flew out from the bunk. Sri Ceylon dropped down and rolled under the hook. It struck low on the side of the helicopter, damaging the hull, and landing gear. The rest of the militia scattered around the bunkhouse. As Simbat flew the helicopter up,

Ali released two more heat seeking missiles from it. They both flew into the garage, blowing out the front wall and part of the rooftop and ending the troublesome fusillade in an explosion. The tail rotor's seized and the helicopter shook. They flew out over the lake.

"Cool it." said Ali to the hook. Each time the tail rotor would stall, it would dip towards the sea, they were flying fast enough to catch up with the runaways.

"Look there, on a boat ? Any women in there? Slaves?"

Ali peered through binoculars to the boat and saw a net cast over a large gun but it was distant. "That's them. Can you get up higher for a better look."

"Not really. We're going back to the fight. It's probably safer there," said Simbat. He operated the blades. He flew back to the complex and descended between the wrecked buildings. At the edge of the garage, bandits were hogtied, and there were women, kicking their backs and fronts but also crying into the fire. Some of them looked up at the noisy helicopter. Simbat hovered low.

Mkash approached the cockpit window, signaled and shouted, "Two serious injuries. Three teams, one sweeping the woods, another in the bunkhouse, and us, guarding captives. Some of these termites got through a tunnel."

"Yeah, they're sailing north. I'm gonna fly over them for a bit. Put a combination trap on the vehicles and leave them. I'll be back in five minutes, then everyone goes, bad guys, bitches, everyone and everything you can pile in."

"Sure boss."

Mkash exited the cabin with the gust to see his men piling up sacks of coffee in the yard. "They're coming back in five minutes, don't miss the boat."

"Are you serious? We haven't even cracked the safe yet. This place is like an ant hill full of goods."

"The gold's already on a boat to Karonga. We're going after it. We'll come back later for the other shit. Round everyone up."

Sri Ceylon gestured towards the bandits, "Should we execute them?"

"No, we're bringing them."

"Why? Their lives aren't worth shit."

"Tie them up good. And check their mouths for razor blades."

Ignatio hadn't found Feride and was going more and more bezerk, foaming and spitting, shouting "Where is she! Where's my wife?" jumping and stomping dead onto their heads.

Mkash touched his shoulder and said to the bandits at gunpoint, "Ok pigs, my friend's hungry. I smell fear. Smells delicious. Which one of you is the fattest eh? Who gets roasted up first?" They dragged one towards the gasoline fire and pushed him near. He screamed and tried to stand up. Mkash gets close and whispers, "Deal for your life? Start with the bosses name."

"Sandhi."

"Good man, you're smarter than you look. Now, Karonga, who are your affiliates there?"

"Some guys at a bordello. I can give you directions."

“Bring us there.”

The other bandits eyes and mouths were covered. M Kash and Mbwana stood armed. When the helicopter came back, the rest of the guns and explosives were piled in and the bandits were thrown in the brig.

When the helicopter took off, the cabin felt crowded for the first time. The leak in the tail motor wasn't catastrophic but Ali and Simbat felt the combined stress of the whole crew. There was lots of noise and motion in the cabin but the voice in Simbat's radio headset was Mbwana, anxious from the tail. “One of the pistons is jammed. We'll have intermittent stalls in the tail rotor. Keep it flat.” Eight girls were in the cabin. They were distraught because they'd seen one girl killed by a bandit, who then took his own life. Under the interest and protection of Simbat's men, a few of them started talking.

Mosi asked a group of women, “Are they just rogue bandits or did they come from the military?”

“I think they were funded by British,” answered the girl next to Mosi. “Rhodesian terrorists. I'm from a village near Chipata. Before I was kidnapped, the villages were taking about a regional protection militia but I think there was a spy in our village because the bandits came the next day.”

“Do they have allies?”

“Just some smugglers and gangsters in the cities. They act like military officers sometimes. I don't think they're in the army. Defectors maybe.”

“Do they have partners in Karonga?”

“Yes, they'll go free there. If they are defectors, Banda'll pardon them too.”

Mosi interjects, “I heard these bandits were the lone survivors of an army brigade that was massacred in the night by Banda's secret police.”

“Ahh you're blowing wind.”

“No really, apparently they all refused to kneel to him.”

“If Banda demands blowjobs from his soldiers, he gets them.” The topic ends with shrugs and dismissive grunts. The focus changed to the women. “I can't imagine how horrible that dungeon was. Those barbarians will pay. Don't worry now though, it's all over. We'll take you wherever you want to go.”

“How many girls in here? Two, four, six, eight. Wow.”

“But where is Fariha?” asked Ignatio with his face in his hands.

“Some girls were taken suddenly, four of them. Maybe your wife was one.”

“Hey man, that means she's alive.”

“She must be on the boat speeding up the coast.”

“Full speed ahead!”

“Stick the slugs, save the princesses!”

The helicopter glides in sight of the boat. A thick fishing net was obviously covering a large gun mounted to the boat. From half a kilometer away, it started flashing and clacking.

“If they have any rockets left, we're sunk.” Vo puts his best foot forward to a woman and gets down on one knee. “I don't wanna approach you like they did, but I want you to know, m'lady, that I'm

there for you physically if you want, a hand to grasp, a shoulder to cry, a prey to pounce at.”

“The tail rotor's leaking oil, we can't stabilize and the next landing's gonna be a bitch.”

“We're not going to cross the lake like this. Ali, check maps, is there an airfield in Karonga?”

“Yes, about three miles inland.”

“Radio ahead.”

Chapter 42 Militant Idol

Simbat, slightly reclined on his wooden throne, stands and address his guests. “The winner,” he announces, “will be funded and flown to the so-called Islamic State. Allow me to introduce our contestants! From Circasia, the Living Martyrs! A group so paradoxical, that they cover their faces to save others from their sheer insanity.” A spotlight illuminated four men at a dinner table, dressed as a Greek chorus. From Tajikistan, the Singing Ismailis have come, whipping blades, singing and dancing for our entertainment. And lastly, from Sanaa, three masters of disguise.”

These are the units of his new militia, but there are also three reasons why Simbat has invited them to present their skills like this. Firstly, the musicians, staff, friends and family in his ballroom are also trusted members of his army and they deserve a show. Second, by showing their arts, each group briefs the others and builds confidence. And lastly, he could never resist a grand spectacle.

“We're a fighting force, and I will shortly reveal the mission but first, under the Almighty eye of Allah, let our contest begin!” The masked bombers step forward in black cloaks and grotesque theater masks. In one sweeping motion, they remove their outer-garments to reveal, that they're proper Caucasians in *chokra*, the traditional woolen coats, worn with daggers and gazys by the shepherds and watchmen of the Caucasus Mountains. Silently, they each remove a gazyr from their bandoleer and hold still. The first uncorks it and withdraws tweezers. He covers his face and corks it. The second Circasian withdraws a spool of wire from his gazyr and also corks his gazyr; covers his face. The third uncorks and upturns it, showing it's empty. Then he too covers his face and poses motionless. Now the fourth man removes a bug eyed and shocked green face to present his own. A sternly focused man squints a half circle around the gazyr in his hand, and he uncorks it gingerly and holds it in front of the first man who inserts the tweezers and withdraws a kernel of explosive. The third reaches over his empty vial, which receives the charge. The second man cuts a length of wire, and pushes it through a cork. Another grain of reactive chemical, about the size of a lentil is inserted and it's capped with the fuse. A pomegranate is withdrawn and cored. The explosive is sheathed inside the fruit. Lastly the wire is touched to a battery and the fruit pops and splatters climatically.

Light applause transitions a sweeper before the next group begins energetically, singing in harmony over the palace musicians, whirling blades and spinning dance. All are enchanted by the Ismaili Sufi's athletic blend of knifeplay, whirling, and holy verse. *la ilaha illallahul, mahammudur rasulul*, they spin like tops, their dress blooming conically like one of six white flower petals with a red skirted leader in the center. They sing the verse and flare out, *la ilaha illallahul malikul haqqul mubin*. Simbat declares, “Ha, I should've been an Ismaili, or a hippie.” *Muhammadur Rasulullahi*

Shodiqul Wa'dil. They solemnly withdraw weapons from their tunics and, as they turn, leap yards behind the blade's pointed strike at the dust in their empty spaces, rousing a spirited applause. Their pose is met with an ovation from Simbat, "Bravo!"

The leader of the last group takes the stage, a blue eyed, blonde bearded fellow is certainly a rare sight in the Arabian desert. He honors the skills of the "deadly dervishes," before exposing his troop with speech and humor. "My name is Walid, and my brothers and I are from Yemen. Although Yemenis are honest to a fault, we've spent our lives practicing deception. Our skills include, full native acquisition of Farsi, Russian, two English dialects and three Arabic dialects. I humbly request our gracious host to choose a language for our first demonstration.

"English, if you please," says the fanciful sultan.

English it shall be. Already Simbat's mind reels to translate. He asks the guy next to him, "Shelby?"

Oi mates, fancy a gambol in the bog? Right good season to nab mud eels.

Sounds palatable, and we haven't heard church bell toll yet, if we're off now, we shant be home for afternoon tea.

Right. Say, did you see all the little devil worshipers out last night? All painted faces and pitchforks.

Ah yea, I thought it was the apocalypse. Thought they were real goblins before I noticed they were just children.

That's right, American tradition, name of All Hallows' Eve. The godforsaken go out gallivanting for sweets. Only reason I pay it mind is because it's the same night we're all supposed to knock back our clocks once, so it's still an hour to zhuh: Back behind the counter.

Two of Simbat's men are quite impressed, laughing haughtily, which is good enough for his approval. He claps a bit and shrugs.

Walid responds, "Evallah, shukran. Our next presentation is at a Damascus souk. An Algerian tourist is haggling with the shopkeeper over a backgammon set." They start suddenly. "*Selam Aleykum habibti-*"

Simbat stands and interrupts, "Thank you gentlemen, that's fine," and sits back down. His speaker hastily clears them off the stage. "Please excuse the hustle of servers and enjoy the music."

A fast and high-pitched drumbeat introduces an ascending arpeggio on the dulcimer, accompanied by a lute. Four belly dancers take the stage, leaning back with arms waving high.

"Well done, all perfect tens." Simbat rises with open arms and praises them while his servers bring in a quartered lamb, sizzling on four beds of saffron rice. Simbat's words rise above the succulent aroma, "You've made it too difficult to choose." He grabs a meaty bone and inspects it for a bit of flesh. "Who isn't aggressive," he bears a mouthful of gold teeth, "is sneaky." He nips a tiny bit of meat off and chews. "*Mmfh.* Who strikes in the shadows' voice is a lullaby; *mmm mmm mmm*, but who speaks not, has mastered the elements." He picks up a silver chalice and raises it. "Each skill, with humility and humanity." He stands and dozens of cheers begin the feast.

A bit later Simbat speaks again. "We're not really fighting against Daesh. We're fighting for Mesopotamia with maximum enmity against it's enemies. Daesh is led by heinous generals but there's one I've met. I had one in my grip thirty years ago and if I meet Zaik nations, but if we are to believe

the Koran we must accept that we are both citizens under Allah. Mesopotamia has recently taken a turn in favor of the Rojava, in their city of Kobane. Daesh will retreat to Tabqah. There will be transports of people, weapons and intellectual materials.

“But my friends, it's now that I will reveal the shame of my life. Many years ago in Eastern Africa, I fought with a militia, not unlike you fellows. At the end of it, I had a son and lost touch with him. The mother was a young virgin who we freed from a human trafficking ring. Not only did I let the villain slip through my fingers but I've recently learned that my son has joined Daesh and is likely in Tabqah. For this reason I've sought out your skills and aid. Tonight you are my guests for dinner, and tomorrow we fly as brothers in arms. This evening, I'd like to meet with a representative of each troop to discuss strike points.”

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Twenty four hours later they're in the middle of Daesh's desert territory, under the radiant starlight and comfort of Simbat's camp. Their bellies are full of leftover lamb which is even more flavorful on the second night. Gathered around the campfire, the tea is almost ready when Simbat says,

“I'd like to tell you a story of rape and blood vengeance. Once upon a time, there was a mountain village with a river running down and a thick forest at its foot. A boy lived in the forest. He was a woodcutter and he was in love with a girl who lived with her father on the mountain. A ferryman worked at the river crossing and his father was the town mayor. So that's five citizens, ok? The boy, the girl, her father, the ferryman and his father, the mayor. Remember them. One day the father shouted at her so she left to pick flowers. She passed the boy loading lumber onto the ferryman's raft. He saw her on the opposite banks. She was so beautiful. As they crossed she stood and watched them approach. The boy said, 'Hi, where are you going?' 'I'm going to gather flowers at the edge of the forest. Where are you going?' she replied. 'I'm going to bring this lumber to your father.' On the raft, while the ferryman was unloading she approached the boy and said, 'Give this to my father.' and kissed him on the cheek. The boy blushed and unloaded his lumber. After that, the girl was followed by the ferryman. He moved on her and raped her in the forest, then he put her back on the other side of the river. The boy was returning and learned what happened. He ran to the crossing and killed the ferryman. When she finally arrived home, word had already spread to her father, who was waiting at the property's edge who disowned her with a basket for a field bed. Lastly, the boy who killed the mayor's son was himself executed.” Simbat observed his guests with a keen eye who sat still, not so much as to sip his tea.

Tribes in Yemen keep the ancient law and Walid understands blood trades. Jafar Sadiq, tall and handsome with the pale eyes of an exiled prince thinks about Simbat's story and sees the thick forests of the Black sea, each village a ancient enemy turned ally in a new war. The companion moon smile over their desert camp. Haydar's eyes well up like glacial lakes under snow capped peaks in the spring.

“May such sinister days never pass our friends and families, but I beg each of your answers; who acted right? Or rather; who is least cursed? The ferryman, the boy, the girl, her father or the mayor?” Not wanting to break the tension, Simbat hesitates to drink his tea, holding eye contact with Walid, Jafar Sadiq, Haydar, briefly gazing at the dozen others behind them, implicitly asking each one to answer. Simbat watches them think.

Abdulhasan pulls the corners of his mouth back in an expression that could be mistaken for a smile, if one didn't observe his eyes plunge below his ears. “The father of the girl. Both dead men are because of his inability to educate his daughter, and it was his responsibility to put his daughter's rapist to justice too, but certainly it's best to be alive and with your family. He did the least evil so he has least punishment.”

“Would she have got raped if he hadn't argued with her? She kissed the boy as an act of rebellion. No, it was the major who acted true. He killed the boy lawfully after his own son was killed.” said Haydar.

“But what of the girl? Surely she didn't deserve rape just for flirting. Her lover was right to avenge her,” said Jafar Sadiq.

“True, but the wisdom of our religion and our culture teaches that violence follows improper lust.” said Haydar. “If they aren't married, they should not be lovers.”

Walid seizes the sound, “Surely, we all know the curse of beauty. The worst of them is the boy because he didn't act as a lover should. If he truly loved her, he would have left his lumber to accompany her to the forest. The worst was the boy.”

Simbat brings forth a boisterous laugh from deep within his lungs, “My friends, I know your character from your answers. Please, indulge me.” The tension breaks with murmuring laughter as hands reach for their refreshment. “Walid, to defend the girl, you value freedom above all. Haydar, you value law foremost. Abdulhasan, you value money most of all. And Jafar Sadiq, you place the highest value on love.”

“And what of the person who supports the rapist?”

“Sex.”

“Ah...”

They rise from the fire and move to a table. Simbat lights a lamp and unfolds a map, “*al Dawla al Islamiya fil Iraq wa al Sham*, or DaIsh,” he lingers on the name a moment, “is here.” He swipes his finger up the Euphrates river from Ramadi. And here,” he looks up from the map to the horizon and the men's faces, then the air above them and the sky and the stars, opening his hands and arms, “is the vast desert of al ba'aj.” He inhales the minerals scented air. The starry night blankets the horizon. “Their capitol, Rakka, is here. Tabqah, the neighboring suburb, has the the Euphrates Dam. It's Daesh's most fortified location. My old helicopter could level the dam, blast their airbase and crumble their ministries there but we are, however coming as spies.” There he taps small red circles at the Western edge of the desert, “We but they will not unload their howitzers at us, thanks to some clever espionage. We will land on the rooftop of Tabqah hospital,” he taps the eastern point of the crescent shaped lake in Northern Syria, “at the Euphrates dam on Lake Assad. Thanks to some even cleverer espionage, we have a brief smoke screen to ladder drop two teams into a corner of Tabqah airbase and the dam complex before our scheduled landing on the hospital roof. Jafar Sadiq's group will infiltrate the air base. Haydar will lead the team targeting the dam. Walid will be inside the hospital and I'll be on the roof as his chauffeur.”

Chapter 43 Halnj

Their field hospital is the village Halnj. It was established in the unfinished mosque in the center of town and it's maintained by the villagers under duress. They submit to an ever changing guard of militants from all four directions. They follow Islamic State jurisprudence, and are expected to labor at their new occupiers' civil projects. The workers are mostly elderly villagers. To watch the influx of maimed bodies is a sign of that Halnj will see gunshots before the Islamic State leaves.

In the last three years, Bedir Baradost went from volunteering at the mosque's construction, to representing the elderly in negotiations with armed groups, to coordinating the elderly workforce, to his current position working as an administrative slave to the Islamic State. The conflict began when he

was in his fifties. He took heart in visiting the elderly locals of Halnj each day by bringing them food and news. Each day he estimated how long it'd take to finish the new mosque. "ISIS is totally driven out in ten days, which means we can get back to work. However we don't have the money, and there's many other buildings that need repair. Asad's money would help, but there will be Kurdish soldiers in the region until the end of the war at least. And we will be Kurdistan between Syria and Turkey. Asad's soldiers will come back, either before, to support us, or after to fight the winner. Maybe the Russians and Turks and will forget Asad and Kurdistan will win our city indefinitely." Some remembered tales their grandparents had told of "The great war a hundred years ago and the end of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Turks had ruled with authority, but the French and Germans built railroads, dug irrigation ditches and mined for copper and silver where there were forests and rivers. Now, those nations have forsaken our land, only flying through the sky, dropping bombs. Once again, the wolf is at our doorstep, and things are as they were before the life of this land was stolen."

The elderly civilians are put to work cleaning bedpans, washing bodies, and preparing food. Sixty-eight wounded soldiers moaned in and out of consciousness inside the unfinished mosque. The voice of a traveling mullah was amplified with heavy reverb and the recitation is al Ghashiyah. *I seek refuge with Allah from the accursed Shaytan.* On the mimbar, the imam recites to the wounded, *In the name of Allah, the entirely merciful, the especially merciful...* while bodies of thirty-nine others are washed outside and wrapped in cloth. *Has there reached you the report of the overwhelming event?* Inside, soldiers wait for material to be removed from their bodies. *Some faces that day will be humbled, working hard and exhausted,* Twenty more wounded soldiers are brought in. They quickly run out of painkillers. Three doctors have arrived from Rakka to serve the soldiers. *They will enter to burn in an intensely hot fire.* The unfinished ceiling casts rays of light and young men go into shock and die.

The washroom is used for surgery. Nearly all injured soldiers have bullets, shrapnel or debris in their body and the nearest x-rays are 100 kilometers away in Rakka. *They will be given drink from a boiling spring.* Field Commander Emrullah Ismail is heavily sedated and his right arm is in tourniquet to prepare for amputation. His surgery is urgent, feasible and quick. *For them there will be no food except from a poisonous thorny plant. Which neither nourishes nor avails against hunger.* As he's carried to the makeshift surgery in the washroom, he regains consciousness and bends his eyes towards his broken arm. He laughs at the numbness, finds it comical, is excited by it and the inability to move something so familiar to him. In delirium, he says to the villager carrying him, "I know I'm still alive because in heaven, I have two arms, and three dicks."

"You should let the anesthesia put you to sleep, you don't want to see what comes next," says Bedir, carrying the back of the gurney across the open square. The muffled sound of sawing can be heard as they approach the green door to the washroom. The village porter knocks at the door. As it grinds opens, a scream groans through tearing bits of flesh. The smell of iron and isopropyl alcohol envelops them as they enter. The blue tiles have blood in their cracks and the room is damp. At the far side is a man, lying on an operating table. Two surgeons stand over him, one has a suction pump and a wad of paper towels, and the other has a rotor saw. The plastic shield is crimson and the man is clearly conscious, panting heavily. The two doctors, aware he's going into shock holler for another injection and another tourniquet.

Bedir wheels Emrullah into the damp room that he tiled a time ago. The washing trough he laid is full of severed limbs and the tiles have blood in new cracks. He transfers the patient to the operating table and collects an arm and a leg from the basin.

Emrullah's left arm is shattered and scorched. His face and torso have first degree burns because

the truck shielded most of the explosion. He's deaf and only hears the voice of Allah, more beautiful than the voices of any earthly woman. Who would want to hear the voices of men? Prone on his metal operating table, he tries to ask the doctors, "can I still fuck?" but all that comes out of his mouth are glottal stops and low moans. He thinks, Allah will bring me through this and He will return my arm if he judges me favorably.

The doctor looms over Emrullah's left side with a pair of scissors. As he draws them near his shoulder, Emrullah grunts and twists away. The surgeon says, "Get the gurney straps." His assistant cuts the bloody shirt exposing his blackened shoulder and charred arm. He starts to thrash so they tie the mumbling, drooling patient around the chest and arms, legs and torso. The doctor draws the line an eyebrow's length from the tourniquet. The surgeon operates the rotor saw, and applies it to the flesh, tearing off red and black bits and spraying bloody pulp against the plastic shield. The pain distances with his heart rate. The shock of living the final moments of his arm, with death, muffled sounds from underearth, inhaling pure fluid, loss of balance, paralysis, water with no surface, not pain but fear and the rumble of the saw severing his bicep in this drawn-out moment.

It takes a minute for the saw to circumnavigate the humerus. It stops. They observe the condition of the blood vessels. They're still bleeding slightly so they apply a second tourniquet. The doctor keeps an eye on the patient's pulse while the surgeon gets the gigli saw ready. He pulls the wire thin blade tight, inspects it and tells his assistant to, "hold his arm down there. We're not going to strap down anything because we still have twenty-two more limbs to amputate today." The surgeon lifts the elbow and the shoulder tenses in revealing slightly more unattached bone, and slipping the wire blade saw underneath. "Got it? Tightly now! Ok." He draws the saw taut against the humerus to catch the bone in its teeth. He pulls long strokes to chip the calcium, forcefully at first, counting the pulls, "five, six," until the wire blade creates a groove and steadies into it. "twelve, thirteen," it catches and the rhythm quickens. The smell of corn chips wafts into the air. The surgeon tears through the bone with each pull. "twenty, twenty-one," thinner and thinner until it completely erodes.

Pressure waves are stirred by turbine engines and Simbat shouts out, "Air is thin here! The tail needs to calibrate! Keep it running!" He slinks back to the door. Walid and Simbat get out and greet two guards. Haydar exits with a toolbox. Walid hastens in, escorted by one of the guards and Simbat goes in the opposite direction. Jafir Sadiq flies to apply a short wave electric transducer to a third guard who drops his gun. The blades spin faster but he sees a blurry simulation.

In the cockpit, Ali raises short wings, then flips four switches to drop sets of claw arms. It flies and falls back at fifteen meters. They speed north, then drop lower than the dam, tickling the grass on the islands before thumping down on one. Across the watery gap, the rubble of the western city walls are sooty. Ali looks back from the cockpit. The Mil-mi 17 is less than a quarter size the Mil-mi 6. "Daesh is expecting someone else," Ali shouts as the helicopter winds down. He opens a box with four hellfire missiles. "These are radio controlled but they are braced to the gunwings with a toggle switch. It takes four arms per missile and you've got to reach to get them into position. Attach them at their balance point." He slides open a hatch below each bench. Kneeling, Walid's brothers hold tight and extend the payload to the claw arms which grip shut.

Snapping against the armor with decreasing force, a barrage of rocks, slung by a few kids crackle. A few yards from the cockpit, an older boy reaches to his hip and wings a stone at the windshield as it lifts off. A tiny web of fissure takes root in the glass. They speed towards the airbase. Ali flips down an eye tracking interface and locks onto the northwest tower, but a barrage of large

caliber bullets pierce the hull in two places, one of which kills Sulahit instantly, slumping him into the middle lane with a hole in his chest. Their missile connects to the gun tower and envelops it in a mushrooming flare.

With his left on the pitch control, he arms another missile before engaging the throttle with the right. It speeds across an empty air strip. He sees a square of fabric at the edge west of the burning tower. There's a jet beneath a tarpulan and no one nearby so Ali sets another rocket off and guides it with his eye piece. The jet blows up too.

-

She applies dark eyeliner and eye shadow. Channeling her childhood Arabic lessons, she considers all the questions the pharmacist might ask. She's been preparing for this conversation, *-'ana hunu lilhusul ealaa wasfat tibiya* . If this works, I promise Allah to pray to you five times a day.-

She strides up keeping her eyes narrow and level, *"Salam Aleykum."*

"Aleykum Salam, etfadly?" The receptionist's voice is high and melodic. She removes her Burka to show a smile to match.

"-lilhusul masrah tibiya

"Sorry, do you speak English?"

"Yes, I speak English."

"My mother was English. Just between us girls... where are you from?"

"Turkmanistan."

"I'm Egyptian, these dialects are so different and I can't speak the formal language at all. Sometimes it's just easier."

"Yes, of course. I'm here to pick up a medicine, for Khalisa, for myself authorized by Abdel Kamil al Anbari."

"Ah, yes ok. Let me look in the cache," she gets up and walks away from the counter.

Duygu looks down the hallway. She can't see anyone. Down from the pharmacy is the dermatology clinic. The waiting room looks dark and empty.

She returns with a sealed package. "I have your medicine. Strange package. What is it?"

"Pain killers."

Speaking despair is taboo. When your spine curls your head into your hands. falling into quivering lap, it's better to pray. On your knees, the charred skeletons aren't dancing in front of you.

Tola sees Rabi at the tunnel. He presents the stiff upper lip. "We survived because Allah wants us to fight." The cave walls quake. He's crouched, waiting for his convoy. Commanders, the injured, and some of the more expensive equipment are passing through, vehicle by vehicle, single file in a crowded line, thirty miles to the end. By the time he's called to pass, he can hear the approaching gunfire.

In the gassy tunnel, many are in shock, most fall into a spastic exhaustion. Creeping along, men break down and are pushed into alcoves to allow others to pass. When they finally arrive to Tabqah,

Tola's immediately ordered to unpack truckloads of computers, drones and office equipment into a storage space in the dam structure.

He follows his order to the edge of the dam road where three vehicles are parked. He opens the door and boxes of hastily packed notebooks spill out. He's alone across from the rising sun. Something shimmers like a emerald in a tropical ocean. Then, thunderous clouds swoop in behind the rushing energy. The Green Saint, older than faith, who guided Alexander the Great to India but not back, rises from the pale blue lake, without a ripple and glides straight, booming "Fuck this shit Tola! You're an ass, but even an ass won't haul in a hurricane. And who am I? I am one of them whom He has sent. I saw you hitchhike across the sea, and now you're unloading trash from a truck? Your State has already lost. Abandon your post."

He picks up the spilled notebooks as if in a dream; nothing seems strange.

Chapter 44 Karonga

Simbat flew squinting, almost directly into the sun. There were clouds forming with the nightfall. Every time the tail rotor stalled, the hook jerked hard. Laterally, he was trying to think about how to land it.

Ali pondered and suggested, "We need to gently drop the hull on a strong but giving structure. A pit, a building foundation, the inside of a produce truck... something that will cradle the hull as the landing gear crumples.

"We could land it on an inflatable raft."

"Even if we could find one rated for 8 tons, it wouldn't be stable enough," said Ali. "We'd roll off."

"At what angle would the blades hit the ground?"

He exhaled and glared, "We gotta land it flat."

They turned inland and watched the horizon tilt, flying over an awed group of swimmers on the beach, flying over colonial brick buildings and inland over squares of flooded rice paddies.

"Ask Mkash if both wheels are fucked. If we still have one, we can land the other side on a short platform. It's gotta hold five tons and stand exactly a half meter. I'm going to call the airport staff. If they have a military grade rigid inflatable raft, we might be in luck."

This far inland, bullets were removed with forceps and placed between the teeth before wounds was doused in alcohol and dressed. Those who got burned and shot felt lucky to have made it through

that bullet hell. So far the mission had been a success but they all agreed that the little getaway boat was full of glowing embers to spark a new, even crueler band of robbers.

Simbat radioed ahead to land and negotiate a deal. They approached the airport, a fifteen meter tower and a two-story terminal. Most of the staff were waiting on the runway. They'd set out a steel crate on the landing pad with some cut tyre rubber on top. The steel compressed as they touched the grip of the earth. Simbat prayed as he took it down. Miraculously, the tail rotor maintained. The hook kissed the ground and wound down. He got out and surveyed the damage. Sri Ceylon was tapping the hull where the landing gear had been welded. "How long's this gonna take?"

"Pfhh, full day," he surveyed the hull. "Well, maybe less. Can I scrap the truck for the wheel?"

"Do what you have to do." The mercenaries debarked and the airport employees wasted no time selling their aid. The cost was climbing but this mission was funded by a nation. The mercenaries were fighting for money and justice. Feride's freedom was at least as important as the unknown amount of gold. Ignatio, unfortunately, wasn't rising to the occasion. He'd learned the name, Sandhi, and had been muttering and cursing it since they'd landed in Karonga. His humorlessness wasn't in harmony with the others' joviality and there was a glint of premeditated savagery in his eye.

Simbat remembered the other name, Zaik, a relatively common Arab name. They were all uneasy this far inland, still miles before sleep.

Simbat approaches Ali, "Fix the tail. And don't hesitate to ask the airport workers for help," passing a stack of green money. "We'll find the girls."

"Yessir. But sir, Karonga is small. How do you expect to find them? That snitchy bastard's ass was to the fire when he promised help."

"That's Mkash's man. If he doesn't come through, he answers to Mkash."

"And this isn't Dar. You can't go asking questions to random whores and pimps." said Ali.

"It's good that you are the sensible one, but I am Simbat! The master who sniffed out the pirate Salekh from the Port of Monaco all the way to the craps table from the smell of seagull shit."

"You wild dog, you saw that in a film."

"Maybe. Half of piracy is a good story."

"You might want to talk to that new guy. What's his name?"

"Ignatio? He's bound to come but I can smell the madness on his breath."

"No not him, the the other guy from Dar. Mossimo?"

"I'm not sure. His map led us here."

"How did he get the map?"

"Maybe he worked with them."

"Exactly."

"He'll come too. I'm not sure about Ignatio though he seems to need a drink."

"Let him take what he wants."

The three taxis at the airport sped off like walking the plank. Habitually, jaunts at harbor offered a bit of fun. However dire, this situation called for the same boisterousness. This carefully orchestrated

charade, made Simbat cringe a bit inside. He wasn't the only one daydreaming about starting a family, but they continued to carry on and act the fool. "I'm looking for a nice little ass," said Simbat to the taxi driver. "Drop me off where I can find a girl." The three taxis split.

Mkash's driver followed the snitches directions. A short while later, they approached a dirt intersection adjacent to the neighborhood. The snitch started fidgeting, "You guys are gonna protect me right? I mean, after all this you can't leave me here. These guys will do awful things to me."

"What's your name?"

"Kidole Gumba"

"Alright, Kidole Gumba. We'll take you away."

He blurted out "I've been here once."

"What is this place?"

"Whorehouse."

"How many guards?"

"One at the gates, a few more inside at the doors."

"What about your man, Sandhi. Did he trade girls here?"

"Yeah."

The lanes were dirt, flat and intersected at right angles. Most of the yards were green, well kept gardens. The homes were single-story, made from wood and sheet metal. Their destination however, stood out like a face tattoo. It was a wide, rectangular colonial house that rose two ballroom-stories above the rest. The taxi parked at the end of the lane.

Mkash took the snitch and another man towards the house. The lights were on but there was no noise, or movement. "It looks shitty," said the snitch. A short, iron fence lined the perimeter and tall tan grass lined the the yard. The guard station at the front gate appeared empty too. A few dead palm trees towered over an angry dog chained to a stake with a dugout radius that barked as they walked past casually.

"Let me get a look out back." Said Mkash. At the end of the lane, when the others walked on to the beach, he cut through an empty, overgrown lot and doubled into a back yard. He came back and still heard the dog barking and the house was still still. Mkash crept low to approach. He stood next to a tree and silently jumped up over the rusty, iron fence. His feet came down silently and scrambled towards a double cellar door with lock on a chain. He took it up and tried the door handle, checking the rusty padlock. He took out a ring of five skeleton keys, took the medium large and set the tension on a minuscule spring. He slipped it in, turned the latch twice and busted the door ajar with the heel of his hand. The lock on the chain had a keyhole on the front. Three pins, he thought as he heard a shrill whistle and looked back. The dog stopped barking. A car was driving down the lane. He crept back around and watched a long, black car that could be holding nine people. It approached the gates. A guy with a big gun got out, opened the gates and took position in the guard hut. As night fell, Mkash took a last look for vulnerabilities in the hut and hopped back out of the property.

Simbat's taxi rolled down a small hill to a gully intersection. The neighborhood funneled into a thick forest hollow with a buggy dance hall. A few dozen people were drinking under the front awning of a wood building. A sign, *Tavern*, was the only thing lit up. Reggae music was playing and women were dancing. A few men were drinking from clear glass jars. It was lively but the bench seats around the edges were lined with worn out drunks, cracking grins slumped over while sipping their carefree cups.

The group wove through, winking at girls and flashing golden smiles. At the door, they got eyed up and made a quick glance towards the bar. They got nodded in. Simbat had set the volume on his walkie talkie just low enough so only he heard the beep. He excused himself to the bathroom. Ignatio asked the bartender for a cup of banana liquor, "That's sold outside man. Only foreign drinks at the bar."

Over the radio, Simbat heard, *the snitch paid off, we have eyes on the girls. They're entering a building.* over the walkie talkie. "Do you have eyes on them? How many?" *Maybe 8 armed men. Mkash is on the property.* "Hold back. Wait for the hook. Where are you?" *We're at the northeast edge of the north center square.* "Ok I'm at the tavern. Center-middle, dead center. Over." *Over and out.*

Back at the bar, Simbat sat next to Sri Ceylon and looked around, "Where's Ignatio?"

"You already know."

Simbat sits down and orders 3 beers, "Listen here, Mkash's snitch paid off."

"Really? I figured he'd chosen a last ditch lie instead of the fire. Alright," he sipped. "What's next?"

"We're badgers. We go in quietly, root around for what we need, eat who we must, take what we can, and leave."

Sri Ceylon sat outside next to a woman. It was loud so he got close and asked her name. After a minute, they went inside and talked.

"Malawi is known as *the warm heart of Africa*. Where do you think we got that name?"

"Friendly people?"

"Yeah, we're friendly. We're inland people and don't get too many travelers. We're friendly but look around. We get everyone here because this is the only bar in town. This is where they put the rabble, the alcoholics, the divorced, the flirtatious girls with no fathers."

"Why are you here?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"So what happens to the young village girls that don't get married?"

"Ahh, well boy you're in the right place."

"Is there a whorehouse?"

"There used to be."

"What?"

"Ah some government men came and shut it down. Ironical because the owner was an old government man too."

“How'd that slip Banda for so long? I thought he kept his hand tight around his men.”

“Oh he knew. Karonga's not a big city.”

“What happened to all the girls?”

“Well, a lot of them are here, or they work out of other houses.”

“Can you point one out?”

She glares him out.

“What? I'm a sailor, back at sea tomorrow.”

In the late hours the crew gathered in and around a tree. They'd been taking turns staking out, resting and swimming until the right moment.

Simbat spoke up, “We know nothing about these guys, so caution, confidence and coordination. Can you get in silently?”

“I think so,” Mbwana holds up a set of lock picks, “if someone takes care of the dog, I'll try to get the girls out with no fuss.”

“I got something for that bitch,” Mosi took off his backpack and pulled out a bloody cloth. He unwrapped a piece of meat.

“Where'd you got that.”

“Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies.” There was a bit of muffled laughter.

“Ok, that leaves the rest of us for Sandhi and his gold, but don't forget about Zaik. There might be Arabs here too. We need guns at the windows, ready to eat chaos, not serve it. Take it easy, no hot tempers, no stray bullets. Anyone need a drink?”

A bit more laughter and a few guys passed a bottle around.

Mbwana crept over the fence like a monkey. They watched him drop down and creep low towards the back door. They grabbed rocks and fanned out.

“Alright, let's put the dog to sleep.” Two or three of Mosi's dreadlocks were dark red with silver crimson moons shimmering as he crawled towards the fence. The dog growled so he slumped down, rolled over and hucked the meat. The dog answered apprecitively. The guard peered out and saw it with something in it's mouth and grunted “dumb squirrel”. Mosi was watching M Kash watch the guard. Sri Ceylon watched Mosi. Krishna Varnasi watched Simbat watch Mbwana pick the lock and lower the chain to the ground. He dripped oil and silently opened the door. When he entered, they sent a signal down the line. He descended uneven steps into earthy darkness. Only a tiny bit of moonlight shone in. If anyone was hiding in the dark, they would see his silhouette. He raised his hands and gave a low shush as his eyes adjusted. He first noticed pillars in the middle. He sniffed the air. As he managed his heartbeat, he heard someone breathing heavily, probably sleeping, about ten meters away. He tiptoed towards them, stopping every few steps to listen. As he got nearer, he recognized more people breathing. It was pitch black in this corner. He felt self-conscious, as if eyes were on him. Then, from outside, a shotgun blast. He froze still. To his right, a match sparked lit, illuminating the face of a young Arab with a cigarette.

A moment prior M Kash, with a telescoping shotgun pointed at the man in the guardhouse, shot

the starting gun twice quickly peppering up the guard. The projectiles flew at the windows. Two guys showed their chests in the windows. Bam! Bam!

Mkash stood over the moaning, buckshot guard, “Live through this. Stay down.” Berfinber carried a boulder. Mkash grabbed it too and together they slammed the huge rock at the front door, smashing the lock through the doorjamb and busting it open. Berfinber was already firing at the inside corner. Mkash dropped to the ground and rolled in, staying low as Berfinber fired three shots and rolled in after. He put two slugs into his shotgun and fired from a short distance, as more mercenaries entered behind him.

Downstairs, Mbwana was facing down a smoldering cigarette and a probable gun in the darkness. “Shh, don't make a sound. We're gonna sit here and smoke.” Keeping it pointed at Mkash, he took another cigarette out, chain-lit it and chucked it at Mkash's feet. “Go ahead, but if I hear anything louder than a breath, that'll be your last.”

Upstairs, shots, loud voices and glass breaking were heard and gun barrels were heating up. Of the dozen mercenaries, only Mkash had a long gun. He was walking around outside, blowing out windows upstairs and down. At a brief lull, he gave the holler through the megaphone, “We want Sandhi, the girls and the gold. Give them all.”

In the basement Mbwana said, “You're lucky to be down here, instead of fighting with your friends. But those are the sounds of your friends dying. So, when the smoke clears and my friends come down here, I can help you. However you want, point your gun, or trust me friend. I won't let them shoot you down, not after you gave me this cigarette. We just want Sandhi and the girls.” He motioned to a cage where there was quiet breathing.”

The Arab just stood there smoking. By the time the cigarette finished, the shots had stopped and Simbat was opening the door, shedding light on the stoic girls. “Ok. Go get his gun. No! You wait here, I'll get it.”

“Listen man, I'm gonna help you walk out of here, so let me talk to my man.”

Simbat was listening and approached carefully. Before they got a chance to shake hands, the goon took off running.

Chapter 45 Thrown Rope

Rabi is at the front of the retreat with guntrucks, tanks and armored personnel carriers with trailers containing howitzers, ground to air launchers, RPGs, commanders, mullahs, spies, lieutenants and dignitaries. While the back of the retreat is ambushed by the YDP, Rabi returns home before dawn and even manages to get into bed before the first call to prayer. He skips it and rolls over to a sensual morning dream about Hayat. A bit later he wheezes, wakes, relieves himself, falls back asleep and wakes again.

He scoffs again at the pretentiousness of Tola's text message, *...have prevailed at Lepanto, and if the Christians hadn't been driven out of Istanbul...* -Running into battle with a head full of nonsense like that, he probably got blown away. It's good enough for Dabiq though, if he's dead. Hmm, *The final*

words of a mujahideen, crazy dickhead always belonged in a library anyways.-

He motivates himself to push through the day's tasks with a piece of baklava and a cup of coffee. After the morning meeting, he will put his mind to personal matters, in particular, marrying Hayat with as little fuss as possible. The wedding should be small, only a few dozen guests, generals, mullahs and their families. They don't have any real friends here anyways, just some jealous guys who would come to meet wives. Of course he'll invite Abu and Tola. He hopes they're still alive, so that he has a few groomsmen. He puts on a headdress to meet the philanthropists.

The day's responsibilities flood in and he sees helicopter in the distance. His uncle calls, *Are you ready? Have you read the file?* "Yes uncle Abdul." *What do you think of their motives?* "Yeah, they're proper." Rabi ruffles through the pages, "Anti-statist. He hates England?" *Yes nephew, but don't talk about Islamic State this, and The State that. Tell him that we're a gathering of decentralized regional governances, unified under a Mullah.* "Are they anarchists? Do you know anything about their history?" *Yeah, they stayed in my apartment for 2 days. Plus, Mullah Abdulhamid personally vouched for them. And he's been their Mullah since they were kids.* "They're from fucking Birmingham?!" *Pure English, reverts.* "Alright, whatever. What about the money? Do we know where it comes from? How much?" *Didn't you read the fucking dossier? Virtual currency, Bitcoin, Chipcoin, Computercoin, whatever. But they're like the companions. People trust them with their zakat because—* The phone line suddenly cuts out at the revolving door. Inside the lobby, security says, "very sorry sir, power outage. Just a moment for the generators." Rabi rushes to the staircase and bounds up.

The night shift comes to an end at the Emergency Gynecology. Ayshe asks the midwives whether they'd like tea. Everyone cheers up and she goes to boil water. The conversation is pleasant and fresh, "It's wedding season." "Enough about that! I caught my husband in night marriage with an pagan. The rat!" Duygu breathes slowly to control her heartbeat. She withdraws an eyedropper and slips it between the back her fingers, showing her palms like a coin trick. She gets up to pour the tea, saving the last glass for Khalisa, who waits impatiently by the door. Just before tipping the spout over the last glass she squeezes the contents of the eyedropper in. She hands out each glass and smiles warmly at Khalisa. "You're learning a lot here. You'd make a great nurse."

In the night sky, flying over oceans, cities, desert and oasis, Abu putters and loses altitude, falling and spiraling into a cart of hay at the bottom of a cliff, hiding. Voices sound open sesame in many languages, "açıl susam", "sésame ouvert-il», aftah ya simsim", "konjat baaz". The door opens and a doctor tells Tola and Rabi, "He's dead." "That's good, because we have some of his money" The scene dissolves.

No time later Jermaine comes through the wall holding a can of beer, "Chin up mate. Don't let em get te air of the dog, init? Alright mate, it's me birthday," and hands the can over.

He's comfortably sunk behind his eyes and soaking in blood. "Jermaine, Jermaine, Jermaine, I'm pent up, believe that. And done in by my own best mates, no less. Stood up proper and bowled over. Anyways, it's alright now. How are you? Still getting pegged at Club Libertine by that dominatrix? What was her name, Feride? Ahh anyways mate, let me lie here a bit." Jermaine falls backwards, sipping as if rooted on a spindal.

Forever passes before the beloved family member gingerly opens the door blooming words. "My boy, my love Abu, Son of Simbat, safe with me. We're going to heaven together."

“Mum, can I really come?”

“Why not? You fought jihad didn't you? You're in! Jewel encrusted pavilion, drinks better-than-wine, delights that earthly women are no equal. You're guaranteed! Die happy,” she ascends.

A bevy of reporters in an old tweed push in through the door, pens clicking in their teeth, flipping the pages of a top-bound notebooks with grubby digits, asking “son, how's father?” Other reporters flood in with microphones. “I represent the thousand and one nights, a question for the story books. Have you lived up to his father name? What adventures have you had? What will you do next? Probably, you're gonna die.” Abu takes out his gun and pops them like balloons. Tola and Rabi are back. They confer and decide that they're going to pull the plug because he's dead, and they can have all the money in his Kuwait Bank account.

On the dam bridge, Tola paws at the door handle of an unmarked van. The three other guys have stumbled off and he's all alone and opens the door to start unloading. A crate of folders, binders and yellow paper spills out. He looks towards Tabqah city. Two women are approaching on foot. One's holding an AK-47. He'd heard al Khansaa has had men arrested, just for looking at them. He hides at the front of the truck. The women stop at the back. Papers are blowing away. They're speaking English as they chuck crates and notebooks onto the ground. One woman finds a cell phone and tries to turn it on. In the distance a helicopter is touching down.

“Who are you?”

“I am,” her eyes wince. She pauses, “Khalisa of al Khansaa.”

“I'm your commander. Open your eyes.”

Khalisa stares blankly for a moment. Then the slits of her eyes soften and open, but her pupils dilate and widen.

“We have to reach them before the men do! We're going to punish a group of women sunbathing at the far edge of the lake. We must ride out to arrest them.”

“But, you are my charge.

“No I'm your guardian. And you are an enforcer.”

The brain is a chemical magnet, woven by life. Tola's seen and heard minds torn by various chemicals; Special K, 2CB. This lacks the shuddering paranoia of any halucinagen. It's appears to be relaxing her muscles, but her balance is intact, he's heard the extra ingredient in this Captigon shit is cooked up local but this isn't any speed. She seems massively dosed by it. That, or she's mental but she seems to be missing connections and forget details about the present. “But you already received your orders. Now punish those women at the lakeside!” Duygu puts on her burka. The familiarity hearkens, circles back and recedes into his unconsciousness to appear as a tattoo on his back.

He walks into plain view, presenting himself unarmed. Duygu raises hers, but slows her hand when she recognizes him. “Is there anyone else here?”

“No.”

-Of course, they're all here. He's either an asset, or an enemy. His heart will betray his head when he sees my face. If he's afraid, I'll shoot him twice.-

She strides ahead of Khalisa and around the edge of the van. A dream glistens over her niqab as

she pulls off the fabric.

They've been acquainted for years, and she's wearing blue doctor's scrubs. He stares at her for a long moment but it's Duygu who breaks the silence, "is this your van?"

"It's a military van."

"I'm leaving. Do you have the keys."

"No, but... why are you here?"

She shrugs and looks out in the distance. "Kismet."

Abu doesn't move, feel pain or remember. He's in a hospital with a skull fracture. From moment to moment he knows it, but mostly he's lost in dreams. Sometimes footsteps boom and echo down the hall or people just appear over his bed. His mind echoes of beginningless conversations with everyone he has known, all shaken up with dryer sheets and tin foil but eventually, it stops resetting. When he wakes, his heart softens as with the first sip of tea and he wants to see his friends.

Elsewhere in the hospital, a lucid conversation is taking place, "Do you mind if I record this? I know a reporter at Dabiq." Rabi duffles in his bag for his recording device.

"No brother, I don't mind. Dabiq is an excellent magazine. I have just read the interview with the widow of Brother Abou Bashir Abdoullah al Ifriki. A great jihad blazes across Europe in her wake. If you'll allow me to speak candidly, I hear you're courting her."

"Well brother, more is happening than what you read in magazines."

"Haha," Walid affirms and Rabi pushes record.

"Brother, you were raised as a Christian. How did you return to Islam?"

"As a child, I remember going to church on holidays, but like so many in England, my youth was corrupted. My father was a footballer and he was never around. In England, when there is a widow, the men often court her by buying her alcohol and drugs but none of those men could provide for us. But when I was five, by the grace of Allah, my older sister married a Muslim and they adopted me. We were poor, but rich in spirit. In fact, I'm still poor. The money I carry isn't mine. It is the wealth of the faithful. The immigrants. The Strangers. Parents who see their naturalized generation spend public money on drugs and alcohol; the halal butchers, importers, and landlords would rather give Zakat outside of the UK, and they trust me with their money."

"I am that naturalized generation and brother, you are right. Here, money doesn't turn the world. How incredible that people follow the Prophet and establish autonomous caliphates. In Malaysia, an entire island is under the flag of the Prophet Muhammad may peace be on his name. We're in Europe and America. Brother we're growing and this is the beating heart of Islam, the land where true Muslims can make their own way."

"Yes, I hope. Maybe this donation can help you keep the power on."

"Haha, inshallah. Would you like to see the pharmaceutical lab?"

"I'd rather meet with patients. I understand the military just had a serious engagement. I'd like to meet some of the wounded, foreigners if possible."

Rabi exhales, "Ok, Let's go to the ICU."

Khalisa purrs a hot breath through her niqab, watching her charge speaking, flirting! uncovered with a man. Her sense of justice commands her to act, strike, strike, striking until it bores through her motor cortex and she lashes out inside, screaming to lunge towards Duygu's bare neck, but it's ejected past her as she barely manages to flinch. Her motor cortex responds only to outside stimulus. Light and airy, Duygu says, "Today I put it in her tea. Then the power went out in the hospital, and a helicopter landed on the roof. She's a fucking, trained horse right now and I'm getting the fuck out of here."

"Wow, everyone's fucked up on drugs. You're not afraid."

"Walking out like this is typical every day. This is where they've kept me. And they're too busy getting fucking blasted in an air raid. The only thing we've done is" she scoffs, "What the fuck is all this garbage? Did you clean out school?"

He exhales sharply and looks down, shaking his head slightly. "You got a cigarette?"

"Nah, Hey Khalisa, got any cigarettes?"

"I don't have any."

"We can buy a pack as soon as we get to Turkey," Duygu grins.

"What the fuck, fucking blast. Bomb blast at the airfield today... yesterday."

"Are you free man? Are you fucking sane? Can you bring me to Turkey?"

"What about the dam guards?"

"We're al Khansaa badge. We can walk past them. What about you?"

"I'm a fucking soldier, I can get past. You sure you didn't leave a trail of breadcrumbs?"

"No, I've been planning this escape since Rabi kidnapped me. Now's the time."

"Rabi kidnapped you? Holy shit! Alright. I'll help."

"Get a bike. Meet out there," she points down the dam road. There's nothing but an empty highway stretching across the edge of the precipices. "We can make to the Turkey in a few hours."

Tola looks the opposite way. The other guys are on their way to help unload the van.

"Bring me home. Easy chance. I'm going. Don't follow me without a bike or something fast off-road." She beckons Khalisa and they walk off.

A gurney is being pushed towards the emergency surgery. Men in military fatigues are groaning on their backs or in chairs. Rabi checks the roster and sees, *Abu Simbel al Masqati; Concussion, Possible skull fracture; X-ray 13:00, Room 420* -My god, maybe he'll rant nonsense like some kind of drunk outside a pub.- Rabi heads down the hallway, past doctors rushing to stop a patient bleeding on a gurney rolling down the hall. A man with a burnt face, and a bloody stump of an arm passes them.

"We were entirely successful in Kobane until the American bombers scorched the earth. I was there and though Allah protected me, I can't say I was untouched by their fire, and he shows a burn on his arm. We're going to the room of a soldier who wasn't so lucky. He also came from England and is my good friend of many years."

His forehead is wrapped in a bloody bandage. "Brother, are you with us?"

He reaches out his arms and says, "oh Most Merciful Allah the Supreme, Lord of the magnificent throne, cure my friend."

Like second nature, Simbat approaches the man guarding the rooftop portal with a gruff smile, signaling that he's thirsty. He takes his hand, draws him in close and twists his wrist and pulls him into a rear choke and squeezing him to sleep. Haydar throws him a ropes, gags and pistols and closes the door. The helicopter takes off immediately. Simbat grips conceals the pistols and finds the guard snoring. He opens his mouth wide, presses his tongue flat and shoves in the gag. He starts to tie his hands and feet behind his back but pauses for a moment to listen to his earpiece. Walid says, Simbat, fourth floor, room 420. That piece of information came quicker than he thought, which gives him an extra moment to consider how many ways this operation can go wrong. He shoves the guard behind it and opens the metal door to search for his son.

Tola sees the motorcycle in the back of the van.-Mondial Zone 180, not bad- He pushes through it to check the gas tank, -Full, alright,- He pushes and dumps junk out the back door, including a large metal cabinet. He rolls the bike over paper and cables and drops the back wheel down, busting a huge dent in the cabinet. The other guys are coming back. He checks the starter. -Well, Fuck it- He sits in the saddle just as the two other soldiers approach briskly, "What the fuck? Do you expect us to clean up this mess?" He turns the throttle to speed away but one guy gets a hold of his arm. Next he reaches for the handlebar, Tola tries to put a guard up and the guy's grip shifts to his shirt. The bike starts to wobble as the guy tries to mount it behind him. Tola shells up, puts his t-shirt neck in his teeth and rips through it as he throttles and shoulder strikes the guy. The bike doesn't move because the other guy's got his hip up against it and the handlebar's twisted. He gets a hold of Tola but when it kicks, it bucks and shrugs the guy up. Tola frees his shoulder by gripping the right handle with his left hand and twisting the throttle again, by then his jacket was already off one sleeve and the heavy soldier, off balances grasps at the only thing he can reach, "fuck your mother!" he shouts and falls back with Tola's shredded t-shirt and jacket. Tola shouts and feels the surge running through his arm as he swings his shoulder back down to racing position and speeds away.

-How the fuck did I get here?- He rides on the empty road for almost a kilometer and sure enough, there at the side of the road, he sees the women scrambling across the smooth dirt that's as flat and banked as concrete. He waves her up. She gets on. At speed the totems of orthodoxies come out to dance in the desert sun. Al Khidr's standing on a fish. Nimrod leaps off at Nineveh and Jesus snaps off a thorn from his crown to pick his tooth. Malcolm X tells Elijah Muhammad it's time the chickens come home to roost.

Simbat's kneeled at his son, eyes closed. He takes his hand at his bedside and it's like the same hand holding itself, the same square jaw quivers, "I'm sorry. The world is a dangerous place." Abu gurgles. Simbat widens his eyes as Abu sniffs. Simbat gasps. His heart is pounding. His son speaks.

-Another dream- "Dad? Or are you the devil to bring me to hell."

"No, ha," zygomaticus snaps, "This calls for another chance. I left and I felt sorry for years. You must be thirty years old. All the riches of the world can't buy you the life your deserve."

"You didn't even ask about school, or the mosque. I had a community there."

"Yeah, I was proud to be a father in London, for a while. I went to the pubs at night and talk

about pushing a pram around the supermarket.”

“I don't remember you from then. Only the ship. I hope it sunk. You just took me away. I know why you left though. It's the same reason I'm here.”

“Money?”

“Adventure.”

“Yeah, well. Adventure's no good without love, money or power.”

“Come on now son, let's go now. Heal your head with dad. ”

“Alright.”

Simbat taps his collar twice. Abu sits up to put his feet on the ground. Next to him, his father lifts his arm around his shoulder and they stand up together. They walk past the reception desk Abu leaning against his father. Simbat speaks, “Is it okay if my son and I walk in the courtyard for a bit?”

“Yes, but the elevators are out of service.”

“I can walk.”

Simbat supports his son up the stairwell. At the top there's a chain locked around the latch. Simbat shoots it off and kicks it open. Pressure waves agitate the hot air. Across the black rooftop he sees a guard looking confused. The portal opens and another guard emerges, who wastes no time and fires his Kalishnikov from the hip. Simbat crouches, aims and shoots him twice in the chest. The second guard aims his rifle. Simbat stands up and steadies his pistol with both hands and shoots the remainder of the magazine. Two bullets strike the guard. Abu's crouching behind him and Simbat doubles back to support him across the rooftop. The helicopter thumps the air and lowers to set down.

The portal opens again, this time Rabi and Walid come out arm in arm and smiling. They look at two dead guards on the ground under waves of pressure. Rabi reaches for a pistol, but then he sees Abu, limping with his father and stops his hand. Walid and Simbat make eye contact. Simbat's gun is in his hand. The two pairs approach each other.

“Mate,” Rabi reads Abu's word under the agitated ethers. He raises his hand to clasp Abu's. Memories flood in. Rabi inhales sharply through his nose and gives a slight nod. Abu shrugs off his father and leans towards Rabi. They share a long look before Rabi transmits, “Looks like you've got an angel.”

“That's dad,” he tips his head towards him.

“Is that who you answer to now?” he looks back at the helicopter. “Where are you going?”

“I don't know.”

Alright, that's that.” The helicopter starts to roar. “You won this round. Go to your kingdom.” he hugs him. “But don't say I never helped you.” Rabi turns and drags his feet towards the stairwell. The others turn and walk towards the helicopter. At a an inkling, Simbat turns back and raises his gun. Rabi too has his pistol drawn. He shoots once before slipping into the stairwell. Abu looks down at his white gown, soaking with blood.

Chapter 46 Feride Fuc

As a last touch, Ali painted on the new landing gear, *If I were a star in the sky, I'd come down on you* and it took off not a moment too soon towards the old colonial house in North Karonga. Ali and the repair crew had ditched the jeep after putting its wheel on the bird. The course was short and they hovered over a big house in a residential neighborhood dropping two rope ladders. After a few minutes of climbing, there were two dozen people, each with pockets full of watches and gems in the helicopter.

Chapter 47 The Zone

Probably the driest land between the two rivers, the flat plains where the snow blows south from the Great Caucasus were damp and marshy once. In the 14th century before Christ, a sect of monotheists existed autonomously between empires. They were shepherds, noted Ezedi as mountaineers by the Hittites. The Sumerians testified they were divinely created at the root of Adam but not Eve. They sing not about Joshua but Moses at the walls of Jericho, Of Lilith in the garden; of Taus, the primo angelo who bowed only to the creator, never the creation.

Some survivors' nature is to return to empty villages to mourn. Others return to the mountain to cleanse the bloody ground. The trauma is shared deeply in numbers at nearby refugee camps, and even by those who migrated to European cities and villages. A phantom of unheard victims howls at night.

Bahtiyar stumbles to see the tall communications towers in the distance. He walks through empty fields, far enough from the road to avoid being seen by cars. A few villages. Large white dogs keep his distance from the cattle and sheep at the edge of these villages. He attracts the attention of some hard eyed farmers. A drainage ditch carries off dirty water and blocks his path towards the city. He takes off his shoes and walks through it into the hot sunny day. He's thirsty. The buildings are low and there are minarets, antennae and radio towers in the middle of the city. Another half-hour of walking passes and he's resting under the highway with the smell of sewage below.

Shoved away and wandering, Bahtiyar ambles a-rhythmically over scrubby, flat ground with the sun at his side. He's been walking through the sunrise and arrives to see the central radio towers over Suruç. He says and decides that He, and He alone, is his protector. Under satellites, Bahtiyar hears people call his name, first with fine and loving graces then turning abusive, shining lights in his face, calling him fuckwit. He's agitated and now he's thrashing. No man, woman nor state will claim the soul of Bahtiyar before Allah. He's interrogated on white concrete, after he struggles in shock. He's challenged to run. They catch him by the armpits. His legs are tied and before long, he's in a dark cell. They bear down on him, stand over him holding long flashlights. He looks up and turns down as he's smacked with it. He gets stomped and bruised. Then they throw him in a slightly larger cell with a bunch of other bearded men. He rests and is left alone.

Duygu wraps her arms around Tola and tries to rest a moment but they were launched off the motorcycle by a big rock under the crumbling farmland and wound up lying on the ground together. Relatively unscathed, they laughed and let their inhibitions titilate a bit before Duygu urges they pass the border first. It was marked by a chain link fence. They widened a hole to accommodate both of

them and the Zone and they're through.

Within moments they've spurned a group of soldiers in beige approaching as a defending army by sending off warning shots. "Keep going," from the back of the Mondial Zone. Tola keeps his wrist twisted towards the defenders. "Slow down now." A large calibre bullet flies at close range and bangs their eardrums. They approach a tree and stop nearby, Duygu dismounts and walks towards the soldiers who can be seen at a fence across the same scrubby farmland they've driven across all morning. She shouts boldly, "Brave guards of the borderlands. Thank you for your rescue. I have been captive for months there." Some of the men beckoned to her voice. Tola tries to keep his balance while avoiding direct eye contact with any of the heavily armed men. A howitzer is pointed at him.

Abu is across the entirety of the bench while, close to a dozen men crowd the opposite. Abu continues to sleep while Simbat kneels by his face. My son, listen to my voice. I'll tell you a story

Epilogue

As it happens, it didn't happen. In the year Freddy Mercury sang to nearly two-billion people at Band Aid, Thatcher's second term as PM, and UK's peak unemployment, a ship, captained by Simbat, the not-yet-born's father, slid around the northwest horn of Africa and into the Red sea, dodging tariffs, navies and cyclones. Along the way, mates brought up mutiny with confrontational jest, that there was a baby at the helm while the captain, the one and only Simbat, fed his expecting bride canned tangerines and coconuts in the midst of this slow journey towards the grey horizon. Thee took it at a loss, but the mates were satiated with liquor and shore leave.

Feride's womb was an amniotic bounce castle; as Abu's fingers and toes were forming, the expecting mother endured day and night queasiness. One placid layover in Italy, the Bantu beauty basked in Mediterranean luxury. Simbat bought a leather eye-patch and sold confiscated coffee to Reggio Calabrian businessmen over linguine del mer at a seaside resort. From her beach chair in Italy's heel she caressed her growing belly and dreamed alone on a rowboat in the familiar harbor of Dar es Salaam. The sunlight was long and sprayed upward from behind stringy clouds to the to the horizon. The boat rowed itself to the top of the world. They funneled inland swinging a three-point turn in the harbor and landed at Harwich International Port. Simbat gave command of his ship to Sayeed, his trusted first mate. Go to Columbia and bring bananas to America at a regular commission. The new family disembarked to taxis from the only pub hearty enough to host the rowdy crew.

He bought a set of apartments in East London and slowly filled them with the best American furniture that foreign capitol could buy. Abu's birth anchored them there but he didn't promise devotion and she didn't expect much. The babbling-talk that made baby Abu wiggle and squeal with laughter made Simbat complain that his ears were bleeding. Feride tinged her baby's sides with long, delicate fingers and he would squeal with laughter. They avoided speaking to him in Swahili, or Bantu but read to him in Arabic. and imagined daddy Simbat washing up on razor sharp rocks, and climbing to a forbidden island...

Abu Akra sat at his mother's lap and they read books together, to learn English. They would read about Simbat shipwrecked. His illusory father is the folk hero who floats alone on the open sea, clinging to a plank until they were picked up by a ship whose captain had been killed by a sea monster. They hunt it down and but it dodges their cannonballs and grips the ship with its mighty tentacles. It shakes and nearly tears it asunder when Simbat and six men grab a cannon overloaded with balls and gunpowder into its mouth. From the rain of guts Simbat pulls a key. A fortune teller's riddle *Peel the outside and cook the inside, eat the outside and throw away the inside* He treks deep into the mainland...

Looking for fruit he treks to a impassable white barrier rising up to the sky. Our hero steps back to see, as from an ant to a albatross, a colossal egg which moments later hatches into a monstrous chick to chomp at his head. He jams it's beak open with a tree trunk and hides in wait. Mother bird descends from the stars and blocks out the sky with it's wings. He's too small for

A short time later he rides on her foot with baggy pants billowing high above the sea. His arcane key is lost but the bird brings him to the underworld. He flies over mountains and into a chasm. A long and funneling queue of young brides wielding axes, rusty blades and pitchforks — thousands of young beauties in lingerie wait inline spiraling into the chasm.

Frozen in place is King Shariyar, naked but for the bondage of ice and shrieking that 1001 late mornings previewed this hell. -I'd seen it all... in my dreams!- he wails. Items of torture scatter the rocky pit.

Simbat begs Shariyar's pardon -King of muses demise, help me recover a lost key.-

Shariyar bargains back -Trade for your first born!- His torture has made him a demon.

-Foolish king with a bird for a cock!- in chorus from the harem. -Neither you, this sailor, nor Satan has claim on souls and you've got no keys. Use your imaginary key to unlock your iron maiden *Ahahakamakamaha*- King Shariyar wails -Wait!- through the fiery whiplashes, -I'll only go deeper, but maybe not before her seeing her, beyond these spiteful specters if she waits. Scheherazade holds many keys. Go ask, but also give a message for me. Tell her to beat a drum, so that I might hear when she draws near."

Simbat nods and turns away. The steed has flown the pit. A trail spirals up aplomb with spectral babes dressed in nightclothes, burlesque and oriental styles. They garnish royal blades and clang chains. He shudders and begins to climb the narrow path passing furious women. He begs their pardon and steps around them, -Who's this pimp?- Others chime in, -Our fat husband? How's he sprung loose? Let's slash his belly!- Simbat takes some accidental hits but asserts, -Ma'am, I'm a traveler. Your King awaits your vengeance.-

A dark and pretty shade, wearing her bridal veil and little else entices, -Aiiii! What little use, robbed of virginity and life and for what? What do I get for lost time?- she seductively closes the distance but Simbat weaves left and dodges the kiss. She starts to fall, but hovers over the pit and fades into a genie with a wisp of blue vapor for a bottom half. Hovering, she utters a terrifying scream.

-Yes, quite unfair- Simbat replies hastily with one eye on the path. He climbs out but the queue continues past the violated brides and towards an sonic oasis of lyrical musings. Simbat sees the end where the scornful wives are turned away from one of a great different nature. A woman sits on a maroon blanket with a peaceful fair face, calm eyes and an exquisite lyre. She wears turquoise garments, a saffron headdress, and births a quickening lay. As their eyes meet she sings,

To pass the gate take an ear, or meet your fate as you draw near.

Peel the outside and cook the inside, eat the outside and throw away the inside.

Shining in flossy rows under husky shell. Don't ask for it plainly. I'll never tell.

Peel the outside and cook the inside. Eat the outside and throw away the inside.

Did Simbat guess the riddle? Did you? It was given to an old civilization; like the scab on the head of a wheat spike. Ours -millet, teff, quinoa and sorgum- are overpriced at your restaurants while this dehydrates the planes and make quick work of the farm animals but after a few rich seasons, come more mouths to beg at my tent flaps.

Simbat guesses correctly and *takes an ear* to the hidden tomb, deep inside a long cave. The bone notes chill our hero as he ambles across skeletons to the door. It's a keyhole with a slot opening on the doorjam served with a truly *corny* riddle. Simbat picks up a wolf's lower jawbone, plugs the tooth gaps with kernels and tracts it in to flush the hull.

The door rises. Our hero tip-toes between tripwires, allowing poison darts to retain tension within their slings. Treasure is across the hall glowing but in the space between lies peril. Inside of a big hole is a rotten corpse, impaled on a spike and still wearing his fatigues. Shards of tile break away to the pit below and threaten more trap floors. The treasure across is null, blasphemous and too costly...

As Abu's childhood passed, Simbat the father visited less and less. Abu was fourteen when his mother died. He waited for his father to return. In an orphanage for Muslim teens he brooded, drank and managed decent enough marks to enroll as a premed. He lied to girls and even pushed a few up against ivy covered walls. He prayed for forgiveness. Fridays he was both a rake and a mullah, indulging in sublime recitations by daylight and treacherous depravity at night.

At points, he was lost to the world, but not to his family. Not to me. Whether self-consciousness, self-loathing or self-discovery was the cause of his defection isn't known by his absentee father or myself,

his maternal grandmother. Although his father and I know of the mysterious past of Abu Akra, we don't know his big ideas, targets and motivations. His journey to the Levent, from the onset claims not to be the actual events. In spite of that, I'm not about to reveal if my grandson is one of the 2000 UK citizens who've abandoned first world privilege to fight for Islamic State. He, like the storyteller, is motivated by money, adventure, sex, recognition, righteousness, and personal history.

And who am I? I am Kahina, Abu's grandmother and psychic guardian angel. Why do I tell this story and from where? Well child, I sit under the old gate in Stone Town, where he was conceived.

Time exhales its history in to the covers of books. Not the same stories each time but variations with modulation AND transposition. Animal sounds from flicks of the tongue held between the folds of our experiences. Some tales are too rich to be anything other than told so as not to attract greedy pirates or colonists to pillage and surreptitiously pilfer the nuggets, and the beginning of some stories are lost to history. Our heroes' participation in savage murder, if his blood and spirit attest, is defensible but this isn't a trial. He doesn't know his own beginnings. As his grandmother, Abu's origin can of course be traced to me and my heathen husband, as well as that old pirate and his kin but allow me to open the story in my daughter's tribe. In the spring of 1984...