

Bad Looks

By Thermanos Bueul

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Chapter 1 I presume

In the Kipengere Range, Ignatio whistled a lonely tune to the wind. He'd led his flock up to a cold height to feed on thyme. Having gripped the curved head of his long crook, he stretched both

flanks of his torso. He considered the way into the foothills; two familiar roads down, one over the ridge and another through the trees. He squinted into the distance. Nestled in a deep cut valley, he saw little wisps of smoke rising from his village. Further along, he could hear the sound of hyenas crying. The air froze with the half moon rise.

The sheep set a slow pace. He'd tended his flock for years and was wealthy. Kinga villagers were meek and didn't bling out for the swagger shows on the plains. Plus, he was in love, traveling with the woman of his life. He wanted her to bathe him that night.

He took a glass flask out of his pack and sipped on banana wine. It seemed to sharpen his senses. Something was awry. An unnatural grumbling in his left ear fractured his fantasies. He looked uphill to see four vehicles driving down the winding road. The sinking feeling that hit his gut sent him running down, ahead of his grazing sheep. It could be a government convoy or elephant hunters, but Ignatio had heard of village raids around Lake Malawi and it could only be, bandits.

He had strong legs and ran down fast. Grim thoughts gave him the speed of a cheetah. He was bounding faster with each crashing step, beating the ground with his bare feet, sending rocks and rubble tumbling after him. Eagles screeched ahead. He leapt from a low precipice and rolled to his feet on the scrubby grass below. His ankles were cut and bruised but his knees pushed him along faster.

A moment later, the eagles congregated in trees over the village tea shop. "Ahoi there, look up!" rising up and noticing that there were perturbed birds beating and alighting and calling shrill warnings from above. Men pointed and queried, "What are they telling us?"

Just then, Ignatio barreled in shouting -Bandits!- between gasping breaths. "Four vehicles are coming. Maybe thirty men." Some groaned and grabbed their foreheads. "These men come with heavy blades and bullets, and kill without mercy!" There was little hope. "We can't defend with our weapons." "We should make a deal. Offer up some gold, sacks of coffee, a woman to appease." "Our daughters aren't trade goods!" "Whatever we offer them, they'll only want more. Let's fight and kill them."

Without coming to a consensus, the men split up. "Take these weapons to the forest. Flee!" Ignatio and the other warriors took spears in ambush at the road.

Their vehicles precursed their appearance. Blades flashed the icy moonlight. Machine guns clapped the air. Their vicious faces caterwauled murder. At the ridge road the first villager stood up and threw a spear. It missed to the road just behind the speeding jeep. He reached for his blowgun but was blasted across the chest by bullets.

They mercilessly pushed into the city and split into groups. One went to the village green and the other towards a large estate within a stone wall. He was wearing a leather bondage shirt with strange beaded jewelry and he stood up through the roll cage of the jeep and let loose a rocket, blowing the wall to smithereens. Everyone's ears were ringing when the guard at the old house ended four bandits' lives but was shot.

Four bandits swarmed into the colonial estate and stole sacks of coffee, silver platters and jewelry. Bottles of scotch, were opened and guzzled while they turned the cabinets out, breaking calabash and looking for booty.

A half dozen bandits ran into the forest where they tried to dislodge villagers with hide-and-seek taunts. A woman threw a large rock down from a tree and quietly knocked one out. Another one climbed up the tree. She climbed higher, showing to give chase but smashing him down under an even

larger stone. Another villager skewered one in the darkness. She covered his stuck mouth but was bitten and released. He screamed out a menacing cry.

Ignatio entered the dark forest whispering loudly -Fariha, Fariha!-

“Shhhh! If you don’t shut up, you’ll kill us all!”

He crept out and stole through while a scattering of hot coals lit up the night at the edge of the forest. There were a number of flat, sharp rocks there which he picked up. Inside the village, homes were burning and old women cried out to see their neighbors dead across doorways. Warriors continued to fight even bullet-ridden. As Ignatio approached his home, the village flared. The pack, wearing leather and denim, were carrying bottles, metal, ivory and girls back to their jeeps.

Ignatio managed to ambush one from behind an unburnt corner of a house and broke his head open with a bloody rock. He stopped and looked down at the man for a moment. He wasn't completely sure who it was. He put his head down in his hands but kept his eyes open, touching them dry with his middle fingers and listening around him, walking away before removing them and taking a look into his home. He grabbed his spear. Across the town square, the bandits had parked three trucks. The savage earlybirds stood around it, satisfied with what they’d plundered but Ignatio approached as the last band jogged up, fastening their belts. The fourth jeep sped in from the shadows with its top off. Inside a woman was slung over a big set of shoulders. Ignatio recognized her hair and his heart pumped flames as he caught a glimpse of her face across the way. He charged.

A third bandit stood up with a machine gun. Ignatio, loath to see her like this, was running up to the vehicle and whipped the spear into motion. It narrowly hit the gunner but he turned back and raised his weapon. Ignatio had closed within fifteen meters before slumping sideways and letting lose the rock as a bullet flew through his hair as he barrel rolled back to his feet a fair distance lateral to the jeep, which was skidding. The gunner swiveled and fired two more shots before the gun clicked. Ignatio let loose a last stone that ricocheted up to graze the gunner's adversarial eye. The jeep veered and closed in on him as his hand touched something flat, a shard of baked clay. He sent it spinning off his finger and caught the side view mirror to hit the driver. The jeep hit Ignatio and he fell unconscious.

Chapter 2 Brogue

Metal claps are muffled by sweat saturate air whirling into fan blades. English voices count “1, 2, 3...”, “attaboy, crank down”, roars, encouragement and accomplishment, more reps and dissolved electrolytes as fighters prepare for work.

Between the concrete walls, among exercise equipment, crowded in, a guy in a jersey—Cork 9—asks, “Who's te keepah for te Turkish team?” His voice is like a tin whistle. “Whatsisname? Eh?... Musa... Musala?”

Abu and Tola are in earshot but strike up a conversation at the same cadence. Tola says, “Ya know, this used to be a proper boxing gym, and now we've got American football on the telly every morning. What the fuck is that show? Just ads and ref's calls if you ask me. What's next, a fruit juice bar?”

"Is anyone proud to say we're not the cheapest gym in London?" Jermaine had hurled for Cork. Now he works at the door of a club in North London. This morning he's come to the gym wearing his own jersey. He keeps talking, "He's... Paraguayan, no. Uruguan? Did ya see how quick he stopped Chelsea shots?" aggressively, "Shots! Shots! Shots we had, on goal! ... Muslera! that'sis name. Like BLAM! with the Mickeymouse gloves. b'DOW! all our best shots. I hate to see a match draw for Chelsea. Even to us, on our worst game. I'll be in Turkey next week, properly settle the draw, I will." Like the climax of a sweaty opus, with a change of timbre Abu says, "I'll score one on Turkey tonight."

"Yeah, get him Drogba," Jermaine cocks an eyebrow.

"Got a date with a pretty little Turk from Saint George."

"She kept your number after you dropped out? Ain't she a doctor?"

"Yeah, intern by now, at Saint Pancras."

"I like t'way t'Turkish girls play. Come off a winner's ball. Root last week. Kissed her goodnight and told her not to get pulled in any doors on her way to Camden. Now she sends me naughty pictures of her Sunday afternoon. But you boy, going out with a doctor, and a West End girl! Cheers to you mate. Bet she'll zone you out though, have you running circles round the middle. No penetration."

"Yeah, well maybe that, and maybe I've got a play that'll drop her panties even this evening" as Abu swings his towel around his neck and jumps up to grip the chin-up bar. He hoists his huge body, ridgy legs, size 15 trainers, arched shoulders and all, once from the biceps. Two. In his rounded rectangle head, his eyes cross. Three...

Abu is a young man reckoning with adulthood. At the awkward age of 14 he moved to the Orphanage of the East Mosque where he gained a sprawling surrogate family who argued about what was best. They guided him to study medicine at St. George University but he dropped out unceremoniously. He started an underground auto repair service with Tola who had a silver tongue to sell anything.

He thought of his mother's eyes anytime he picked up beach glass. She whispered nonsensical epitaphs, frequently in Swahili, "My gentle little elephant, have you caught any prawns?" Social Services just left him alone in the flat. After she passed, he nuzzled the cashier, a thirteen-year old boy, awkwardly growing. She took pity on him and gave him freebies but his childishness tit love was a meanicing from the other kids. He grew so fast he didn't know what to do with his legs and he would get bowled over by the other kids. When she died, he willed it all away at the boxing gym. As he grew, girls could neither trust nor resist him and neither he nor they wanted much conversation.

He's been coming to this gym since he was sixteen (actually nineteen, foreshadowing sake). Jermaine knows he's hiding something because he's seen his ID but he too has a vested interest in seeing Ws on his scorecard. A shady past has worked to his advantage. At 6 foot and 15 stone, Abu can threaten without raising his voice. His nose was flat against his stiff jaw like an anvil. His cheeks and temples are like two bricks. He repairs engines part-time and otherwise hasn't developed a big ambition, but he's got his 400 kg deadlift, as well as his date tonight, well under control. He's late to mosque though, probably have to sit outside.

Chapter 3 Zig Zag

Abu's eyes rest as peacefully as a bird in a tree. He stands tall enough to see kufi hats like white carnations. Shopkeepers rush to retake the cash register from their daughters. Others shake hands and pray. Abu hears "I hope your Aunt Simone gets better," "Al hemdu" "May Allah watch over Mira's new family and bring her many children", as he exits.

Outside, Rabi is smoking a cigarette to the end. He lights another. "Did you see the Tabqa Dam video? Bismillah, what a firefight!"

"Am I a sick fuck or was that the greatest. Brother Letts was knocking off heads like dandelions!"

"Ah yeah. And those were fucking, military heads, trained by Americans. Listen mate. If you can keep clear of trouble there, I want you and Tola to come with me."

"Yeah mate? I know, well, jihad in Belgium, Paris, all over America, London tonight."

"Right, at the drag track."

"Gotta have some fun, right?"

"Do you still want to sell your car, because I know a buyer in Paris. Thirty-thou."

"Pounds?"

"Is this fucking Paris man? Yes pounds."

"Alright alright. I'll think about it."

"And another propagandist scandal against Brother Mullagatwani. Same old honey trap. The only way to bring down powerful people is with drugs or girls. See you tonight mate." They clasp hands at waist level.

Rabi and Abu met in Saint George and couldn't help running into each other until they eventually became friends. They've both fallen down the Islamist rabbit hole online. The Algorithm sent them videos like, *The state of the Ummah* and *her brothers called her Khanesaa* and suddenly they're exposed to this new spectrum of content that's not only informative but also really entertaining, with different creators bringing their own viewpoints to this giant group of people in the comments section. They laugh at government officials being turned away from their own offices and kicked out of village mosques. Before long these videos, subtitled in English, French or German feel like a rebellion against authority, national identity, and society as a whole. They were still young enough for teenage rebellion. They started shouting *Kafir* at kids with beer cans. There was an extremist inflation in the anonymous chat rooms that they'd be invitations to join. Lots of people had been talking about this new *Dawal* for a while now; an uncorrupted proto-government where anything was possible. This huge group of people were learning Arabic, and sharing new viewpoints they hadn't been exposed to in their families, nations or cultures. It was Zion and everyone had an idea about the Islamic State. Everyone's expertise was valuable. Those who'd ventured to elevate Shariah over Common law in neighborhoods in England found a reason to leave.

Abu quickly walks towards the tall, concentric rectangles that hem in the front door. Inside he looks down at the patterns on the wall-to-wall carpet. As he ambles, he traces the bold lines winding

and zig-zagging over-under each other. Lines like the path of a blown-off leaf swooping back to earth rise and the vines loop and creep onward. The vines which branch off, terminate. He gazes, focuses and finds the one vine to the stone *mihrap* in front.

Abu saunters towards the holy lands. Imam has finished speaking and men greet each other.

He's still a young man, one-hundred kilograms with thirty-centimeter biceps of college dropout. His eyes show the flesh of his being, often full, varying of shape, size, spacing, direction and color. Contrast, brilliance, brightness, sensation, balance and symmetry function as motion in Abu's eyes and when he got excited, they would well up with moisture. His forearms and upturned hands show a lighter tone to his dark face. He sits next to a young man with his palms up on his thighs and says, "...when God calls and we're obliged to answer."

Long before he dropped out of university, Koranic studies here had guided him. He matured to find meaning in it and between its lines. He seeks to judge people, especially those who would suggest a caliphate cannot exist. Mullah Mulligatawny trained his mind and the old guard at Summo's taught him to throw, dodge and take punches. These are Abu's lodges. Countless idle nights were spent 12 meters under the neon car park sign.

Now men shake hands, their sins falling like autumn leaves.

Throughout their adolescence, Abu and Tola would drink vodka from plastic bottles. Tola'd say "Ey man, sniff these white girls", or "Ey Mate, hit the spliff why not?" Tola is smaller, louder and more focused. Summo's was his lodge too but he didn't fight, last of anyone Abu. He'd hold his pads on Friday nights waiting for the two blonde receptionists to clock out. Then he'd rev up his Vespa with some of the other speed freaks. The chicks would wink from behind bleached plaits, boost up and whistle at a young Abu and his younger crew. When their dates pulled into the littered car park, teenaged Tola and his squad would follow them hos' date's shiny Jaguar half way to South-End on the Sea, hooting and hollering and grabbing their dicks.

Tola keeps his collarless shirt buttoned up in the East London Mosque. His pants bunch up at the waist as he bends and bows, sits with his back straight and feels his neck soften. He prays on the dole, but who isn't? He used it for a resin mold craft set, with which he does auto-detail under the table.

Throughout his life, Tola bought faster and faster bikes. He sold grass strictly for business but he dipped his little spoon on the weekends. He and Abu both stopped drinking. By the time he converted to Sunni Islam he'd flirted with dozens of faiths. Once a month, and he took it seriously. He found the peace of a man who knows God. His family, Smith used to work on the ferry to Holland. He met Zionists from Suriname in Rotterdam, but when he got back home he stumbled upon a Jehovah's witnesses court. After seeing the general English public as potatoes, listening to his pitch, he gave up. Later, he wore the same white shirt with The Nation of Islam, who schooled him on colonial abuse and the stink of Empire. He was happy to attend services at Armenian, Greek, Coptic, Russian and Ethiopian Orthodox churches for the next seven years and even whirled with Dervishes.

That's the history that his tattoos tell. King Joseph expands into a pastiche featuring verses, all manner of crosses, ankhs, and Celtic knots, Malcolm X, Haile Salessie, Jesus, angels, hands praying, Solomon and the Queen of Sheba coupling between a pride of lions, Inri, amen and bismillah. Sometimes, they jumped off his pale skin while he rode shirtless under a ball helmet, moving powder and pills just ahead of the forces. It made him enough money to partner in to an auto-body repair and detail shop with his friend Abu. He worked with custom resin molded frames. He crafted them and charged twice as much as a competing shop that used 3D printers. Tola, whose mother and

father owned a few horses in Stoak-Newington, whose grandparents were gardeners in Enfield, whose great-grandparents caught foxes in Cheshunt, hated his parents as they hated theirs. Each generation traveled a short distance and a rural demarcation away, each pushing towards London on sharp acquisition. He made it on these Arabs, selling coke and fixing their wrecks. He also completely neglected to pay taxes.

A familiar group of scholars and students gather near the Imam's pulpit. A white bearded elder with shameless, bright eyes approaches them smiling. He's dressed in a white shirt, a white lace skullcap and baggy grey pants. He bids Abu, "My son, could you bring that Quran to the ground?" His name is Mullah Anjem Mulligatawny and he was once the imam of this mosque. He lost his position twice; once for encouraging antisemitism and again 20 years later in a sex-trafficking scandal but he's still allowed to pray here and this is one of the rare opportunities when he's able to preach. He motions towards the stained glass vector circle behind a bookshelf containing many volumes of Hadith and an open Koran resting on a pedestal atop the porte piazza.

Abu obliges, and sets the book on the carpeted floor. The men sit in a semi circle with the youngest in the middle. More boys are ushered front and center to listen. Abu sits with his palms up.

Mullah Mulligatawny begins with greetings and prayers, then asks the children, "Who freed Allah's people from the Pharaoh?"

"Hazreti Musa" they race to reply.

"Correct my sons. Musa spread Allah's wisdom to his folks. And who was even more knowledgeable than him?"

One of students blurts out, "Prophet Muhammad, sallallahu alayhi wa salaam."

"Indeed our prophet is knowledgable. The extent of the prophets' knowledge are unknown. But the Holy Koran speaks of one man who knew Musa. In Surah 18, verse 65, this man is called, *one of our slaves whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves.*"

"Who is this?"

"..."

"Well, neither did Musa. But one of the Israelites asked, 'O messenger of Allah, is there another man on earth more learned than you King of the Israil?' Musa said no. Allah rebuked him, saying that one man could not know everything, nor would one messenger alone be the custodian of all knowledge. There would always be another who knew more. Musa asked, 'O great Allah, Tell me his name, that I might seek wisdom.' So, Allah told Musa to bring a salted fish on a wandering journey and not to eat it. Musa ordered a servant to pack a light sack and he retrieved a dried fish from his storerooms. They set off into the desert, through forests and over hills. After many days travel they laid down to rest at a dry riverbed. In the night the servant awoke to see a trickle of water coming down the valley. Next the salted fish came to life and jumped into the water. He presumed he was dreaming and laid back down. The next morning him and his master saw the land changed. He told Musa and they checked to see that the salted fish was missing. 'Ah! The sign!' Musa said with excitement. He sent his servant packing and retraced his steps and sat there, unable to believe his own eyes as green things grew and branched all around him. New saplings and shrubs were growing and green vines were wrapping their tendrils around their branches. Down the stream a man approached. 'Peace be upon you,' said Musa. The mysterious man looked and said, 'Peace?' A lingering silence passed as he walked slowly, never taking his eyes off the old King. 'Is that how people greet each other in your land?' he asked. Musa replied, 'I

am the God's Prophet, founder of the tribe of Israel.' Khidr snapped, 'I know you shepard prophet, and I know your divine tablets.' Khidr calmed and queried, 'Why seek me?' Musa replied, 'As a teacher. I seek to accompany you and to learn what I don't know.' The cloaked man immediately responded, 'The essences of our knowledge are divergent. I will upset your sensibilities and your impatience will bother me.' Musa was emphatic, 'I will follow you as a student and I promise to obey your every command.' Khidr pondered and replied, 'You may accompany me on the condition that you remain silent.' Musa agreed. They walked three days in silence along the sea and came to a harbor with a sturdy boat at the dock. Musa followed al Khidr as he greeted the crew as friends. The prophets boarded and sailed with them. A short time later a sparrow was flitting around, dipping and drinking the water. 'O Musa, our combined knowledge is no more than a sparrow's drink in Allah's waters.' Suddenly al Khidr took a board from the ship and pulled it loose. Water slowly but steadily leaked in. 'Do you mean to drown the crew whom you greeted as friends?' Musa asked indignantly. 'Ah, the morning hasn't even passed and already you've forgotten your promise.' As they disembarked Musa's nose curled in disgust. He regarded his master's deed as evil and they walked on in silence. Then they arrived at a village and found some young boys playing. Al Khidr stops, singles out a boy, calls him over and kills him with a rock. Musa shouts, 'Indeed you're actions are evil.' 'You have already outpaced my expectations as a student.' Now Musa snaps back, 'I promise to be the one to turn back if I should break my silence again.' The master and disciple were hungry and tired but found no comfort because the villagers were miserly and paranoid. The travelers were shuttered out of the windows. Al Khidr, intent on some mysterious purpose, came across a fallen wall and began to repair it. Musa watched silently as he gathered the rocks, mixed the minerals for cement and started repairing the stone wall. They left the village. Musa spoke a third and final time out of frustration, 'You're mad! You sabotage your friends boat and kill a child but volunteer for undeserving people who wouldn't even give us a drink of water. I wanted to learn your wisdom but you've shown-' 'The time,' al Khidr cuts him off, 'has come for you to go back to your tribes.'

Ahem-" Anjem clears his throat. "What do we think was the lesson of al Khidr to Musa? And what does this story teach us?" he turns his eyes to his audience, first the children.

A young man speaks up. "I believe they represent different aspects of humanity."

Another man cut in, "It teaches us the value of patience Anjem Hodja. I think Musa missed an opportunity to be a greater prophet."

"Anjem Hodja" a third student Allah told Musa that al Khidr was the wisest, so by questioning al Khidr's wisdom, was he questioning the wisdom of Allah, which is a sin."

Anjem continues, "Musa left. He walked back alone and came to a fishing harbor. He was shocked to see the same crew he'd crossed the water with. Musa apologized and took out some money but the crew refused it and praised his wisdom. 'A plunderous navy was commandeering fishing ships but when they looked at our sinking boat they left it. We easily repaired it and now, we are the only ship at sea, and catching more fish than ever!' Allahu akbar!"

"Allahu akbar!"

The youngest student asks, "But teacher, why did al Khidr kill that boy? And why did he repair the wall?"

"Those who tell the word do not always know the intention of the Almighty!" he snaps. "How dare you question with impunity. Are you blind, illiterate or just stupid? This is no fairy tale, this comes from the Noble Koran. Don't tell me it's your first time reading it. You're nearly a man, but you've

learned nothing of the quest for knowledge. Pray that the hours between now and your next beating stretch for you to read enough without blue fingertips!"

Abu winks and blinks at Tola. One eye drifts, the other gapes. He rubs them, takes out a set of wooden prayer beads, and carelessly whips them against the fist they are clenched in. Tola looks up at Abu, his voice is low and expressive, "And as for the boy, he was a pagan and his parents were true believers. We feared that he would pressure them into defiance and disbelief. Surah sixteen, al Kayf. It's from the cave. Al Khidr killed the boy because he was going to corrupt his parents."

Chapter 4 The Unification of Tangankiya and Zanzibar

In Tanzania, it was more than one hundred tribal units which lost their freedom; it was one nation that regained it." -Julius Nyerere-

After centuries of colonialism, African nationalism ignited a revolution on the Swahili coast and the Sultanate's hegemony was overrun in Stone Town. In the heat of the night, January 12th, 1964, revolutionaries from the Afro-Shirazi party joined with the banned Umma party. Before morning broke, they'd forced open police stations, airstrips and the Sultan's palace. The exploited masses claimed revolutionary rule over Zanzibar, Dar es Salaam and the newly independent East African nation of Tanganyika. Centuries of Portuguese gold miners, Nazis, English warmongers, Omani iconoclasts, Indian dealers and other colonists has been driven out. The economics of slave and spice trade was confronted with a viable opposition. Arabs and Indians were slaughtered in the streets. Europeans and Americans were evicted and deported. The revolutionaries established new courts. Waves of nationalism followed. President Nyerere's *ujamaa* socialism, and the Tanzanian Shilling narrowly avoided hyperinflation.

Mbito was a young boy when his father helped the revolutionaries massacre thousands. After a few days, order returned to the streets. Jubilant visitors came to his home. They would gather around the radio in the evenings to hear Nyerere speak, "*The African is not 'Communitic' in his thinking; he is -- if I may coin an expression -- 'communitary'.*" Henceforth Tanzania, port and country, would be independently ruled by a single-party revolutionary council.

Coffee traders docked in Mombasa to avoid tariffs. Inside of dark storerooms in deep catacombs, saltpeter crystallized on barrels of old cloves and banged in phantom explosions. The economy was already in depression. Many traders in Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar, lost opportunities and resigned to village life. There was more effort paid to education and justice; ideas were open to trade but a lot less money ingressed.

Mbito was educated communitarily. As a boy he began working at the docks. As a young man he was given responsibilities and power. He made money and relished his positions. He would get his hands on foreign products, music and even currency until he was caught selling magazines. He went to jail. On the third day inside, he wept and cursed his family, but then he came to terms with his crime. He was playing mancala with his cellmate when his father came to bail him out. The first night after he returned home he was thrashed with a rolling pin. "This is pornography! Don't ever, *never* let it in our country again!"

He was forgiven and allowed to return to work. Forthwith, he checked the scales to the digit. He inspected packages of coffee, sesame seeds and tobacco with the national crest; a man and woman building a shrine of tusks over a shield decorated with regional flags and traditional weapons atop Kilimanjaro- looking more like an anthill- with the words *Uhuru na Umoja* sashaying underneath. From the right angle, the mountain looked like an bottom view of a live elephant, with the couple standing askew, gently holding on to the beast's man-sized tusks. The new tape had a holographic image that was mesmerizing to look at.

Chapter 5 Duygu

In a mostly empty flat, a woman's desultory voice bounces down dark halls with high ceilings. It's an old Kylie Minogue song, "Should I shout for rescue... uh oh oh oh, don't let go, two hearts... forever, I'm in love, I'm in love, Is this for ever and ever?" All the lights are off save for ten bare bulbs arched over a mirror on a vanity set. Brown boxes stack precariously on furniture in the front room. The curtains are dark, heavy and let only a flicker of light and motion through from the West End.

Duygu's finishes her eyes in the vanity mirror and unscrews a bottle of red lip-gloss. She puckers and swabs it around oval lips. A playful smile swings from her round, high cheekbones. Wide almond eyes set below smoothly rounded temples, over an arching nose and quivering upper lip revealing chicklet front teeth. She feels beyond her vanity. Boxes are rustled. She considers the day's anatomy lecture. It was right before the school holiday and the professor asked everyone to touch their philtrum. The few who did it, touched their faces so subtly that few others noticed. The lecture expounded, *A vestigial medial depression between the nose and upper lip. On humans it has no apparent purpose.* She misses her family. She's thrilled to be going home tomorrow. *It's just this fingertip sized saddle in the middle of our faces. But on dogs it's a moist groove that helps them have this amazing sense of smell.* Her patience is strained and she sheds a tear. *Jewish legends say that's where we're touched by angels within the womb as they command us to keep their secrets.* She really doesn't like going long periods away from her family. *I notice that some students here have got it pierced.* This kind of long winded scolding is as disarming as baked goods. *We certainly can't practice medicine in England with those kinds of facial accessories.*

She grabs her purse, throws in the lip gloss and runs out. Two blocks up, she's meeting Abu, the boy from Saint George. He dropped out sophomore year but randomly texted her last week. She decided, what's to lose? Later at Club Swag with her girlfriends, she'll see his meddle. She whips out her phone to check his message, *a night at the races?* and a picture of Piccadilly Circus.

She replies *u there now? If u'r not too rugged, we can go up to Leicester latenight.* She bounds down the staircase.

The night falls and Abu's sitting in the front seat of his Alfa Romeo Giulia. He grabs his mobile to check messages from bouncers, club owners and bartenders. Duygu's reply chimes and Abu's out of his car. She's leaning against a tree as he stands up. He squints and mouths "sexy bint". She hops forward "Hello hello," and jumps up for a hug. She hangs for a second from his neck and gives him a peck on the cheek. She's wearing a tight black and white dress, tall boots and a lavender fur coat.

Abu hasn't seen her like this. In fact, he hasn't properly seen her smokin ass since college, just her social photos. They took a sociology class together. When he started working at the shop, he lost game with most of the college girls he'd known but she always returned his messages. After class he used to try to get her to come out but she was always in the library. For the first time since college Abu sees himself in her... future.

He's swallows down to bend and kiss her back on the cheek and continues smiling pleasantries for an extra moment before, he opens the door to his Alfa Romeo. It's blue with A&W glittering under the streetlight.

"Nice car"

"Yeah but it's too conspicuous. I'm gonna sell it. You wanna see it hit a-hundred in four point five seconds?"

"OK," capriciously, "just not in the West End, alright?"

"C'mon, let's go to the quarter mile track. It's in North Kensington."

"But, that's like an hour away."

"Is it now?" he diverts a glance right before threading the needle into heavy traffic on Regent street, speeding down Pall Mall onto Marlborough Road. Before ripping past Buckingham Palace on the A4, he flickers the car alarm, the vehicle ahead of him pulls into the left lane and he speeds ahead. Whilst passing through affluent London, inbound traffic was heavy but his road is clear as they drive out through the parks district.

She announces, "I heard you were a junkie a while back. I was worried about you."

He interjects, "That's bullshit. I'm a Muslim."

"..."

"Did you believe it?"

"Do you think I'd be here if I did?"

"So is this the chance?"

She exhales sharply. "A chance at what?"

"The one I've been asking for since Saint George. Girl, we go way back. Do you know the first time I ever texted you was on a flip phone?" he holds a lingering smile with gumbdrop eyes.

"Haha, is that right? Well don't get the wrong idea, I'm a Muslim too." Abu's still staring at her. She laughs as headlights blur by, "I think you should watch the road Loverboy."

A bit later they pull onto a ridge road. At the end there's an empty industrial park with an empty lot in front of a boarded-up factory. A long tar-streaked pavement full of people runs flat and full of cars too with bass heavy music blasting. A few cars have open hoods and another dozen people gather around.

Abu rolls past slowly and mumbles out the window, "I'm deadly on the quarter mile." Some of the women turn their noses up. Abu laughs and hollers jovially at another group. "Ay mates, ya know your boy's good for a laugh. C'mon who wants to take on my whip today? I want that spot son, gimme your ear son." He slows and reaches under the seat to show Duygu a silver revolver. She gasps. Abu consoles, "Don't worry. It's just a starting gun." He rolls by a man in a rubber suit gyrating with a

magnum of champagne. Abu hollers out, "Hey Dun! Is it alright if my bint pops us off?"

"Yeah it's alright with me," to the crew setting the a finish line. A guy in a tux swings the trophy chain encrusted with glass jewels hyping the crowd up over a loud speaker, who notices and weaves, "... a fine young lass gonna be popping us off promptly at eleven so go skate, if you wanna be late..." into the hype.

"Here," Abu takes Duygu's hand gently and reaches the other under the seat auspiciously. He pulls out a small white box and thuds it heavily into her hand. "Hold that." He opens it and takes out a thirty-eight shell. Duygu gasps. Abu reassures, "Blanks," he says. She looks puzzled. "Empty rounds. Just a lot of noise and no metal. Click clang bang" He loads three chambers. "It will turn, and every other shot will blast. You want to mash the pistol?"

Thoughts race through Duygu's mind. The police are likely flat roofing and can't be arsed with races in Croyden. Her right eye looks up to meet him. She grabs Abu's bicep and feels the pistol with the other hand running across the cylinders and hammer. Abu's spine tingles to the base and beyond. She nods and guides it into her purse.

As they get out, other cars growl around the bend. There's a low-rider that's wheels keep spinning after it stops, Jeeps with spotlights on roll-rails, classic cruisers and more than a few Jaguars on the tar streaked track. There is a group of girls in a photo session and Duygu joins in, chatting vapidly.

Abu steps up to his crew. Tola's rapping,

I'm blowing up for the last time

You're probably right, reach for your belt than I might find mine

Hiding in plain sight and wired under a thawb

Right when they say alright mate bomb the synagogue

His bare arms show off his tattoos and gold jewelry. Rabi takes the last drag on his cigarette. His beard is so thick, black and trim that it looks drawn on. Abu steps between his friends and says, "Mates, I just want you to know, that you can count on me."

"Yeah, thanks mate," chirps Tola. "But that sounds like butter, are you on a roll?"

"Wait and see, if it goes right. But I'm not sitting bitch."

Rabi declines, "Mate, you ain't bet your arse. Bitch sits, as bitch does. The way I see it, you take the seat that you earn."

Abu bargains with his back to his date, "I'll sell you the truth for a good story.

One girl's instantly bent on Duygu after seeing who she arrived with. She chides, "Oh is you a bad bitch? Are you gonna listen now or later?" Fur boots stomp over to lay a finger on her but Duygu pushes her back with her chain stitch purse. Hands fly back at her trifling, "Back me ho, get under me or I'll leave you sat or slain."

"Hey!" Duygu belts out, "Who's first?" and pulls out the pistol. The aggressor backs off, but in the wrong direction and turns away. As Duygu sashays past, she shoves her hip and knocks her down. "Piss yourself."

Two drivers shoot last glares and pull up to the line. Duygu is there with the gun held high.

“Ready,” the car engines putter.

“Set,” everybody looks to the windshields.

“Go!” Duygu blasts the cap.

Two cars speed off at evens. As she turns, Abu catches her little body in a hug and they walk together down the track. He stands close behind her and reaches over to grab his pistol back.

“Good shot puppet.” barely over the din of motors.

“Puppet?! Maybe you got me wrong, you're not stuffing your hand, or anything else!”

“Yo,” he rubs his eye and looks around with the other one, leans forward and says, “Give me the damn gun.”

“Oh I see. Now I’m the crazy bitch with the gun and I’m supposed to calm down. If you wanna take me out, show me what you’ve got. All night, people are throwing eyes at you. You must have a hell of a rep. You got this car, you can drive fast, you bring me out here to show me who you are. Let’s see. And if your ride’s got speed, you can drive me to the club after. And take your stupid gun,” she shoves it in his pocket.

“Damn, everybody’s stretching me out tonight.” Abu tilts forward as Rabi approaches, tucked in.

“Hey man,” Rabi grips his shoulder and yells into his ear, “Man! You want to race tonight?”

“Yeah, I’m bound to. Let me see the list?” Abu grabs the clipboard from the tuxedo clad emcee. It’s full pairs until two a.m. “My gun got no clip but this board’s full clip,” he snaps the clip “b-dididididDamn,” they walk on.

“I have written my name already.”

Abu checks again, “Rabi you’re on race 3! I want that spot.”

“It is not free.”

“Oh? And who are you gonna beat in a Rover?” He looks at the list of names “Here we are. *Replicobra*? Slow loser against Alfa. Listen mate, I’ll race for you and I’ll be your Romeo. I’ll give you 20 percent.”

“Keep your winnings, but pay the entrance fee back if you lose. There are higher ceilings. And a lot more money to be earned for both of us. Do you remember what we talked about on Tent Street?”

“What? When the little girl smelled poo? Sure, The Islamic State, but stifle your blackmail, I’ll race, and I’ll go when I’m good and ready.”

Rabi cools his intention and calls Tola into the conversation.

“There is much more than fast cash, but tell me tonight if you’re ready to make ten-thousand easy quid.”

Abu’s circular eyes flatten. “I don’t know man, I’m running up the wall here. I’m not looking for chump change with kafirs.” Tola’s ear’s drawn in and he jumps off his bike.

“Drive with me... a delivery... for my uncle.”

“A job for an Arab,” he considered. “Alright maybe. Why do you need us?”

"This isn't just a job brothers. This is a life of jihad, in Rakka, and I wouldn't offer it to anyone else. *Al Khalifa*" he spread out his arms as if holding cudgels across the black night. "By the end of the week. It's four days drive. There's war there. There's work. Rebuilding something eternal and almighty." Rabi pulls a shining coin out of his pocket, "This is the premier Islamic currency. Pure gold. A standard that can never devalue. Listen," he pauses. "You'll make the same wage but live a higher life. You'll do the same jobs, boxer/mechanic, stuntman/body, teach combat, doctors, they're all under the state. You just keep the engines running for two thousand pounds a month with no expenses. Rent, food, wheels are all paid for. I've already set up a new bank account to access and send money all over the world. I can set up two more right now over the phone, and wire you five-thousand pounds each right away. Or you can take it in gold. Anything but the fucking pound. Not for money, or the good life," he stands straight and puts both hands up in prayer, "I'll going for the glory, but not for my own," he pauses. "That of Islam." He lowers his shoulders and laughs. "How was that? Am I ready to be a mujahiddin?" The corner of his eyes sharpen.

"I love gold. I just have one question, I saw people burning their passports."

"That's voluntary. Everyone takes a name so no one will be tracked."

Tola curls his lip up, "Wheeling to Mesopotamia has got to be the most arsed scheme I've heard since gangbangers. But of course I wanna go see. I'm just not sure how far up the State's asshole I wanna see."

"OK, I'll give both of you the three-ounce bonus that I get for bringing you."

"The whole five."

He wobbles his shoulders dramatically before stretching his eyes and nodding, "Ok, you twist my arm but okay. But I need something more. Tola, I need a different kind of gear, speed. And Abu, you're my body guard until we reach Arabia."

"Five ounces of gold."

"Pure *dhahab*."

Chapter 6 Sailor Man

The February of 1984 was an early spring and an old whaling vessel was approaching Stone Town. Inside one of its two cargo holds sat fifteen heavy metal boxes made from corrugated steel; the industry standard. *Intermodal freight containers*. Product could be shipped to train or truck without breaking bulk. More often than no, they were full of junk food in plastic packaging. In a dark cargo bay, a man with a clipboard approached the labels, squinting to read their ID numbers. He looked down to see the metal extended all the way to the floor. He touched his toes against the hard steel as he read the code, no bigger than rice grains.

"L... S... G...O... no, that's a U. One-oh-seven, seven-three-seven... How could these huge boxes make work easier?" He asked the rats in the darkness. "They're awkward and the machines to lift them are even heavier and more awkward!" For such a man, no less of a name than Simbat.

In the corner, a pile of old sacks were stacked on a cart. He flops down on them and rests his eyes. A cloud of dust diffused into a dream of sailing to Zanzibar as a deckhand, hauling sacks to the port of entry. The captain was shouting, "Maize in the front corner, shift that Ceylon tea back and bring forward the Earl Grey, or you can parlay your way off before we lay plank into the harbor."

At port with sacks of corn and seeds, Young Simbat with earrings of brass, finished hauling the goods off the ship. Afterwards he leaned against a wall, crossed his arms across his broad chest and closed his eyes a moment. He immediately heard a loud voice bark, "Let's get to work! All this stuff needs inventory."

"Yes sir," he straightened up and followed the serious looking man down a corridor into a dimly lit store room.

The official, dressed like a bureaucrat, pushed up his glasses and started counting sacks. Simbat leaned back up against a wall, waiting with empty hands for this local official. When the orders didn't come, he occupied those hands by counting prayer beads. The official heard the noise, looked back and said, "Who are you? What ship do you come on? Why aren't you working?"

"I work for the Sultan of Oman and all the sacks are loaded."

"Simbat of the Sultanate," he laughed at the brazen deceleration and lowered his eyebrows, "Well, if your Sultan could see you now, would he think you were working hard enough?"

Simbat half understood, replied, "Yes yes, Sultan Sayeed, very good. Very rich!"

"Does your Sultan have many ships?" intrigued.

"Yes, a hundred, maybe. And warships."

"Oh ha! don't bring those here."

"What is your name?"

"Mbito, I am the Order General of the Port." He showed the pins on his lapel.

"Very nice to meet you Mbito."

"Your Swahili isn't bad," the man said in decent Arabic. Happy to chat with this talkative man, Simbat was friendly. On holiday seasons there, they would practice each other's languages. As a young sailor, Simbat thought mostly about stipends and whores but his friendship with Mbito sparked new ambitions. He looked at inventory, memorized prices and repaired ships.

On the old sacks, Maymun the monkey tapped the dreamer's arm. Simbat lifted it and the little monkey nuzzled in. He went back to sleep, and dreamed of old Captain Sindhibaatr from Thatta reeling up the hull in the dinghy. He told Simbat, "I am the father of fifteen, I have four wives and they all have hidden intentions." Simbat replied "How fortune they are. They will certainly have every opportunity. That is the reason you spend eleven months a year at sea. To establish a legacy?" Simbat thought that Sindhibaatr had one-too-many ships. He told Sindhibaatr about some Bedouins who brought large groups on hadj from Muscat.

Simbat bought some American flags and rented a small boat. He paid an actor to impersonate a lieutenant of the US Navy. People were always chasing the old mogul down at ports to burden him with beurocratic procedures. Bribes were paid to the wrong people but when the Persian gulf started to fill up with American ships, Simbat figured no one would know the difference. He forged a lien against the ship he'd been working on. He had it sailed up and served it to him. It read that the ship had been

stolen by Soviet spies in the Koran war.

Old Sindhibaatr asked his lawyer. He was versed in the changing standard of wet law and he had no desire to travel to a courthouse on some cloudy Dutch port. A luxury caravan from Muscat to Mecca, however was starting to work its way into his desires. "Perhaps a few months on land would do me well." Sindhibaatr told Simbat one evening on deck.

"You will go with a noble tribe of Bedouins, who once showed me kindness and honor. Please allow me to honor them by brokering your family's hadj. I ask only for the least of your ships in return."

Sindhibaatr considered but quickly refused. "There's too much work to be done. I'll fight my own battles or my ships will be seized by emperors." Simbat suggested the legal battle could be fought by someone with fewer assets. He refused again and shuffled off to his chamber.

Simbad forged another letter from the Sultan of Oman. A month later Sindhibaatr, busted through a wax seal with his gold letter opener and regarded the crest. It read, *Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman*, he read on, *Son of Muhammad, brother of the Sun and the Moon. Sovereign of sovereigns.* He skipped a few lines. *...your fleet has grown to exceed the protection of the Sultanate and its passages at Hormuz and Suez can no longer be sponsored.* Sindhibaatr threw his hands up. The next time he saw him was breaking bulk at Zanzibar port again and he called out "Simbat!" Simbat appeared and clasped his hand, "Your offer is most gracious but you must know, there are three dozen in family, and not one of them makes their own bed." So it was that Simbat paid for a band of Bedouins two years salary to take Sindhibaatr, his elderly parents, four wives and eleven children, three more children from previous marriages, four siblings, eight nieces and nephews, and fifty-one camels two-thousand miles across Arabia. Despite the cost, Simbat considered it an honor gift and painted *Mashallah* across the stern. Sindhibaatr, returned to India spiritually fulfilled and never returned to sea.

Captain Simbat turned a sharp profit in his first year, trading between East Africa and Arabia. The holds were always full of coffee, textiles, fish, vegetables and plenty of peanuts. Despite the lack of sails, there was a kind of crows nest, high above the communications tower, which was where his closest counselor Sayeed Hesham Sameer, more wise than Simbat, and his pet monkey Maymun had risen early to climb up to the crowsnest. Simbat was going to fit the communications tower with a new radar outfit. He recruited zealous men from West Indian and East African fishing villages. The next year he procured a 20-year old, Mil-mi-6 helicopter from a Soviet black market auction and armed it with missile launchers. Out at sea they chased away long loneliness with fantasies and jokes- *The whores here are tighter than clams, and three times as fragrant* -as they passed from port to port getting to know them. Simbat would hoist, deal and drink as much, as they all wasted time betting on cat fights, singing, drinking, diving into the sea and shooting weapons. Whiffs of tales, imagination and legends carried them out time again but a change in maritime laws, procedures and technology was stripping the paint. Old mates told stories with swords out.

More like an abetting uncle than a father figure, Sayeed, was twenty years Simbat's senior. Once, when Simbat was a teenager, he fell in love at port. Sayeed helped him sneak the girl onboard but their lovemaking was too loud and they were found. The girl was sequestered in the captains quarters and Simbat and was locked in the brig with his accomplice. It so happened that the girl was a kind of princess. While the love smugglers were locked up, their ship was waylaid by the navy of a small, but wealthy island.

As the ship was burning and going down, young Simbat wailed, "We're left to die!" He banged on the metal bars, "Hey! Captain. Let us free! "

Sayed replied, "No one's coming. This is all your fault, but maybe there's always a way out." He started to jab at the panels with his elbow. "A weak link, a low picket, a loose plank or a trap door." A panel sprang out, showing a dark rectangular gap in the high wall. The floor was starting to tilt, making the wall easier to climb. They crawled out through a vent and found a passage to the engine room. They opened a hatch and climbed into the bilge pump, crawling upwards with their backs against the vent. Before long they saw stars and scaled upward. Scrambling to grip the duct they scooted out of the tube just before the water rushed in. In the sea there were bodies among the flotsam and jetsam. The assailing ships' wakes congealed the bloody sea under the moonlight. Sayeed and Simbat strapped a panel with O rings and waited three days to be rescued by the Malaysian Coast Guard.

Dozing for the better part of an hour, Simbat hastily finished inventory and passed up through the humming steel corridors to see another clear sunrise over the water. On deck, he heard a holler, "Land Ho!", and stubbed his tow looking up to see Sayeed climbing down. "Count up! Today's the first day of Rabi al Thani"

"Not surprising who rises earliest," Simbat jested, "Did Maymun wake you up with a leak? In the morning his dick is longer than my tooth."

Sayed glanced at his pet perched on his shoulder and said, "Hold back now Maymun, our venerable Captain is gonna try to outdo your sexual moves and we don't want old Simbat to bring back with him a case of crabs."

They grinned slightly and kept their eyes squinted against the rising sun as the crew came up on deck. "*Habari Yako!* Aakash," "Good morning Mbwana, baklava for breakfast again?" He slapped their backs. "A joke?" They whipped each other's chests with limp wrists, smiled and squinted.

"Did you hear about the boy who went the whorehouse to lose his virginity?" "The bitch took one look at him and said, 'You're too young. Go fuck a tree and come back in a year.' A year later the boy came back in to fuck. The pimp looked in the room and saw him poking and looking up her cunt with a long stick. He burst in hollering 'What the fuck are you doing?' The boy replied, 'Well, the last time I did this, a squirrel bit my dick so I gotta make sure it's all clear first.'" The deck roared in laughter, drowning out the engine.

"Alright," said Simbat, "Stone town tonight, but tomorrow evening we'll be in Dar es Salaam. After we unload, I'm sick of your faces until the first of June."

Simbat walked with Sayeed who passed out envelopes of Tanzanian and English currency. As the savory winds of Africa blew hard against his face, he said quietly to Simbat, "The Afghans are seeding a Jihad against the Russians. Every general in Afghanistan is looking to build a battalion and that means slave wives."

"And that means Africa."

"Fuck! I don't wanna come down on the wrong side of this thing."

"Anyone who's ever been to a brothel knows the difference between a girl who was bought and a working girl."

Chapter 7 White Cobra

Duygu's acting the vixen and harassing the bottle gimp. The emcee picks up a microphone, "There's an opening in the super street class. Looks like Replicobra's too slow to the starting line." Tola's motorcycle thrusts onto the back wheel and he leans back. Abu drives up to the guy in the tuxedo and calls him over. "My race is imminent. Where's the contender?"

"I don't know. I'll announce an open spot in a bit."

Duygu opens Abu's passenger side door and says, "Well, I guess that's your slow loser. Stuck in West End traffic perhaps."

"What's the buy in?" wonders a young kid

"Six-hundred wins a grand." At that moment up on the ridge, a Shelby cobra with aggravating red headlights squeals through the gates and down the hill. It burns and smokes for a flash before ripping to the starting line where the passenger door swings opens and two women in long white dresses sashay out passenger door of the two-seater. The car revs as one of them lights two cigarettes and they split to the driver door, where a gentleman steps out dressed like a silver-age superhero in red and white.

"So he makes an entrance. Alright big boy, show on the road, let's go." With the door open, they laugh and hum. She says, "but don't get it wrong, win or not, it won't change my mind." He dares a closed mouth kiss. -Cheeky-, she smiles, looks up and opens his lips with her tongue for less time than it takes for an egg to crack. Abu eyes are thumping on his closed lids. She backs up to look at his face, tuts her tongue and heads up. "Have a good race."

Audibly, the silver flake sparkles under the Cobra's red headlights on Abu's Alfa Romeo. He wants Duygu to shoot the gun but she chose to wave the flag. Abu concentrates on it and replays his race mantra. It's 60% man 40% wheels. His car is fast. Fill the mix and get rich quick. He puts the gun back under the seat and starts revving up with the car. He watches the flag fall and accelerates to the limit. The Cobra contender's tailpipes shoot flames. He's behind by a length. He flicks his turbo, kicks it into 6th, and pumps. Shwoom. Even at at 120 mph, Abu keeps one eye on the Cobra as he flies past it at the finish line. He sees the win in his peripherals and comes round to celebrate his victory.

Duygu's waiting, "Looks like a tie, it only registered one finish, 14 seconds."

"Yea maybe even..." Tola hesitates.

"It looks even, but I filmed the finish line straight on." says Rabi.

"It even looks like the flaming pits of hell."

"What the fuck? Let me see," Abu splits the crowd looking at a millisecond loop of a film burning. As the cars drive past the aspect, flames consume it to the point that, when the angle shows the finish, it's just a fireball rushing through a gate, like footage of a bomb test. "Wicked!" says Duygu, trying to keep her head from reeling.

A few people who'd filmed the finish with their mobile phones see two cars blurring slightly past a black and white checkered line on the road. Most people report that Abu's Alfa Romeo snagged the victory by a hair but it's hard to tell. The race official scratches his beard, brushes the dead skin off his lapels and awards the prize to Abu. Tola pops open a smaller bottle of champagne and takes a pill out of his pocket. He pops one and offers one to Abu and Duygu who refuse. He pours most of the

drink on the ground. Abu looks at Duygu and says quickly, "no strings attached puppet."

The loser stands aloof and flanked. He's looking at his girlfriends' phone, huffing and scoffing a bit but he's a duck in a chicken coop so they drive off suddenly.

Later in Leicester Square, the winning crew watch some free, neon clad, boy band sing and dance on a flashy stage. They quickly agree it's shit and move on to the clubs. Jermaine keeps an eye out for the right. To a well trained London eye, they appear harmless; sped mildly perhaps on amphetamines and surreptitiously posting photos that display them with all the glimmers excess of Piccadilly. Rabi's in Tola's ear like a genie, "We need a kilogram of the highest quality amphetamine." Abu sees Jermaine outside Club Swag.

"On it," Tola slings out his phone. Rabi peeps his password.

Jermaine's got an earpiece with a curly white cord. "Heyyy mate!" They grip right hands and bump shoulders over the velvet rope, Duygu is putting on lipstick a few steps away. "Wah gwan?"

"Naught for much," replies Jermaine, scanning the crowds, "just a gang of vexed Paraguayans inside. Hang on mate," he presses his earpiece. "Just a bit of rabble at the peep show, you go ahead in." Jermaine nods to the club bouncer and trots off.

Abu says to Duygu, "Look at my man Jermaine. He does VIP services and in his ear right now, he's got a direct line to one Bob McGilicutt." The bouncer unclips a velvet rope and waves them in. They descend a dark staircase at 160 bpm. Deep bass pulsates from below.

"What makes this club great," says Duygu in the moment before Abu pushes open the heavy door, "is that you can't hear the fucking boy band outside."

Through the door, a drum break sets a timer and they weave through the throng of electronica while dancers close gaps behind them. Maroon and pink lights whip around and Duygu drags Abu past groups of girls, those whose eyes wander take notice of the notably unequal couple. They find a space in the dance floor as the bass drops and they bounce and tremble. They move like two swords clashing, and whirling, revving and repeating and returning to the look and the smile. A song slows down and Duygu says, "So do you want a drink before I go?"

Abu's eyes gaped and drooped, "Well, lemmie walk you home. You wanna go now?"

Duygu's eyes narrow, "Yeah nah mate. I'm taking a cab to my cousin flat near the airport. So, see ya." She turns and leaves without kissing him goodbye.

Abu stands for a moment and starts to feel the questioning eyes. He walks straight, catches the door before it shuts, and grabs the wrist. "I think you forgot something."

She's totally annoyed and stretches her face at him. "What?"

Abu's blanking, blinking. He just says it, "the kiss."

"Boy, what kind of girl do you think I am? I came from a good family." Her affront nails Abu's raw nerve.

"Off ya go bint. Ya slag."

She grabs a taxi. Out on the main road there's a little conglomeration on the hood of Rabi's car. "Ay mate, what happened? I just saw your biddy come out. Said she was going to the airport."

“Yeah, I didn't piece it together at the time but she's likely going to Turkey tomorrow morning. Back to her own then. Anyways she's more like a mate than a bint. It's three o'clock and she still hasn't got her documents in order. I'm not bothered by it but it gave me a clear head and a fit last ride. I'm ready to sell it. 30,000 pounds.”

“Right mate, sell it in Paris, than get in the Range and drive the bint the rest of the way. Now's the time brothers. Two new accounts with Kuwait bank are going all the way. Believe me mates, everything makes sense.”

“What's the speed for?” wonders Tola.

“They mix it up into a pill called Captagon. It's actually decongestant for dogs.”

“Ha ah, okay.”

“Who are we to talk? Everyone in London's whacked out on cat tranquilizer.”

“So what? You're gonna start popping pills?”

“Fuck off mate, I'm gonna cook it and sell it because it'll be safer if it's stamped there. See the Caliphate's got a problem importing, even medicine for dogs is made in Europe or America. We're gonna smuggle it in.”

“Sounds too risky.”

“Mates don't worry about the borders, the only sketchy one is Turkey and upon entry, we have a deal with our license plate scans at the border, we'll be golden.”

“What about ISIS, don't they execute drug users?”

“For hard drugs, yea. But we consider this like coffee. Besides, this shit's been round Mesopotamia for a long longer than ISIS has. Now's not the time for a new war on drugs. Unless the Saudis withhold the cash flow.”

Suddenly a clashing chorus of loud, local voices, “Buy you a drink!” and three open cans of beer splash over them, tepid foam spraying across their tailored shirts. The white back end with aggravating red tail lights is speeding away, so they rally fast into Rabi's black Land Rover and speed off. “He's fucking dead!” “Kafir's going to hell tonight!”

Inhibitions are abandoned for the chase. Abu and Tola are jeering to follow. Both are desperate and focused on the head of an old bastard. “First I'll get a piece of his face with this knuckle, then maybe an ear or a nose and I'll tear it right off. Then I'll put some rock or a brick right through the hole in his face, right in his fucking mouth. Than I'll stab him up and down.” Ahead on the road, at a stop light, his car is idling in the clear of the intersection. -Drive up there, let's rip him apart.-

Rabi thinks and speaks, “He's baiting us. It's a fox hunt. There's surely a racist cop a few blocks up.”

“Well, fuck me. I'd have fallen right into that trap. You're too smart Rab.”

“Two can play at that.”

“Alright than roll up, real polite. Cuppa tea.” They approach the gentleman with mocking stiff upper lip swagger, miming a tea party. Him and his girlfriends are trolling with nasty sneers and rude gestures, not saying a word. When the light turns green and the faux-bra speeds ahead, Rabi accelerates sensibly down the road, watching it get getting further and further with an eagle eye on its aggravating

red taillights even when it's not braking. It turns left.

“You reckon he's going to catch the A4?”

“No fucking doubt. He's a country cunt for sure.”

“Alright then, we'll just go around east and play a little Hyde and seek.

“Right, cat and mouse. They insult us by throwing alcohol over us. It's clear to see that we must return their screw. Abu, have you got any bullets or is that just a replica?”

“It's no fucking replica. My dad gave me this pistol. I've never actually shot it. But I'm not ready to murder a guy who splashed beer over me.”

“Than just shoot out his tyre. He'll come through quickly. Good timing getting here.” Rabi opens his glove box, “what's this then? Thirty-eight?” and takes a loose bullet.

“What the fuck you doing with all these?”

“Oh you know, got to stockpile em. Alright then mash man, can you shoot it straight?”

“Fuckin hell,” Abu aspirates and loads the bullet into his little gun. They park at the edge of the highway. “That's it, Cromwell Road” “Right across there, he's gonna pass. Take a right, Nevern Road. Alright, now pull in the back and park behind the building. It's perfect, down there we can see the roundabout. Right there he pass. Just shoot his car, the tyre. Maybe you'll shoot his foot.”

Rabi rolls his window down a crack, “And what if he doesn't pass? We're sat—look there, red replica rolling.”

It's near four a.m. and the man known to this story as Replicopra has pulled up to a red light in West London. A white two-seater pulls up to an intersection across from a taxi driver a young motorist lured into road games by a provocative engine rev and a couple of sultry blondes running their fingers across each other's chest, riling up their driver for what promises to be an evening. He grins and revs up too, but he's fucked. He wasn't Islamophobic, he was just an asshole who'd started dozens of fights and ran from hundreds. He just happened to pick up some trouble and throw beer on the wrong group of guys at the wrong time.

So he peels out up the causeway. The accelerating thrust pushes his relatively light car with about four-hundred and fifty horsepower and four-hundred and twenty pounds of torque. When the bullet strikes his vehicle, it severs the front-left caster, wobbles the alignment, jams it turnt and springs the left side of the car up with enough force to flip it. It hops the short, embanked median strip and drops head-on a yellow taxi as it pulled up to a stop sign.

Abu, Tola and Rabi watch the carnage they engineered. A near perfect alignment of direct force. In an instant there's blood smeared across the intersecting windscreens and bodies pushed up against them with engine parts thrown through the taxi like buckshot, ejecting two people through the windscreen and bludgeoning the rest against it. They watch their effect, awestruck and trace into the collective thought -flee!-

Chapter 8 OG Mbito

20 years dedicated to this office, and for what? With each passing year, Mbito saw fewer and fewer ships sail in. He passed time at his mahogany desk with a two-way radio and learned that textiles from Zambia were making good profits. He heard about Kenyan coffee right before he heard about Mujaheddin soldiers in Afghanistan. He heard that zombies in Malawi and Uganda were cracking people's heads open. Although he wanted to open the economy, he recognized that the conservative trade policy was keeping their assets safe.

Mbito had matured with his nation and was tied to it. He wasn't religious or cosmopolitan so his family values, ethics, and pride were with Tanzania. He was about to see his oldest child get married, and he expected a ten percent increase in exports if they lowered tariffs by only three percent. He was free to voice how proud he was, even though nobody in power ever listened. Nonetheless, he said often that Tanzanian products needed sensible tariffs to encourage trade of the best that Africa had to offer.

He shuffled and straightened the items on his mahogany desk. He turned off the green lamp. The theme of the evening news relaxed him into his chair and he listened in the dark, dozing with the radio's soft hum.

After talks with liberal economists, President Nyerere has agreed to a 10% cut on coffee. Finance Minister Kighoma Malima has said that this measure hopes to encourage trade. Depending on its effect, trade liberalization could continue...

A big grin grew on his face and he was about to bring his good mood to his wife. After the show, he got up to see that his whole family was asleep in bed but his wife was waiting awake, knitting by candlelight. She looked up and whispered "Dear, did you remember we're going to Banou's garden party on Saturday afternoon."

"Ah yes," his grin was inviting her to come into the living room.

She replied, "Come here baby, let me help you with your collar." He stood in his slippers at the side of the bed allowing the tight clasp on his white collar to loosen. It was filthy with yellow sweat.

"Thank you dear,"

"Let's go to the sitting room so I can rub your back."

Suddenly the phone rang. Mbito hummed as he shuffled to his study. It was the governor of the Iringa region, "Bad news," he delivered. "Bandits have raided Kidugula village in the mountains. They kidnapped girls and killed at least a dozen others. They stole everything. Survivors have no money, food or anything to trade. The food bank can help a little but surely we can't meet needs nonetheless quotas. There is no coffee, no tobacco, no gold neither. And there is famine. We cannot even reach the villages or build roads."

The news weighed on Mbito like a cannonball. A few more hairs turned grey. He needed to take action *and* call others to it but Tanzania only had one rescue helicopter.

Many young officers were certainly waiting for an opportunity to defend their country. He stopped short and imagined the bird's eye view of the harbor, filled with ships. Then he thought about the heartland, in fear an famine. This was his hand to play so he thought that they'd been too lenient. Trusting the word of the other leaders that there would be border control. The National Guard would be sharper if there weren't so many lazy bureaucrats in the major cities. He had a feeling he would be stymied by Jonathan. He'd become a military general, a day Mbito rued. He told Governor Anduru

they'd need to protect themselves. He called him.

“Bad news”, he delivered.

“I know, bandits are raiding the Kidugula mountains. They kill without mercy. They stole everything. Survivors have no money, food or anything to trade. The food bank can help a little but. There is no coffee, no tobacco, no gold neither. And there is famine.”

“What about the national guard? Was there a reserve in the region?” after a long pause.

“At their base on the lake shore side of the mountains. It was the villagers to that took up spears and fought bravely against the invading bandits' machine guns.”

“What did they take?”

“Many young women and girls, lots of coffee too. Most of the villages in the East farm at least a little coffee.”

Mbito looked at his checkbook. “This calls for action. I will do everything I can. For now, get the national guard to search the Livingstone mountains. I'll call back in the evening.”

He closed the line with his finger and dialed General Jonathon.

“We have a dire situation in the Livingstone mountains.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sir, in the Kipengeres, there are savage bandits that—”

“Yes we're aware. At the moment our strategy is strictly defensive.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“There isn't a feasible point of attack until we know where they'll strike next. We've sent soldiers to some villages.”

“Are they searching for these bandits? Can we contact President Banda?”

“Banda is not our ally in this fight,” he sighed. “He's dissolved the Malawian cabinet. War is just one provocation away. If we send troops across the lake, they will certainly be attacked. We're protecting our villages.

“All of them? Sir, the bandits may form a garrison. They have military vehicles and weapons. If there's no cabinet, they're probably acting independently with no recourse from Banda or Nyerere.”

“How dare you use their names together like that!”

“Both are able to stop this, but neither will and perhaps for the same reason. I suggest we cut off the serpent's head before it grows another.”

“Any military crossing into Malawi is off the table.”

“Sir, am I to understand that we're unwilling to respond to a foreign invasion?”

“We can't risk getting involved in endless escalation! Goddamn it Mbito, you're a port officer, why am I having this discussion with you?” It clicked to a dead air. Mbito slid his finger into the slot, and rapidly flicked 1,1,1 for Mr. Ali Kighoma Malima, treasurer.

“Sir, a band of rogues are raiding our villages. We won't send our military. It's a disgrace! We must send food aid immediately.”

“Immediately sir. We will send food and medical supplies. What village?”

“Kidugula. Just send it to Iringa, and they'll forward it to the right places.”

“The situation is indeed dire if the impetus is on us bureaucrats.” said Mr. Malima sharply, “Damn it! General Jonathon is acting like a little girl. He leads a military that could conquer Malawi in two weeks! These bandits are an annoying little mosquito sucking away but our hand cannot slap!” Papers rustled over the line, “They'll eat, but if these bandits aren't stopped we won't need to send food for much longer. This nightmare needs to end.” Kighoma was bold to say, “Keep this quiet for now but we need mercenaries. Do you know of any?”

“If there's a dire need, I know some who may answer the call, fewer if he has to work with Jonathan?”

“Mbito, I fear there is a powerful foreign influence at work. And I think if we asked him, Jonathan would know nothing about that. I'll contact the Central Intelligence Agency and ask who they think might be responsible for this attack.”

“I'll try to narrow down their location with Governor Anduru, and ascertain their size and fighting strength. As for the mercenaries, they'll need access to this information and at least half a million dollars under the table. Is this available?”

“I can't say at this point but I will call you tomorrow,” Mr. Kighoma Malima hung up his phone, said his prayers, fell asleep and out of our story.

Chapter 9 Friends' enemies

“My old friend, you've grown at the sides.”

“Is that another hole in your ear? You pirate. What do you drink?” They laughed and embraced.

“Coffee please.”

“Coffee, yes.” Mbito paused and slumped like a wind up toy that needed a crank. They he smiled through one side of his face and straightened himself back up. He silently rebuked himself for the offer he was about to make. Simbat was starting to bend his brow at these gestures.

Leaning heavily on the armrest, Mbito reached for the phone and called for coffee. “Simbat, have pirates tried to take your goods?” Simbat was glancing around the familiar office. Wide-open shutters splattered sunlight across a large, ornate world map inside a blue, orange and red frame. A portrait of Nyerere hung behind the heavy wooden desk.

“Since forgotten times, yes, we've met pirates. Nothing has changed. Only a few are bloodthirsty. The seas are safer and the profits higher when they balance out the imperial navies. And for you and your nation, I've heard tariffs are being cut. I think you're going to see a lot more of me and my crew.”

“Yes, but today, the bad news outweighs the good. We open our ports, but we're raided from within. We have half the amount of coffee and the price will double.”

“Talk about prices after you tell me of this invasion.”

“Yes, of course. The inner borders are being raided by bandits. They scour our farmlands and villages, killing, raping and stealing. West of Selous, the land is rich, but the people are poor and cannot defend themselves.”

“Can’t your military bring them to justice?”

“Not without risking war from Malawi. We watch this parasite suck our blood and our hand cannot strike. I think they are connected to the coup who tried to assassinate President Banda. They might have allies within our borders too.”

“They’re from Malawi? Can Banda help? This is his problem too.”

“Banda thinks he’s impeccable but he knows his days are numbered so he’s ignoring the countryside. If we notify him, than he will say that the bandits are waylaying *him* from Tanzania.” Mbito slurped the last of his coffee and lit a match, “They raid us for coffee, gold,” the rising smoke swirled around his face, “and girls.” He lit a candle.

“In Afghanistan, they’re building an army. A man offered me a lot of money to use my ship for a trip across the Indian Ocean. I’m sure he’s smuggling people.

“You think he’s shipping soldiers to Afghanistan?”

“More souls than soldiers.

“”

“How many are these bandits? And how well armed are they?”

“Fifteen bandits at village raids, armed with guns, blades and grenades but probably a lot more at their base. Can you fight them?”

“I don’t know. I’m not going to float like a duck. How much is this worth?”

Mbito wrote \$500,000 on a slip of paper and slid it to Simbat.

“In gold, plus expenses for ammunition and repairs to our vehicles.”

“I’ll call the treasury, I don’t think there are that many gold bars left.”

“Gold should be in the hands of the people who spend it, not banks. I have to recruit an army. As much gold as you can, and the rest of the cash gets twenty percent.”

“Ten.”

“...”

“Alright fifteen. I never should have taken you under my wing, you mobster!” he larked.

“My sailors can fight, but we’re not soldiers. If I can recruit mercenaries, we will accept.”

They shook hands, “I will call your radio in the morning.” Simbat left O.G. Mbito’s office with a tentative agreement and walked down onto Zanzibar’s port. He told a crass joke to himself, “Greetings Stone Town, Father Muscat orders early season peaches, and a eunuch to guard them.” Along the shoreline, young boys swam. He struggled for a moment to remember the way to the bazaar. He walked past the big tree and stopped for a cup of tea from a street vendor. The sea was still rolling in his ear. He was thinking about whores as he walked steadily towards the market square. When he arrived, he paused and leaned his broad shoulders against a wall in a shady spot. Some men at a

produce stand recognized him and gestured him over. Simbat gave them an ear.

“Oooh ha! Sailor from Arabia, come here. Do you drink tea? Keanjaho! Tea!”

A hurried shopper in a business suit cut in front of him, “I’d like twelve plantains, two pineapples, twenty mangoes and peppers, lots of peppers.” The produce is proudly pushed from the cart into bags. Whether claims are overrated or these actually are the sweetest mangoes in Tanzania, their stand has been King of the Bazaar for three seasons. Okay, I’ll admit it. They’re good mangoes.

Simbat asks Keanjaho if green coffee is available.

“Is there any coffee for Simbat?” shouts Keanjaho. The workers at the stand buzz with noise and motion. “I wish I had a coffee, I’ve been working since last night.” “No coffee. This bazaar has no coffee.” “I don’t give a damn about a bean.” “I bet those gangsters at the tea shop have some coffee or some idea about-” “Hey!” interrupted, “I hear the Chinese Bazaar has some coffee too, maybe can-” “Maybe can call out plantain! pineapples! peppers! or shut the hell up,”

“Stick around this bazaar for a while, Simbat.”

“No no, come back in an hour and we’re gonna cook some rice.”

“Ahh you with your Chinese maggot grain.”

“What should we eat than? Grasshoppers nasi?”

Simbat slowly took out his coin purse, “Thanks for the tea, how much do I owe you?”

“Two hundred and twenty shillings.”

“Here, take all of this,” he slapped a load of coins. Keanjaho grasped it kindly, “And my billfold opens for sacks of green coffee.”

In the seasons at port Simbat packed light, rented accommodation and led an active life. He’d climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro, stayed as a guest at the Sultan of Brunui, and worked as a guard at the Omani Embassy in London. At shore leave his crew are given large stipends and they always return on time.

Simbat often visited fortune tellers but never took fate for granted. He was superstitious but his intention tempered his intuition to write his own story. The timing of his arrival at Officer General Mbiti’s port didn’t escape him he was free to strike for profit and to defend the innocent. If he’d known what I know, he probably wouldn’t have done anything different. Such is the nature of opportunism.

Chapter 10 *C'est la vie*

Hayat is beholden to mourn her martyred husband for four months and ten days, but no wreaths, or garlands of carnations deliquesce in her chamber. She sits on a white couch under a black flag and looks at a laptop shining on her coffee table. She reads a calligraphic image, *Without a doubt Amedy is joining Merciful Allah. Inshallah you join your family in the Caliphate soon.*

Her uncle Abdul decided that she is far too rebellious to join his inner family. But she knows

sensitive details and without his protection, she will be arrested and tortured by Interpol. After rapid consideration, it's decided that the Caliphate will be enriched by her. Between love and death, she will inspire women across the Islamic world to raise a fighting generation. She will enter a life of celebrity reserved in Paris for whores and politicians. She will be a story teller.

Hayat is to travel to Rakka. A transport across Europe and Anatolia and into Sham has been planned. She has comforted and aided her husband Amedy in his self-sacrificing jihad, and thus fulfilled her duties. She has no doubt that Muslims in the Caliphate will praise her *sunah*. Parisians oppress real Muslims so Allah is bringing his servants home. What glorious days!

Hayat daydreams. She sits in a palanquin, high above the desert. Long winds cast the curtains open to expose visions of golden sands like ocean swells. Slaves effortlessly loft her feathery frame high above the desert as she reclines in abundance, snacking on fruit and nuts. Etched on a magical silver tray is a grid for her to arrange various candies, nuts, gems, scarabs and ankhs in a solitaire game. To her delight, groupings of occult symbols disappear and gold coins materialize and rotate while more gems fill in to renew the game. It's a daydream for an idle mind whose cellphone has been ditched.

Her husband is in heaven and soon she travels to the Caliphate. *Muhammad Messenger of Allah* in white calligraphy on black velvet hangs behind the couch she sits on. Her thoughts oscillate between revenge fantasies, her martyred husband and being carried though the desert atop her lofted litter. A packed bag sits near the door. Paris, the city she was born to, educated in, and where she developed her radical bent, will be a broken memory, as quickly forgotten as an Algerian child abandoned to Western Education. She yearns to remove herself, to renew herself. Filthy people will harass her no longer for her purity, abuse her no longer for her righteousness, threaten her no longer for her faith. The "friends" she made here, even the Muslims would send her back to the police. Not again, never again will she sit under those bright lights and suffer the inquisitions of infidels. Today, friends will come to drive her to a righteous, new nation.

Friends are coming to take her there. Strangers. But she worries that these strangers are not friends. Maybe these friends will bring her to Interpol, or angry mobs of Jews.

Amedy is a Jihadi but she knows why he shot the police and ran into the market. She knows what motivated him, but those memories are rotten. What she knows killed him him could kill her too. Leave those memories behind.

The doorbell rings.

"Friends."

She opens the door. Her eye is first drawn to the Arab, tailored to precision in front, her ideal man, the man from her fantasies. She imagines herself on a horse holding him tightly from behind, her heavy breasts pressed against his back while he swings a sword against the necks of hapless soldiers.

She panics, feeling nothing but self-consciousness. Have they greeted her? They're silent now, looking blankly. Her consciousness fades. Her body slumps forward. As eyes roll back horrors, demons and genies close in around her. Hayat's world is crashing down. Not coincidentally, a new world is raising up. As the widow of a martyr, she will be courted by many men, and will choose.

"Why'd she pass out?"

"I'm'a touch her titty," Tola reaches out fecklessly but is slapped away by Rabi, who has pushed the young, limp girl to Abu.

"Uncle Abdul wants her treated with respect, so be a man. And don't ask any fucking questions when she wakes up. Abu, bring her in and put her on the couch."

Inside her house it reeks of condolences and used tissues. Tola picks up a bright laptop with an calligraphic e-card, but scoffs and puts it down. "I can't read this. Rabi, you know Arabic right?"

Rabi snatches it, "It's an email." He begins to read and understand the heavy language used for religious rites, Glorious martyr... *Rahimalu Allah...* in heaven. He silently curses Abdul, then tells Tola that it's a funeral card.

"What's it say?"

"It says fuck your mother, I don't know. This is Algerian. I speak Iraqi." She's clearly breathing but Tola checks her heartbeat anyway.

They go out for a smoke. Abu's silence cues Tola's high pitched voice, "This bint got any family here? Why are we taking her? Why'd she faint and who the fuck is she?" His questions hang in the air. The wind blows. Hairs stay unruffled. A few pedestrians pass with grocery bags. Some give quick, hostile glances but Parisians are canny and unperturbed. Hayat's building once housed both the concubines of French monarchist soldiers and revolutionaries side by side until one day, the tensions broke.

The door opens and Hayat, wearing a headscarf now, addresses them, "Are you Abdul's friends?"

"Abdul is my uncle," Rabi responds genuinely. "We're here to transport you."

She says nothing and motions for them to enter. Without making eye contact she passes through the sitting room into the kitchen and closes the door behind her. The electric kettle bubbles and clicks off. She returns with a pot of tea, a bowl of sugar cubes, 6 tulip shaped tea glasses and asks in a distinct French accent, "did you have a good drive to Paris?"

"Yeah"

"Sure"

"Our road was clear. Uncle Abdul has planned this trip under beautiful weather," rhapsodizes Rabi.

"Yes, Abdul always considers. When he introduced me to Amedy, we were in a spring meadow full of flowers in bloom," she muses. "Amedy threw them into the air and proposed immediately."

She takes a photo album and starts flipping through the pages. "This is the day." She looks like a teenager sitting in a meadow between the two, who are holding her wrists.

"I don't know what Abdul has told you about Amedy." She bites her lip. "He gave me a good life, and his sacrifice helps us all."

"We don't know anything about him. What did he do?"

Hayat hesitates. She exhales sharply and loses control of her dark eyes as if she's going to faint again but she inhales slowly and calms herself. "He worked in an auto factory," she says in a measured tone without looking up.

Tola flips the page and sees a photo of Hayat in swimwear next to a black man of the same height on a beach, her flower print bikini too small and her breasts too large for traditional modesty.

She snatches the album and gives him a dirty look. Tola can't hold back a raised eyebrow.

"We fell in love at a very young age. He was very calm and motivated. We learned about Islam together and," she sobs and reaches for a tissue but finds the box empty, "I don't know how I can."

Rabi quickly takes his handkerchief from his jacket pocket and hands it to her in his most gentlemanly display. "It's alright" he says, "you're young and beautiful and there's a new life for you."

She raises an eye slightly.

"Big event are happening for you. You'll see." Rabi stands up. "Ready?"

"I don't feel ready. I've packed a bag but I don't have the proper clothing. When we're in Milan, could you take me shopping?"

"Of course, of course," through his teeth, "Abdul is my beloved uncle and you're like family now."

"Thank you."

Chapter 11 La Fistinière

Southeast from Paris, medieval towns disappear forever as Hayat gazes out the window. Her heart aches. She holds onto glimpses of estates of wood and stone, Rustic wooden signs advertise wine with family crests. It was once her dream to spend her weekends and summers on a vineyard. She allowed herself one more daydream about riding a bicycle between lines of poplar trees to meet a man with eyes like emeralds, who drops his basket of grapes to make love to her between the vines. Hayat's thought turn pornographic and she slowly turns her eyes towards the large stranger next to her. He's sleeping. She slowly reaches for the door handle and lifts it, a millimeter at a time, feeling for the moment it catches the latch and she's only a small thrust away from rolling out. She closes her eyes and pulls. It's locked. There's comfort in the knowledge that her Islamic State is at war here France and that perhaps, one day, she can return proudly as a martyr widow. She recalls the name of the town, *Châtillon*, and wistfully stores it in her memory as a crystal snow begins to fall.

Hayat doesn't notice that they haven't been on the highway for nearly an hour. Nor does she notice Abu and Tola's discomfort about the detour. Rabi checks his GPS and makes turns alongside picket fences. Tola sings and blathers like a radio dialed across frequencies and glances back at Abu, who maintains cool silence.

"I'm hungry," barks Rabi, "Let's get a steak here eh? I'm buying everyone a steak," says Rabi uncharacteristically, "C'mon Abu, it'll make you feel better about Duygu."

Abu and Tola look at each other surprised. Abu breaks the silence, "What's this than? Are you cajoling for something?"

"He buttering us up to some Italian strip club tonight and wants me to flash my credit card cause his is likely fucked," jokes Tola.

"Oh come on don't make me grease my arm," assures Rabi.

Hayat's got her head outside the window and her scarf flies back and billows like a black flag. Fat sheep stare dumbly as they pass and Hayat concentrates on the scene, makes a mental picture of her abandoned dreams. She withdraws, recovers and mutters "*Asthaḡfiru Lillah*". They turn a corner onto a driveway bordered by two rows of blooming rosebushes. A wooden sign with *La Fistinière* swings overhead.

"Here we are," says Rabi, "A continental steakhouse. If this place can't serve a nice slab of beef, we'll go to McDonalds."

"This doesn't even look like a restaurant," says Abu, but desists, due to his position, "more like a B 'n B."

"Listen, this is a ground mission, so let's get down to ground round." Rabi pulls into a gravel lot between a white and black Bugatti and a grand, cobblestone barn with thin rectangular windows, red shutters and a small door. "Most of the time these B 'n B's put their kitchen in the barn, you know to keep the rooms from stinking like swine. C'mon let's take a look." Tola's paralytic but gets out behind Abu and Hayat. Rabi stifles a grimace. Abu opens the door to reveal a pornographic scene.

A plunging forearm up to the elbow into a man's anus is attached to a bald man who's other arm is fully to the elbow up inside a third man whimpering like an abandoned kitten. Another grunting duo of ebony and ivory fist fuck each other in an intimate and profane yin-yang.

Some of the man-puppets look back, perched on haybales, with welcoming glances. Between stun, shock, pleasure and pain Hayat screams and a half dozen men roil. Rabi covers her eyes with one hand and wraps the other around her waist, pulling her back out the door. Abu and Tola slap each other silly, spit and hurl. Hayat's too stupefied to look and holds Rabi's hands as he steers her back to the car and whispers Arabic curses in her ear. By the time the barnstormers reach the car it's too late for the well-dressed man who's exited the homestead with a baseball bat in hand to catch a hit as they peel out.

"How horrible," says Rabi, from inside the considerable space in the climate controlled Land Rover as it speeds down the road. "The French make their faggotty business in plain view. Let's go to fucking McDonalds."

"Cheap bastard," mutters Abu under his breath.

A panic is accumulating. The task of driving across Europe is tense and awkward with cross purposes. Rabi's eye meets Hayat's in the rearview and quickly withdraws to the road. The honored guest's far-off attention is accessed only by chivalry. He anticipates and yields to her turns of whim, opening and closing the window, changing music, offering her snacks and drinks with deference before she is able to voice her desires. Tola and Abu suspiciously share recognizant glances. Despite fist-fuckers and the sexy photo, Hayat continues to activate a reasonable respect. With every dragging second, the atmosphere presents itself less and less appropriate to a resolution.

They drive through Alpine roads and tunnels into Northern Italy's urban zone with relief. The darkness has long fallen yet the awkwardness stinks like a wet dog. The first leg of the long journey ends on a wide avenue. They step into the cold, dry air outside the American Hotel where they're booked two rooms for the night. Hayat's luggage and they squeeze into the elevator and ride to the tenth floor. They reach the lobby with a window open. The desk clerk looks up from her computer and takes off her headphones to greet them.

"Hello, we have a reservation under al Kathoumi. Two suites."

"Yes sir, welcome. Just a moment please." She clicks her mouse. "May I take your ID please" While lazily scanning passport, she summons a porter. Hayat's sitting down looking at her palms. Rabi looks up at the television the moment it identifies Amedy Coulibaly, the man from Hayat's photo album, *morto*. The porter looks at her ID *Hayat Coulibaly Bournameddiene Abu* and Tola see him too but aren't sure if the porter notices the resemblance. He's not watching the screen when the graphic flips to an active terror alert in the North of France and images of two men, Said and Cherif Kouachi, *a piede libero*.

A moment later a boy greets the travelers. He steps to grab Hayat's luggage, but Rabi blocks his advance with a graceless and menacing mien, genuflecting the bellhop towards the elevator. With his most alien courtesy, the porter bows slightly and says "follow me," and then something in Italian back to the clerk. They walk past the thick purple Venician wallpaper to room 711. The bellhop opens it, hands the key to Rabi, and waits beside the door.

"Is it suitable?" Rabi asks Hayat. She takes a long look without stepping past the threshold. Her room is large and full of heavy furniture. It has an ornate windowsill looking down on a courtyard fit for a captive princess.

"It is," she takes the key and slams the door.

They get outside and start to gallivant, full of crude and childish energy. After talking hard and fast about nothing, Tola looks to Rabi and says, "You're certifiably mental, you know that? I suppose you brought us to the French fudgepackers for a bit of entertainment than, wasn't it?"

"Ghastly thoughts," responds Rabi, "you think it's jokes?" Rabi smokes and offers the pack around but Tola and Abu wave it away, "Fun and games?"

"So," Abu mediates, "I figure, whoever's mash man, bitch, whatever, let's get the pecking order sorted. Rabi, you're the main man and we're following, but these underhand side missions aren't fostering any kind of trust. So, if you've got any more tricks up your sleeve, turn 'em out." Abu whips his hands down with palms up, "alright?"

"Alright." Rabi takes long slow drag on his cigarette and starts a slow, grey exhalation. "The mission operative—and what we're being paid for—is more than a simple drive." Abu closes his hands. "I haven't put my finger on it yet but, think of Hayat as a princess and we're her royal guard. She's going to use her voice. The French have treated Muslims like shit for too long. They invade our nations and start war. Then they invite us to abandon our faith and be proper French. It's fucking disgusting, even moreso than London. Paris is target number one and now it has its spokesperson. When our girl gets to Rakka she'll be a celebrity. Magazines, radio and news shows want to interview her but she's likely to have some nostalgia right? European dreams? So we just get that shit out of the way. Show her this *fahishah* and how dirty France really is. Get it?"

"Yeah I got it," barks Tola, "We leave the English for the Day of Resurrection. Fuck the gold though, what if I turn around right now? I'll take that pack of speed home and sling it to ravers. What then miser? Liar in the habit of abusing people" His tense shoulders and hot head are leading forward aggressively.

In a fluid motion Rabi breaks Tola's focus by flicking his cigarette into his face, disrupts his forwards stance with an elbow strike to the chin and pins him against the building with a hard forearm to the neck. He takes body blows with a tense abdomen and distilled rage.

"Since the bullet slipped from the gun, you've got nothing left to lose, but so much to gain."

Abu backs him off, "walk it off son." Rabi defers to Abu and leaves silently. Tola's spitting and cursing but Abu gets his arm over his shoulder and walks him in the other direction.

Well into the night, the city wears a sinister mask. Within earshot and down a dimly lit avenue, a single cafe remains open. Outside, nimble youth sit on each other's shoulders and writhe into inconceivable positions, shouting "*olé!*"

Abu looks at his friend suggesting they go look for a fight. Tola, sensing that Abu might wind up fighting his way into prison, tuts his tongue and tips his head in the opposite direction towards Milano Centrale. They continue down dark, wide avenues towards the train station. Wide squares connect at informal angles.

Around a sharp block, they see Rabi approaching down a zig-zag-zig of intersections, taking his time on grey stone sidewalk squares. He's apologetic, "you should know something about Hayat," he hesitates a moment. His face wobbles, "she is my cousin."

"Don't fuck with me," said Tola, "Know what? It doesn't fucking matter. Can't be assed. All in it together, pity I'm stuck in too, so let's just finish the drive and do the job and I'll fuck off to London."

"Brother, do you think that you're still a free man of Europe? You might be able to board that plane in Istanbul but you won't make it out of London Heathrow. SO13'll be on your ass faster than you can say Allahu Akbar. Listen son, there's something else I didn't tell you. There are hundreds of people like us going to Syria but no one's coming back. They're all burning their passports. So get your story straight if you plan on it. Hayat's wanted by Interpol, no doubt of that. Didn't you figure she's involved in the Paris jihad? That's raging right now? Over those pigs that mocked our prophet in the magazine?"

Tola face is hard but he's listening.

Rabi continues, "Look, what you need to know is that my Uncle Abdul's arm is long enough to get us through Europe but that protection's gonna wear off faster than cocaine, and after that you're just another fiend. If there's any security footage of us leaving Hayat's apartment, or the roadways between here and there, than this is it hadji. One way trip. You're dead to the west, and the Caliphate is paradise."

"Anything else you haven't told us?"

"Well, you know about the kid in Sarajevo right?"

Chapter 12 Fortune Angel

Before we follow my grandson's gang any further, allow me a moment of clairvoyance to introduce myself. I am the roots of the tree that dropped him. I am a roommate of his head space. I'm the one in a million monkeys that randomly typed his story. Abu never met his grandmother, but I visit

the dreams he ignores. Ah, dreams. I've dug so deep into dreams, that I've lost my agency. No one has any power in dreams. But it doesn't matter anyways. I spent all my power long ago to warn the white and brown people of Zanzibar to flee. Abu's father Simbat took my daughter to London and he left within a year. The nagging mother-in-law of his dreams was ignored. The blind youth scatter whatever seeds they have because anything that grows is good.

But this chapter is for the youth. When I was young, I learned to tell fortune. My mentor Busara and I looked into drank-from cups and smelled destiny in the air. I spent more time with her than my parents. In lieu of an education, I walked all morning through Vuga, in the old Sultanate of Zanzibar where all our wealthy customers drank coffee and wondered about their love lives. Our parlor was some ancient closet with barely space to lie down but it was adjacent to a bustling tea shop. She'd hung a curtain from the ceiling to separate us from our guests. She said that we didn't need to look in order to see. Allah marks each soul with an indelible radiance that is seen with the mind, not the eyes. And that light of Allah rubs off on those we spend time with, the footprint of Allah in the physical world.

But when I was a teen, I gave in to the pagan arts. I asked Busara about resurrection and other black magic. Her disapproval wasn't enough. I opened pages to possession and married a traveling shaman. With this rebellion, I estranged Busara as well as my family. Disowned and renowned, I laughed, traveled, sought and cataloged the oldest stories in history. Words of God! some of them, but less perfect than the Noble Koran. We traveled in caravan to villages as far as Timbuctu and performed at harvest festivals. Fire was my art and I danced. I looked into Peristan. We traded scrolls with Zulu Chiefs and took rubbings from tablets in Kumasi. We studied ancient scripts from Nubia, Egypt and Assyria. The cryptographs of Shango burned my soul and I communicated through the medium of flare. I prayed with offerings of blood and wine and slept naked with the spirits, allowing them to possess me with wild emotions and the gifts of prophecy.

One evening, Jibrael descended on six wings of light. He said that my eternal life had been wasted in homage to the old gods. "Who was once considered the spirits of the earth are and always were the Djinn created from hellfire and destined to return there on the last day. What do you seek from this blasphemy? Are your visions worth your eternal soul?"

"I do not blaspheme against Allah," I was audacious enough to reply, "I worship Him as I praise all ye gods and goddesses. When I dance, I accept their will. Surely the one Allah is the One who enters."

"He is your creator, and he created those you worship of fire and deception. Your soul can be saved, but your sin is ignorance of Koran. The Creator will consider your *shirk* on the last day. Come now faithful into Allah's eternal graces."

Suddenly the wings exploded into light. I was drained and melted formless onto the stone floor. My husband came with his erection exposed as an animal, "Amesemi, you call me here. Be you priestess or goddess?"

I replied, "There's none by that name, leave me. I will come to you after I have rested." But he didn't leave. He raped me and left. I slept and the angel returned and cradled me. He wrapped his wings around me and hummed verses. I awoke, feeling as empty a forgotten oil lamp, and repented.

Henceforth I stopped dancing, became emotionally estranged from my cult and abandoned the ancient translations. Months passed and I found I was pregnant. I stayed at the next town that accepted me, Kidugula near Lake Malawi. Life became flat. Friendships unwound. Spirits abandoned my flesh.

I knew I couldn't return prodigiously to my family until I had atoned for my sins. A little stone

man squat across the from me with his arms wrapped around his knees tightly, a trinket I had kept. His toucan beak rested quirkily on his knees. I took it. I held it low and stared forward. Only one prayer was in my head as I threw it down against the hard ground, “*Allahu Akbar; eshedu enla ilahe illallah.*” The last stone god of hundreds transformed into hundreds of pieces.

A young boy, ran inside, hearing the prayer. I could hear some older kids outside but he was hiding. I asked his name. He said *Ndoano*, Hook. He was tiny, gentle and an excellent fisherman for a 3-year old.

A little lifetime of journeys and spirits had made my young bones ache. When I stayed in Kidugula, my hands started moving slower and my body seemed to lose mass before it swelled up from the womb. I grew with children in this rainy mountain village. The locals were tolerant of me and we made friends with crafters, nurses and dogs. The orphan boy stayed with me and took a new name, Ignatio.

Late in my pregnancy, a former sister-wife came to us with the news that our husband, the man whom I once thought immortal, had died of dysentery. I must answer for the forbidden rite that we performed. She brought a lock of his hair and we salted it and buried it to block his soul from from possessing our daughter. Because it was past my days of ignorance, I know I must answer for it. Afterwards, I prayed for his soul and, by the grace of Allah and the village midwife, gave birth to Feride.

I nursed her and prayed five times daily with grief, shame and visions. I saw black men in the street breaking down doors and slaying brown men, a pervading curse. I prayed for an end to this phantasmagoria but my prayers were intercepted when demons came to collect unpaid debts. Allah is listening but I saw genies and afreetes who told me that He wasn't.

I returned to Zanzibar with my bumbling toddler and her stoic older brother. She needed an education and despite the visions of violence, I followed my intuitions home. Busara was still working in Vuga but the neighborhood had become a powder keg of racial tensions. My parents were both sick with dementia. I reintroduced myself to them and cared for them until they died. At the beginning, they would play with Feride and were always surprised to learn that she existed. At the end they had no recognition of even me. Our bond was weak but I cried for them nonetheless, such is the nature of family.

I brought Feride and Ignatio to Busara. She said without looking up from her book, “Welcome Kahina, Ignatio and welcome to the world little Feride. Your coming is indeed good fortune.” The tea shop's new owners, were the Bulsaras whose brash, young son Farrokh took a shine to Feride. He pinched her cheek and sang her funny songs. But the father, Jer was no longer interested in managing a tea shop so he'd hired Busara to manage its salaries and property. In addition, Jer and Bomi Bulsara split property on the deed and bestowed a piece of it to Busara; 1 *seir* northeast of the old fort and 19 *qasbahs* from the sea, the 2 cubit space between the teashop and the Hamamni gardens, is forthwith passed from Jer Bulsara to the ownership Kimof Busara. We will keep the deed to the tea shop but we bestow all of its profits to you, and nobody will question your claim on the booth. Jer said, “You're free, just let Farokh perform his songs in in the evening.”

The good times wouldn't last long though. Grim visions were revealed with increasing clarity. Busara, also plagued with visions of street violence said, “Kahina, if we're free, then humanity's bankrupt.” Search the Koran to understand the visions through prayer and recitations. Allah is showing us a grave inevitability. We must persuade the white and brown people to pack up and ship off.” Zanzibari culture was scattered around the world. A new rhythm of arabesque pollinated cities with

vibrant color, as they faded here.

In the nineteen-sixties, when waves of new ideas were crossing the earth, Stone Town was teased by free love, feminism and communism, but it was charmed by black power and underclass revolution. Our body politic, Africans were taking their autonomy in fits and starts. The Zanzibar Sultanate's wrestled control from the British protectorate and I thought it was the nightmare; the clash I saw in my visions. Black Africans had unsettled the English enough to leave slowly but a new Arab Sultanate had unwisely claimed power. The cauldron that slowly boiled underground had reached its brim. A month later it would boil over.

It was in that tense month that Busara died, leaving me to manage the tea shop alone. Running a business, raising a family, planning a funeral and giving out seruptitious warnings all made time for each other. In the tea shop, tragedy was framed as a lesson for Feride and Ignatio. "People die when their bodies become too old or they get hurt too badly." I said to them, and turned to funeral guests saying, "Blades are being sharpened, guns are being stockpiled." Everyone struggled to understand my words and some mourned too long, right up until the day pot boiled over and spilled bloody revolution across the streets.

English, Omani, Parsi and Hindi people had to board ships and escape Mji Mkongwe before John Okello and the black revolution rose to slay them at the tips of their own weapons. It came to pass, and for the most part, the new rulers in Shangani were less corrupt, but there was no longer much profit in prophecy and most of the abandoned property, including the tea shop, was seized by the Afro-Shirazi Party. Tanzania was at the cusp of a wave of Africanism where everybody saw the future quite clearly, as we had. We moved into the booth and set up a humble living space. Despite financial trouble in a new nation, luck was at our heels. Feride was a wide-eyed little billy goat who loved the sea, and Ignatio always loved Feride, first as a sister.

Debts had to be collected and the tea shop was seized. Old buildings were reclaimed and new schools were established. The Afro-Shirazi Party decided to ruin and raze tea shop to make space for an open air market, which became the eastern border of the public square three blocks south of Beit al Ajaib and the old fort. When I produced the ancient deed that Busara had bequeathed to me and proved that this booth was owned and lived in by Africans, the men scratched their heads as they read it and spared the tiny booth from the hammer.

I became too weak to walk and adopted the most extreme custom of veiling the world from myself and myself from the world. I ensconced in my mystic space, which I kept private even from my children. Sometimes I paid local gangsters protection money. I also gave to the poor and arranged people to run my errands in order to keep my position in the small booth under the archway of the ancient gate of a building that had been demolished.

I steer men toward their fates and encourage women's bravery and divine intuition. For longer than most of the residence of Stone town could remember, Kahina the eccentric and pious fortune teller is loved and respected. I give words to visions and empower men like Simbat to risk fortune, family and fate against slim chance.