

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 30 The Slip

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

"You see this?"

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

"Do you recall that bird from the race?"

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

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

“Have you called her?”

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

The city buzzes though the open window.

“Let's get breakfast.”

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

*Phones are bugged*

*Lives are in danger.*

He motions to Tola to turn it over.

*Go to reception.*

*You are a stranger here.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I dunno.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right mate, keep it together.”

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

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

“Yea?”

“Look I've kept those three years secret”

“Yeah, sure, at Summos.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes sir!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm in Istanbul."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Haha, he's the best!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 31 Dog Domain

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who let these men free!" he flared.

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

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

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

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



“In the harbor?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And for you?"

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

"How can we trust you?"

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

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

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

Simbat, Ali and Sayeed nodded and sidled off.

"His laugh quelled the gangsters back there."

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

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

"How long have you worked for Tippu?"

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

"And why did you start?"

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 32 Red Ochre

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Arabic"

"Is she your slave?"

"Yes."

"Am I?"

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

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

"Do you remember where you were last night?"

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

intoxication, foreign friends, open mouths, more bottles.

“Allah knows.”

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 33 Flee

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 34 Versa visa

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



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

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

"Ok"

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

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

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

"Drowned?"

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

"Is Valarie a white girl's name?"

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

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

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

help you search everyone.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nah mate, probably the regime.”

“I wanna help them.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Right. To fight the murderous tyrants!”

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 35 The First Euphrates Dam

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

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

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

She looks. His breathing is ingressive and shallow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No.” -This is a nightmare-

“Does your Hippocratic Oath apply here?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sister, we don't have prosthetics.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No."

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

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

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

*Bid them farewell with bullets, just as you received them*

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

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

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

"What do people use?"

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

"Ah, chemical courage."

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

"Who uses it?"

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

"It's safe for kids?"

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

"Is it addictive?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is your name?”

“Abdel Kamil al Anbari”

“Why have you answered the call?”

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

“What opportunity do you seek?”

“To contribute to the State of Islam.”

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

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

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

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

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

“No.”

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

“Yes brother, England.”

“Is this substances illegal in England.”

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

“Have you ever used alcohol?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Chapter 36 Outpost

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 37 Usama & Moaman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Abu and Tola nod slightly.

"I insist."

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

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

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

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

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

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

*A Taliban Shura enslaved me from birth*

*They said I was born from a pumpkin*

*And only in Islamic State do I find*

*My brothers, the strangers, my family.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ah. Good.”

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

“I'm also a stunt motorcyclist.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Homs to her sisters, *we have our pride as diverse as we are, we have our freedom to support the stars*, and released a salsa video that showed a disinterested tigress, heifer and mare leaving the bull and stallion behind at the zoo to go to nature. The video was funded by a central banker in Damascus who happened to be Jiřia's father and the director of this clip. She was sold and Moaman lost his anonymity.

These Brits are the kind of prestige immigrants that Moaman could use to draw in business and shield his reputation. That famous guy, Jihadi John's face was all over Dabiq. British Muslims had a certain flair for oration and maybe these guys could be professional speakers. English Islamic education was good, one of the best foreign education systems for young men to learn Arabic and the Koran. These young men were strong, smart and ambitious. As the determinism of Islamic youth rages and concentrates in the streets of Rakka, Uqayribat was a quieter town where business could be done. Sheikh Moaman recruited them to his squadron on the spot. They would train nearby and travel to the battlefield very soon, to get a taste.

As the Syrian Army amassed in Damascus. In Homs, propaganda blistered the business of the Shiites and their wounds spilled pus all over all the Sunnis. In Islamic State hands, Uqayribat's market stalls inexplicably fill with fresh vegetables and men with contagious smiles encourage one another to follow the example of the Prophet and stop smoking. They look to the Elders, sat low at store fronts, listening to their words and mimicking their examples for posture and voice. The main square has a small congregation of robed men and boys to simulate the *sunnah* of the prophet Muhammad.

8-year old Hamza's poem is patriotic; father why this life is full of hardship? And why can we never stay in one place.

The event has been captured on glistening video, a clear picture to pride and new nationalism. But they're all actors. The elders, arrived that day with a group of traveling poets and will leave to the next town as soon as they're paid. They camera crew are Islamic State propagandists who chased the actual elders into their homes. Tacitly, this state will rise and fall. That it's a proxy to reverse the flow of warfare is liminal, and thanks to the influence of Captagon, allegiance beyond the last battle when the Islamic State is reborn into the minds of all sworn to defend the newest and oldest nation and Caliph is established.

Abu and Tola both recite the shahada, "Lah ilaha ilallah Muhammadur rasolu ilaah." They swear their loyalty to the Islamic State with original prose. Abu begins, "Almost a hundred years after its collapse in a war between infidels, the Caliphate is once again established following the line of the Umayyids, the righteous Calipha Abu Bakr from Baghdad, may his reign endure."

The evening illuminates with fire. All beautiful and grotesque displays of masculine assonance masquerade. Horses, motorcycles, market goods, children and the news crew means labored showmanship, bravado, and smiles. Brothers squint and exhale after the cameras are turned away. The men whose beards have been growing since the fall of Saddam Hussein have an evil mischief in their eye and are the first to exhale and the last to look away.

Upon exhalation, a very select group of warlords make their way to the ancient temple outside of town. They unleash all their personal ticks into the shadows with growls and water splashed into their anus with a cupped hand. Ancient Byzantine mosaics display deer and peacocks, the animistic roots of one of the great empires of Abraham. The ISIS crumple its history with prayers. They prey quietly on the dirt edge of archaeological pits. There are tents in the pits.

A lorry stops and two men wearing flack vests stride the length of the vehicle to lower a ramp. The doors open and there are women and girls. One charges forward with a scrap of metal. Two more

women also attempt to rush the guards. They are knocked and held down. The first woman is struck hard across the forehead with the stock of a rifle. "It's time for school bitch." The other two women are choked out and slump into the dirt. All three are dragged away by rapists.

The remaining women stare at the dark metal floor of the truck bed. They can't make eye contact, can't vocalize their thoughts not to cry out, to mutilate their rapists genitals, to feign enjoyment and perhaps shorten the rape. They trudge down, black out, out into the dark pits, down to endure their worst fear, each step willing their soul to leave their bodies, finding solace in some memory.

These men are being rewarded for acts of holy war dating back to ISIS' dovetail with al Qaida in Iraq. Soldiers who had led raids on American squads were offered these women. Gunmen who came back from surprise acts of terrorism were promised young virgins. Mullahs decided and announced in sermons that girls who worshiped idols were fit for slavery, and any man can buy, sell or fuck his slave. American troops had stopped patrolling the villages full of young girls who worshiped a fallen angel.

Moaman set up a camera, and pans to the girl, stripped to her underclothes, "look up, show your face," she raises her eyelid slightly. "Hard to say the devil worshiping bitch isn't beautiful, eh?" He pans down to reveal an ancient mosaic of a peacock. "Some kind of pagan image. These are the birds they worship," he spits. He puts the camera in the corner and grunts, "get in the bed." When she doesn't respond, he grabs her arm and pulls her to the cot, aroused by his own power. Sadism courses through his veins. "If you move I'll hang you while I screw you. I'll keep you right at the edge of life. Are you a virgin? I don't want to get my clothes messy. What's wrong bitch, don't you understand? Did I get a Kurdish speaking one? Well, I guess we'll find out."

He laughs as he disrobes." Mutter your heathen prayers if it pleases you. No? Last week, I raped an American soldier while he sang his national anthem. Something about stars and stripes. I made his white ass red and blue." He rubs his erection and gropes around before tearing her remaining garments off. He spits on his hand and slaps it under up against her genitals and exhales a few guffaws before thrusting his penis inside her. Pain shoots down her back, clenching the walls of her vagina. Her nerves snap at their failure to tighten and he foists her into shock, which rushes up her spine to turn off her consciousness.

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Tola shares a tall bottle of water with Abu. "Mate, I gonna pop that pin head of Rabi's when I see him," Abu grabs the tall plastic bottle, "I'll wring his complex. If he thinks his drug factory has enough guards to stop me and my brothers--"

"Mate! Can't wage war within the State. You wanna settle something? You're gonna have to set him up, and make it look like friendly fire."

Black and white, slow motion, explosive videos of decent quality produced with Japanese equipment feature camels and falcons, an awful lot of expensive motorbikes, vehicles speeding through the desert, hatred for national boundaries, empathy for Muslims who feel like strangers in their homelands, fighters relaxing, reciting "let him with the wretched soul taste humiliation, strike him in his home and scatter his body everywhere, let him let him with the wretched soul taste humiliation."

On the radio, *It's the last Jumada of al Awwal, 1441. Breaking news about Jihad in Europe. We've been following the location and actions of two Islamic State brothers who attacked the headquarters of blasphemous media outlet Charlie Hebdo. We've just heard that our brothers' stolen*

*car has been found, by Interpol in Northern France. Islamic State brothers killed an entire police squadron after avenging the prophet Muhammed—may peace be upon his name—. The heroes Sayid and Cherif are in a village north of Paris, continuing their jihad which has been ripping through Paris for three days. Whether they return home or welcome the lions to Europe, their martyrdom strengthens our resolve, as we build the Islamic State and bring honor back to our religion. May Allah curse France.*

*Related to this, we have here in the studio the wife of brother Abou Bashir Abdoullah al Ifriki. Sister welcome and thank you for making the difficult journey here. «Thank you for having me.» El hemdula ile. What was it like to grow up in France. «It was like a desert. There are little oasis of propriety. Islamic centers and Mosques, immigrant neighborhoods but so much is vile and viscous, and the big problem with that is that the Muslims living there are subject to incredible temptation.» What advice would you give to Muslims there? «I can't even explain to you how vile and vicious their sins are there. It's worse than you think. We all know France encourages homosexuality, but they even allow them to fornicate in public. I swear to Allah. I visited a McDonald restaurant there and they were fornicating inside. It's horrid.» Wow, They'll burn in hell for their sins. «I would advise all Muslims who have the energy to make their pilgrimage to come here. Europe is getting worse and worse.» Your husband—glory to his martyrdom—was participating in the coordinated attack. He was part of a sleeper cell right? He trained and fought together with Sayid and Cherif. How long had they been planning this jihad? And when did he meet the heroes who attacked the blasphemous magazine? «They met in prison when they were both very young. They were serious about Jihad for nearly twenty years, since the American invasion of Iraq at least.» Did you meet any others who waged Jihad on France? «Yes, we broke our fast together many times during the holy month. And we traveled to meet with elders whose history of Jihad in Europe goes back generations.» And what were they like? «Well, they were very serious, but polite.» France and Europe has famously strict laws on owning guns or other weapons, How they able to collect machine guns and rocket launchers under the nose of the Interpol and the French police? «Haha, that I don't know. They had another apartment across the city and some friends in the French military» Wow, el hemdu. After he escaped the Kosher Market he martyred defending the honor of our prophet in street combat. Was he training with weapons in the house? «No, not in the house. He kept those parts of his life separate... secret. 'You're a wife, not a soldier', he used to say. Then, he told me to pack a bag... that friends would arrive in the morning. He said that he would meet me here, or in heaven. He told me nothing until the day he came with weapons. It explains his strange behavior, staying out at night, new friends, different phones. It all makes perfect sense now. He kept secrets, but I know now that he's with Allah and I am jealous. His heart burned with desire to join his brothers and fight the enemy of Allah on Caliphate land. His eyes gleaned each time he would see Islamic State videos and he would say 'don't show that to me' because he wanted to leave immediately.»*

“We always execute our prisoners and every soldier needs to practice combat killing with a knife. These dummies are anatomically correct. Plunge your knife into their abdomen and it feels the same that it will feel like in battle. We need to know the feel of the kill, because our battle marches are so successful, and we take no prisoners. We follow the standard of the prophet Muhammad—peace be on his name—and *subhan* Allah gives us victory even when we're outnumbered. Our soldiers are the Strangers, reunited after difficult lives and long journeys. The future armies of the Caliphate will look back on these battles for inspiration and further transformation.

*Your blood is a red bridge to victory and a passageway to eternity  
Your blood is a storm of resolve and zeal  
a fire that consumes our enemies a fire that purifies the soul of doubt.  
and tomorrow it will liberate Jerusalem.*

“Brothers! At arms! You are soldiers of the Almighty Commander. Your training has made you fierce warriors. You have been selected for your unstoppable devotion to the Jihad. Target the enemy and show no mercy.” Sheikh Abu Moaman al Badia paced across the front line of his squadron, addressing them under the bright midday sun.

Abu stands at the field commander's right flank and shoots a wide eyed glance at Tola who stands behind with the mechanics. -Anyone who's showing fatigue, or not paying attention is a goner, blown up by the first few booby traps.- He says a prayer for the soldier with drooping eyelids. Tola looks whose shoulders slump and ears twitch and prays that Allah accept their martyrdom.

-Withdrawal symptoms- Tola sees in the listless soldiers, diminishing returns on dopamine re-uptake leading to lack of focus, head aching, irritability and restlessness. Just like the East London Mosque, he sees brash, young teenagers with different mother tongues say *brother* together in Arabic. They're ideologically bonded because they trust their orders and eachother's oaths. Tola thinks again about the pack of speed he sold to Rabi. He plans different outcomes when their paths cross again. It'll likely be very soon on the battlefield.

“Moaman my friend. How are you?”

“Abdullah, thank you. How is Bosnia? I hear the government is moving in on your camp.”

“Yes, I'm in Croatia at the moment with all of our assets. Of course we left a few retards and broken guns behind so that Interpol feels like they accomplished something. This is the week of the Zagreb conference.

“That's right, the conference.” Moaman knows that diplomats, spies, businessmen and representatives from various Western and Middle-Eastern powers will meet to discuss deals. Abdullah is an experienced diplomat who is able to represent the Islamic State without direct ties and his mission is to try to funnel Saudi and American money towards ISIS in the form of weapons, training support, oil and cold hard cash.

“There's plenty more to offer here. In fact I have fifteen white slaves to sell.”

“Are they young? Virgins? In Libya, they're worth fifteen-thousand dollars each. Send them to Sirte, they already have an auction block set up. If you can get a load of white girls there, their wallat's will explode faster than their dicks.”

“Can you arrange a transport?”

“I will look into it.”



## Chapter 38 Theophylline

“My God in heaven and hell! Save me from this pit of suffering!” Alone in a windowless room, a woman wails, seized by her birthing contractions. Linoleum tiles echo her cries in the basement of the hospital. Duygu looks towards the midwife, a lean, middle-aged woman with deep set eyes. “She's only at six centimeters, we'll check on her in six more contractions.” Duygu nods at the attending midwife then notices that Khalisa is staring at her. This is Duygu's first overnight in the emergency gynecology. Her mind struggles to remain vigilant amidst birth and afterbirth. It's getting close to dawn and she's been working for seven hours already. The emergency gynecology is a wing of the sub-basement of Tabqah hospital, a square hallway with ten birthing rooms on the outside and a nurses office, neonatal incubation units and break room in the central block. This evening, the staff is a single Nurse-midwife, two Attendant Midwives, Duygu and another apprentice.

Consciously she knows what's happening. She feels her heart softening with each baby's first breath and tries to harden it against Khalisa, knowing that she keeps a metal pipe in her sleeve, and a gun in her locker. The maternity ward is a sacred place and here is this jail keeper, using violent coercion against the midwives. They are welcoming, kind and matriarchal. Khalisa mostly sits silently writing in a notebook. Ayshe, the Nurse Midwife has been in this hospital for thirty years. She says to Duygu in English, “I'm sorry dear. Not the best days, but we're lucky they don't bother us here. You're a young doctor and I'm an old midwife. Our responsibility is to mothers and babies. I would send you home if I could, but your purpose seems to be here. After you can travel and marry and earn money and raise a family. I'll be here the rest of my life.”

Some things she can't help but get used to; the howls of women in labor, the absence of men and the friendly sorority it creates, the five daily prayers done collectively. Other things are a surprise every time; the segregation of faces, Khalisa's bipolar reactions, public discipline. She sees culture, stripped down of any meaningful image, allowed only to decorate itself with words, a living poem expounding on a beautiful and terrible god. She keeps her ears pricked for minuscule sounds; an electric motor, the sound of someone breathing, voices behind a closed door. She holds a stethoscope to a pipe in the bathroom and hears a Rabi's voice, ... *worked like ... kid. Yeah, hypnotized ... Columbia... believe...*

She thinks about the surgery. It wasn't perfect. Any other hospital would have a real surgeon on staff instead of a hostage. He was awake the whole time but didn't flinch. His eye was active, darting to focus, keyed in and responsive to every word said. When she finished, he thanked her kindly. “Get some sleep”, she said. He closed his eyes. Like a dream, nothing is strange, anything is possible. Duygu suspects he was on drugs. Maybe drugs can yok Khalisa and she can ride her out of this place like a flying horse. She recites the phone number again 075-870-6673

For the time being, her duties in hospital are a comforting bridge from the life she was torn from; the scrubs and other sterile fabric, beeping machinery monitoring pairs of heartbeats, her duties are all comforting and familiar. Through the throes of labor she learns to direct women's breaths. The midwives teach her to listen to the rhythm of their contractions and help them use their lungs and diaphragm to push and stretch their birth canal and perinea.

Duygu and Ayshe are alone in the nurses office when another wail booms expectedly down the hallway. “Oh God, tear this demon from my belly! *Aieeeeeee*”. Unphased, Ayshe says, “Let's go. By the

way, this woman is Turkman. You can talk to her. You're ready. Breathe, push, rest, repeat."

It's 3 am. By the time they enter, she's asleep between contractions. Ayshe announces herself but is met only with snores. Duygu follows, pushing a metal cart with umbilical scissors, compresses, a box of gloves, and surgical masks laid out. She looks at the woman, lying on her side with her knees curled up towards her chin, a fair amount of pre-birth fluids dripping from her portal. She sleeps for a precious moment as Duygu gives a last check to the heart monitor, 80 bpm for the mother, 160 for the child. Duygu arranges a place to lay the newborn, and turns on the overhead lamp. Triggered by the moment, the woman rolls back and groans. She's young. Her temples and cheeks pull back and she opens her mouth and eyes to exclaim a sharp, angry shout. Duygu approaches her and says, "I'm here. I can help." comforts her, "You're close. A few pushes and you'll be through. Okay now, a deep breath."

In the kitchen that serves the military barracks, Hayat prances and muses like a dreamy princess. "Everything must be clean and wonderful. These plates are used by mujaheddin." Breakfast is finished and the soldiers have returned their dirty dishes through the mess portal along with few random notes of love poetry which are read, shared and cherished with giggles.

Hayat's new life fits her. She took a civil examination and was put to work immediately. She calls Rabi, "Hello dear, I hope you don't mind, I'm calling to ask a favor. As you know, firstly I'm Muslim, but I am also a woman and I feel a responsibility to protect others." *Yes, that's great. Hey, just a second... do you know Dabiq? ... well, I have a friend there and, it's just, your words are so proper and poetic, he could write a beautiful article about you. May I record this conversation?* She pauses a moment, "Alright, you may record." *Great. -tap tap click- Ok, start again please* "I said, I want to protect the women of the State so I took the exam for al Khansaa, and I joined a meeting to show my interest." *I can't think of a better career. You are strong and virtuous. Have you met anyone from al Khansaa? They are the deadliest women in the world. Are you sure you want to join the military? You might be sent to Kobane.* "Really?" *Haha, maybe. All soldiers in training visit at least one battle, even the women.* "I'll shoot straight at any Kurdish women's brigades. Those sluts show their public hairs to distract the mujaheddin. Excuse my language. It just bothers me that they use themselves as bait like that. Such a dishonorable way to fight." *Yes I agree.* "So anyways, I received another proposal today, hand delivered from a field commander named Emrullah Ismail. I watched him from the window. He's very handsome, but I think he's too old. I want to marry someone young," *Listen Hayat. -Tap Tap Click- "and powerful."* *I'm going to Kobane and...* Hayat interrupts, "a mujaheddin, but also a businessman." Rabi talks over her, *...when I return...* She continues, "Brother Emrullah devotes his life to jihad, and has two wives." *May I ask you to...* "My husband should give me ten years before he takes a second wife." The line goes quiet. "Rabi?" — *Yes... I think five years, and he should swear it to Allah.* She pauses and takes a deep breath. She thinks, in five years half the men here will be dead. She says, "Look Rabi, I'm a widow, so I know love. Maybe we should wait a year. If we're both still single," *Look, I'm meeting some rich donors. I've prepared some remarks. Would you listen and give me comments?* "Ok, I'll listen." *Ok... Our state is complete with civil services, law and an economy under shariah. Our hospitals are the best in all the Levant. But all of our courts, hospitals and ministries are operating through embargoes from the infidel nations of the world. Buying medicine is difficult and expensive because our supplies come through their black market. We've just opened a laboratory to make some essential medicines but it's only the beginning. To operate independently, we need funding so we're not at the mercy of foreign suppliers. Our emergency clinics, doctor's offices, maternity wards, pharmacies, laboratories and medical supply station are funded from private donors.* "Sure it's good, a little wordy. I'd change the part about being at the mercy of foreign suppliers, we

don't want to come off as weak.” *Right, ok. I'll just say... We're expanding our production.* “Keep it simple. By the way Rabi, it happens that al Khansaa has a very important prisoner, a kind of Shia princess who was married to a general. She has information about Assad's spies. Do you have a truth serum that could help them?”

From the opposite side of the locked door Duygu listens as she deposits the nightly report into a drop box. *Wow, look who's moving up the ranks. Ok, I can make the order, who's it for?... Ok, yes I miss you too. I'll call you when I return from Kobane.* He hangs up.

He calls Duygu on the hospital phone “There's something happening here that's within your control. If you want a good life, you can take it now. Abu, he's not like me. He's an orphan, a good man. He came here to start a family. You would be a powerful family. If you refuse, I hope your family will pay fifteen percent of their assets to see your safe return.”

“Is Abu here?”

“I left him in Istanbul.”

“Why? Isn't he your friend?”

“He had to find his own way.”

“So he's here?”

“Inshallah.”

“None of this makes any sense. Why did you kidnap me? You really think my family can afford a princess' ransom? Did you do it for clout? Did you think I'd stay here?” she spits. “You're worse than the English. You wanna be a kingpin mujaheddin, but no one believes in you. If they did, you'd be here with Abu and Tola. They'll pull you under the dirt with the worms. Fucking around with mental drugs. What do you expect is going to happen? You'll be tortured before you'll die betrayed, and you'll go to hell. Your sins will leave you there for a dozen lifetimes. When you kill me, look me in the eye, I want to remember your face when I see you there.” She hangs up the phone. Rabi flicks a message to Khalisa.

She enters in a pink headband with a gold kalishnakov. She approaches Duygu who sees the golden machine gun and marks it, reads the letters, and gets a unexpectedly hard forearm to the belly. She's handcuffed and pushed back to the dam complex. She descends the staircase with upward pressure on her back cuffed arms. She's pushed into a cell with the other hostages. Two of them are sitting on a couch reading magazines. They barely flinch. She gets up. There is a barred window overlooking the Euphrates valley, spotted with green islands, all the way to Rakka.

Duygu's on the floor. She looks up visualizing the badge. She puts her hands on the ground, bracing and raising, slowly. Exhausted from the torment of observing botched pharmaceuticals, unnecessary surgery, and sick women get checked up without understanding a word the doctor said. She knows there's a drug within her grasp, that she can use to shackal and ride Khalisa like a winged horse.

At hospital, Duygu's watches a woman writhe, shake and cry out for her husband and then, in his absence, Allah. She curses the demons clawing out of her anus. Duygu witnesses her lamentations and breathes through her teeth. There are sharp instruments all around.

On her late-shift break, she tries on the forged al Khansaa headband and tests her boundaries

past the maternity ward. Some areas are unisex by necessity; supply depots, the courtyard, the pharmaceutical desk and a few hallways between them. While wearing a burka, she's surprised by her near invisibility. People avert their eyes at a distance. No one approaches her. One day she tests her luck and tries on the forged headband. People turn the corner.

In her office as well as the dorm cell there's an intranet of articles and Islamic literature in dozens of languages. There are pages and pages of poetry...

*Father, I have traveled a long time among  
deserts and cities.*

*It has been a long journey, Father,  
among valleys and mountains,  
So long that I have forgotten my tribe, my  
cousins, even humankind.*

-Osama bin Laden

Sometimes she considers herself lucky. She's a prestige hostage. The other hostages in her room trifle about the price of each other's ransom. They all share stories about their kidnapping and the treatment of other captive women. -Thousands of women are enslaved here. It's unthinkable. - You think it's bad for us? You should see what's done to infidels. - I hope our captors are all killed by Kurdish women!-

They narrate the life of a slave girl named Melek, a Yazidi girl from Sinjar who sits in a dungeon, staring at the rainbows in an oily puddle. She's seen her husband executed with a knife, and chose that moment for her death, a suicide of the spirit for the body to follow. Never to show kindness to her captors, to Islam, to bear children, only death. In a dungeon with with kindred strangers, she stares at oil stains for hours, reaching down and picking up the swirling patterns, drinking handfuls and tasting sensations she'd never experienced before. She's fed strange green leafy vegetables that were forbidden too, but what does it matter. She's already on her way to heaven. A group of women, some older villagers, one or two soldiers, recite their holy stories in Arabic or Kurdish and even through the language barrier, they hear and understand the stories of their shared culture. They're daughters of Adam but not Eve, and the Peacock Angel is leading them to heaven where no tongue can confuse their faith. They'd fled, hid on a mountain and waited for salvation that didn't come. Melek's village however, didn't evacuate. They knew there was no where to run, so they just prayed. Melek's husband gathered the kitchen knives and waited by the door, but in the end, they all just knelt down and prayed together. The latch outside the door opens and the smell of rice arrives with it. "You're going to be released, eat dinner first." When the door opens, a girl lunges at the intruder and is slapped to the floor. Rabi looks at his stinging hand, "You bitch, eat off the floor." and throws a handful of rice onto the dirty ground. He slams the door and walks past a group of heavily armed, young men reciting poetry. He pauses and listens for a moment,

*Ask Mosul, city of Islam, about the lions—  
how their fierce struggle brought liberation.  
The land of glory has shed its humiliation and defeat  
and put on the raiment of splendor.*

A brother sees him and jumps up, "Peace and greetings Brother,"

"Greetings and peace."

"Rabi, what about the chemical courage?"

"Well, the first ingredient is here. Let me make a phone call. A brother in Rakka is extracting theophyllene from tea leaves. In a few days," he gapes his eyes and raises his brows as he takes out his phone, "wow."

"Hey Abdul, how's it going." *Yeah, good. It's in a big container. Starting to stink.* "What's it smell like, does it smell like a cafeteria?" *Eh, more like pussy.* "What does the fungus look like? Is a black fuzzy layer?" *I don't know, you told me not to open it for 6 days.* "Well, when did you start it? Friday." "Okay, it's Thursday. Go open it. I'll wait." *Okay... Yeah it's black.* "When you took off the lid, did it pop?" *Take it off? I ... It was already off. I think the wind blew it off.* "How long has it been like that?" *3 days maybe?* "3 days?" *Yeah, I mean. I couldn't really watch it. This week was my sister's honeymoon and their room is right next to mine, so I've been out camping.* "Brother you're forgiven. I'm coming on Saturday and we need another day for the filter. Strain out the tea leaves now. This is the most important part! Don't spill any. Pour it slowly through the strainer. Don't slosh it around. After Friday we'll remove the water and maybe, with Allah's blessing we'll still get the substance." Rabi hangs up, nods at the brother and calls commander Abu Kahtab al Kurdi, "Sir, we'll be ready for anything at the end of this week."

Duygu sees Khalisa fall asleep at the end of a shift. She grabs her phone. 0758706673 She starts texting. *This is Duygu, please don't respond. I'm deleting both these messages from this bitch's phone. Show the next one to Rabi.* She can feel her pulse in her fingertips as she texts. She hopes it's plausible that Khalisa would send Hayat a message in English. *This is Khalisa ;) just between us girls, do you know anything to help with an interrogation? I hear you've got connections at the new pharmaceutical lab. I can pick it up tomorrow.*

## Chapter 39 More bad guys

Titus Memon Zekomo, TMZ Samsom crawled backwards in a line, holding the ankle of the cadet in front of him. President Banda had ordered it. It was strange, but by no means unheard of for the increasingly despotic President for Life, now nearing his eighteenth year in office. He seemed thirsty for capitol punishment. He'd fired a senior officer because his uncle wasn't a party member. There were rumors he was going senile, that Banda was already seventy when he took power and was now approaching ninety but no one dared challenge the official report that he was forty.

In his career, TMZ took the chain from around his neck and swung it into faces. He'd killed cabinet members with a hammer – baby vipers, as Police Minister Tembo called them. But when one was severed, two heads grew back. The soldiers and the police were ostentatiously sycophantic. Torture was a necessary evil and it was lucrative. It was everywhere, interwoven into the fabric of politics. The