

# A Valley Apart

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Part 1

## Into The Valley

### ONE

Beth slammed against the side of the pick-up as the truck cornered wildly, pain exploding in her face as her eye socket hit the side of the tray. With ankles cinched together by plastic ties, and wrists bound behind her back, the best she could do to protect herself was to clench her body and tuck her chin down to shield her face. She heard the engine rev madly as they bounced out of a pothole and for a moment she was suspended, cushioned by the canvas cover above, before slamming back into the deck.

On and on they went, the truck never seeming to leave second gear, while Beth slid around in the back like a sack of dirt. There was a moment when she thought she heard helicopters, but then gunfire erupted and the sound of rotors swung away. At some point after that the tempo of their flight seemed to change; the driver shifted gears, the engine slowed, and the mad swerving gave way to a steady rattle – with the occasional bounce as they hit a rock. For the first time in hours Beth felt like she could breathe – and hold a thought without having it battered from her head.

It seemed there were others in here with her; she figured two, though she'd taken a while to realise. She had only clicked when something heavy rolled between her and the side, giving blessed relief from being bashed against the metal, and she'd heard them gasping and grunting as they'd braced for impact.

A gag was in her mouth. Above, a greenish light pricked with white came through the worn canvas, while a reddish glow filtered down the sides. Dust and grit were everywhere, burning her nose and stinging her eyes. But when she squeezed them shut an image from the attack that afternoon looped behind her eyelids, as clear as if she was standing in the midday sun: the man with a red beard who had watched their convoy. She had been close enough to see his lips moving, counting off the distance as their first car passed, then he'd looked at her, lifted something in his hand, and vanished – disappearing before her shocked eyes, to be replaced with light and dust – dust everywhere – and a roaring, ringing silence that had finally faded into muffled shouts and the sound of guns.

The red-beards. The thought of them sent Beth into a sudden full-blown panic – her body seeming to fall away while her mind filled with clouds of numbing fear – until a jolt rapped her head against the deck and the

pain shocked her mercifully back to herself; breathing hard into the gag, but in control.

Oh Christ. The red-beards. Her father had told her about them: despised in Isfastan as the only tribe that never traded hostages. Captives they took for interrogation in wartime, but all were killed soon after as a point of pride.

She was going to die. She felt it not just as a thought, but in the black of her bones. They were going to kill her – and her father too.

She'd seen him bundled into a different vehicle just before they'd taken her. Could it have been their own people pulling him to safety? Beth forced herself to picture the men who'd hauled her father off by his collar – saw in her mind their white robes stained red at the collars by their wiry beards – and gave herself up to despair.

She let her body go limp on the rattling metal tray as the tears finally came. In the top pocket of her jacket the stiff folded paper of her father's letter pressed against her ribs. Through the snot and tears Beth almost imagined she could smell the faint spiced odour of the paper and tried to hold it in her mind – the last trace of him she would ever know.

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The letter and the email had arrived on the same day. Both were from her father, though they'd clearly had very different paths through time.

The letter was the most intriguing. It had come in two envelopes – the outer one clean, with her address written neatly in a hand she didn't know, while the other was creased and grubby, as if it had been carried a long way before being posted. When she'd opened it a tiny flutter of excitement had surprised her; the inner envelope had a faint smell – something like charcoal and spice and sweat – and the waft had given her a strange little feeling of anticipation.

The email on the other hand was more prosaic. It carried a code verifying that it came from the official joint-nations mission to Isfastan, and another postscript declared it a product of the diplomatic corps; yet beyond all this automatic officialdom her father's input was sparse. All he said was he wanted her to join him there – he hoped that she would come – and that he'd taken the liberty of booking tickets. They were attached at the bottom of the email, along with a note to her dorm matron excusing her for the holidays.

If that was strange, his letter was stranger. It had clearly been written weeks – or even months – before the email, and in a very different tone. Away from the computer he seemed expansive, going on for several pages about things she didn't understand – excited details of tribal politics or something (only her dad could get

excited by things like that; she skipped those pages) – before ending with the same basic message. It was time, he said, that they spent some time. He wanted Beth to join him there; the country had become safe, and with his work coming to an end he wanted to see more of his family.

Family was a funny word for the two of them: a distant diplomat and the 14-year-old daughter he left in boarding schools around the world. But Beth swallowed the bitter thought – and kept it down. After all, end of term holidays began in a week – and she'd been dreading them.

With no mother around (whether her mother was even alive was a moot point – no one had heard from her since she'd left when Beth was a baby) her only option beyond staying at school was joining some of the other girls on a family skiing trip in Switzerland. She had been invited, after a fashion, and her father would send the money if she asked – but spending time in the company of the school's shiniest, wealthiest teenagers would hardly be a holiday. Beth was slight and dark and prone to mooching; an expert at avoiding attention. The other girls were all tall and blonde and moved like dancers, constantly jostling for centre stage. Joining them on the ski trip would mean living and breathing an environment of endless, toxic competition and she didn't think she could take the anxiety. The letter at least promised something different; so six days later she emptied the books from her school bag, stuffed in some clothes, and took the train to the airport for a day of airborne tedium.

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She spotted her ride before he saw her. There were hardly loads of teenage girls at Rabaz airport, but that was kind of her thing, seeing without being seen – and when you mattered as little as Beth did you learned to take advantage of your invisibility. She'd long ago learned the knack of fading into the background, letting eyes slide off her, and now she amused herself by blending with the crowd while she watched him from under her brows.

He was a tall man, in his forties maybe, but slim and neatly dressed in suit pants and a nice shirt. At first she figured him for a local hire from his coppery skin and the old-fashioned part in his hair – but he seemed different to the tribesmen taxi drivers who were milling about. For starters they were mostly wearing traditional-looking long linen tunics over dark trousers, with grubby puffer jackets. He stood a head higher than them too. And he had a stillness to him, she thought. A dignity. By side-stepping his gaze and matching her movements to the general bustle she managed to get within arm's length of where he stood holding his 'Beth Singer' sign – before he gave a start and smiled warmly at the girl with the messy hair and watchful eyes who was suddenly right in front of him, a school bag over one slouched shoulder. He straightened and offered his hand.

"My name is Farzin," he said in a soft voice, and she shook as prettily as she could manage, though the flight

had left her feeling grimy.

“Please,” he said and took her bag somewhat needlessly – it was light and her only one – but she took the courtesy and walked with him as he led the way from the arrivals hall out into the car park. She noticed he had green eyes.

“Your father apologises, but things are happening quickly here in the capital, and he has been in meetings since 5am. Who knew that peace required so much admin?”

He had a pert smile on his face. At the car he placed her bag in the back seat, and manoeuvred the vehicle carefully through the throng of bikes and taxis, its western newness seeming to magically clear a path.

As they drove out of the airport Beth twisted in her seat to stare out the window.

It was so utterly different to her home in England. Nothing here seemed to have any order. They passed a row of shacks where men fixed motorcycles on the street – then a once-grand park gone to dust where throngs of children ran with kites. After that a row of up-market stores, with their windows long shot out and soot streaks on their marble cladding. A messy circle of sandbags and wire was perched on their roof like the nest of some massive stork. Everything seemed the colour of dust, with occasional bursts of brightness and life: a row of girls wrapped head to toe in turquoise robes followed their identically dressed mother like baby ducks, only their eyes showing behind the shimmering fabric. Pink blossom peeked over a wall, and a bus with a fringe of silver tassels overtook them with a roar and a cloud of fumes that stained its painted sides...

From the corner of her eye Beth watched Farzin’s hands on the steering wheel, noticing how the neat cuffs at his wrists were stitched in intricate patterns. This time he saw her looking.

“You know, it was my people who taught stitching to the Indians, long before they decided they were a nation of tailors,” he offered out of the blue. “Without us, they’d still be wrapping themselves in bolts of cloth, wondering what a seam was.”

He glanced at her as he drove, and his face held that hint of a smile again.

“I’m no longer permitted to live there, yet still I only wear clothes sewn in my homeland. That’s sad, isn’t it?”

Beth looked out the window again. Outside, the busy streets had given way to a wealthier-looking neighbourhood. The houses were grander, and instead of opening right on the road they were set back behind high mudbrick walls; vines trailed around spikes set in their tops. Some of the houses even had little private guard stations. In one, a toothless man cradled a machine gun that looked older than he was; Beth watched him until he had disappeared from sight.

When she turned back she saw they’d arrived at the mission compound – the secure area where she knew all the foreign staff, including her father, lived and worked behind high concrete walls.

There were more guns – these looking large and new as they poked out of two sandbagged towers flanking the entrance – then they drove the car in a slow ‘S’ between rows of huge concrete teeth before the gate. To stop

car bombs, she thought with a shock – and for the first time the reality of where she was hit home.

Isfastan. An old-sounding name for the newest country on the planet. Its borders had been drawn up in an air-conditioned office somewhere thousands of miles away, haggled into existence by rival neighbours wanting a buffer between themselves and their enemies. The West had backed the notion, and a coalition of wealthy nations called Joint Mission was cobbled together to police a peace that lasted all of half a year.

Joint Mission had succeeded in creating little more than a well-intentioned power vacuum. Freed from the influence of its powerful neighbours the ancient factions making up the newly minted country had launched into a brutal war for control. While Joint Mission, having created the conditions for this new hell, proceeded to do little more than crouch behind concrete barriers and hope for an end to the violence.

Which inexplicably came.

Six months ago a stillness had rippled through the country. Each tribe announced suddenly they were willing to try a different way – and now her father was at the heart of it all, drafting treaties and advising councils, while Beth was being whisked into the country, to idle in a car before armoured gates as men checked the bottom of their vehicle with mirrors.

The gate guards waved Farzin through and soon they were pulling up outside a prefab building that looked like every other. Beth slipped from her seat, stretched, and followed Farzin inside.

They were in a neat, neon-lit office, but Beth had no chance to take it in – was interrupted in her usual game of looking, looking, looking by the fat little man who popped suddenly from a door like a brown champagne cork. “Bethany!” he cried, and grabbed her in a fierce embrace, before letting go just as suddenly and striding to his desk.

A worried energy seemed to be on her father that Beth guessed had little to do with her. He pulled a bottle from a sideboard and glugged a shot into a glass as he spoke.

“How was your flight, my dearest, how was your flight?” He stared at the glass for a moment, looking distracted, not noticing Beth hadn’t answered.

“Drink this for me would you Farzin?”

Farzin accepted the glass without leaving the seat he’d lowered himself into, and balanced it on his knee.

“In one, or by the sip?” he smiled. The tone was more like old friends, Beth noticed, than employer-staff.

“I’m good Papa,” she said evenly – and he looked at her properly then. For a moment more he was the distracted bumbling father she remembered as a little girl – then he straightened and put on his smile.

“You must be tired. Farzin can show you where your room is and get you towels if you’d like a shower, though the hot water isn’t up to much.

“I’m afraid I have a meeting with my American counterpart later this afternoon – but there’ll be coffee and pleasantries with him before we start and I’d like you to come if you can. His son is not much older than you and

arrived just last week.”

Her father opened a door that led outside, and gestured her and Farzin down the short set of metal stairs.

Above, the sky was a hot, bright blue wisped with white – a perfect day. Around them the compound stretched in all directions, its neat dirt roads marked out in white-washed stones that matched the clouds.

Beth felt a wave of jetlag wobble her legs.

“He might make good company,” her father was saying. “And he’ll be at lunch too. And apart from that – Beth?”

“What?”

“Well... I’m looking forward to showing you how things work here. The things that we do. But enough of that. You look tired. Farzin, can you take Bethany to her room? I’ll see you both here after two.”

## TWO

A sudden slipping sensation jolted Beth back to herself. The pickup was climbing steeply, sending the cargo in the rear sliding backwards. Beth hunched her shoulders for the impact, but it never came; as the other two banged into the tray with a grunt the plastic ties around her ankles snagged on something, jerking her to a halt. Beneath them the engine whined as they bumped slowly up an off-road slope.

Muffled swearing came from behind – the two tied figures had piled on top of each other – but all she could think about was her ankles. The angle was wrong and the pressure from the weight of her body was excruciating; she was afraid the next good bump from the truck would snap her foot. She scabbled desperately with her hands for grip on the deck, and that helped – she could keep some of the weight off her trapped ankles – and was about to try and unhook herself when an idea struck.

Instead of pushing her legs off their snag she pulled the other way, pulled using her hand grip for control... pulled right to the point where she was sure her foot would twist off – until suddenly her heels popped out and she hurtled into the two bound figures, hurting, but with legs free.

Almost immediately the pick-up leveled off. She heard the slow scrape of branches on metal as if they were easing between trees, then the engine cut out.

Beth's heart was thumping. Were they stopping because they'd heard? Her head said yes; yet at a deeper level she sensed a rhythm to their movements and somehow knew the stop was not for her. And now her legs were free. If ever there would be a chance to get away, it would be now. She tried to slow her breathing a little – to send calm into her limbs – and felt a faint surprise when she succeeded.

The driver was getting out.

Beth heard footsteps fading, then the sound of branches being dragged aside, followed by the clang of something hollow. A sudden clatter next to her head nearly made her scream – but then she heard the familiar sound of a petrol cap unscrewing, and bit her lip to control herself.

It was a petrol stop. Night had fallen and the redbearns were refueling from a hidden stash somewhere on their escape route. A little voice inside said 'You were right Beth. It was a planned break; trust your instincts – keep listening, watching, thinking – don't give up' then the canvas ripped back and she really did scream – as much as she could with a gag in her mouth – as searing white light blinded her.

The torch beam flicked off her face as her captor inspected his other cargo and she shook her head to clear it, blinking away the blindness. She could see a little – see that her unbound feet were hidden in darkness – and saw the faces of her companions for the first time. One was round, brown, and strangely familiar – but the other



face, blinking and angry in the torchlight, was unmistakable.

It was Michael.

The torch beam moved from one to the other as their unseen captor leaned forward to speak. His words had the rehearsed sound of someone who speaks no English, but has learned a phrase that he needs you to hear.

“One runs,” he said slowly, making sure he was understood. “All die.”

The grey barrel of a gun entered the halo of light, pressing into Beth’s cheek. She turned away, trying not to throw up.

“One runs. *All dies.*”

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They met again in the lobby of the only permanent building within the compound. Farzin led Beth up a stone staircase to a mezzanine level from where they could watch the people coming and going below, then left them when her dad arrived. She watched him pick his way neatly down the stairway. The building had been the grand residence of an old Isfastani aristocrat, her father told her, who had sought to advertise his status by building in the style of an English manor. The result, to Beth’s eyes, was a weird resemblance to her boarding school, Abbey of St Francis (or ‘Absent Fathers’ as they’d known it), which with the jet lag gave her an odd feeling of being displaced in time.

Odd, but not unpleasant. She leaned against the stone parapet, noticing how much cooler it was in here than outside – and spotted the people they were here to meet on the level below.

It had to be them. Other than herself, the boy beneath them was surely the only teen in the entire compound – which meant the big-bodied, uniformed man next to him had to be his father, the American diplomat. The dad was an imposing figure – well over six foot, strong-looking and upright, though gone to fat. He was shooting chummy remarks to people who passed by, while scanning – Beth had to assume – for herself and her dad.

It was busy down below and her own father hadn’t seen them yet, so she took the moment to keep watching, and noticed a funny thing. Those who passed the man seemed to enter a sort of jolliness field he created – they looked up and smiled; lost the rhythm of their steps as they nodded at his friendly greetings, and all without appearing to notice the boy who stood with him – yet their body language seemed to react to the teenager, not the man.

He wasn’t large – might have been 15, maybe a small 16 – yet he stood at the centre of a little empty swirl

within the crowd. It was as if their faces acknowledged the adult while subconsciously their bodies sensed the boy, and gave him space.

Beth was just wondering if she was imagining it when the boy turned and looked straight at her. For a moment his face was blank – then it broke into a friendly American grin to match his father’s. He dug him in the ribs and pointed, and then it was all smiles and jocularly as her father saw them too and waved them down.

Perhaps it was just her imagination, but when they descended to make introductions the friendliness seemed to have a frosty edge. “Bethany – pleased to meet you. I’m Colonel Charles Spencer,” the big man said as he shook her hand with a meaty paw. “But please just call me Charles. I’m with the American delegation,” he added. “I’ve heard all about you.” And something about this seemed to annoy her father.

“This is my son Michael.”

Michael took her hand and shook it without speaking, though he looked her in the eye. She saw his hair was dark brown, rather than black and he was taller than she’d first thought; he’d just looked small next to his dad.

“I’ve reserved a table where we can talk,” said the elder Spencer, and led them through a door beneath the mezzanine where, despite the bustle, a table lay waiting empty.

They were in a café space, cramped but with high ceilings and old fans churning the air above their heads. All around were a mix of military types, both men and women, and mostly in uniform, though there were some geekier types amongst them wearing civilian sweats. Beth figured it for one of the few places in the compound where people could socialise. She couldn’t see anyone who looked local.

The adults ordered coffees. Michael asked for water (Beth thought that seemed self-consciously Spartan) – while she opted for orange juice, which arrived in a disappointing cardboard pak – weren’t foreign countries supposed to be all about fresh-squeezed fruit? Michael sat on his hands and listened to their parents talk.

“You must be very proud of what your father has achieved over here,” the Colonel directed to her.

“Yes...” Beth said, not knowing what else to say, and thinking guiltily of how she’d skipped through all those details in her father’s letter. For some reason he came to her rescue.

“To be fair I’ve told very little of what’s happening over here to Bethany – did I even mention our tribal Shura?”

“The Shura...?” she asked, playing the role of the dutiful daughter, though partly curious too.

“A tribal council; the traditional way of making decisions in much of this region. We have made something of a breakthrough by convincing the very – *very* – diverse tribes here to end their conflicts by sharing power through a permanent Shura council. And Charles here has agreed to give it military backing from Joint Mission.”

“For now,” said Charles flatly. Beth’s father shot him a look.

“Charles, I know that local governments have failed here before. But the *reason* was always Federation

mistrust.”

Beth got the feeling this was something they'd talked about many times.

“What's the Federation?” said Michael.

“Not what – who.” Her father's voice was friendly as he turned to address the boy – though she got the distinct feeling he was gauging her reaction as he spoke.

“What are properly called the Q'shanite Federation are a group of some of the oldest tribes in the region. Rather mysterious in that they seem to have nothing in common, beyond being steadfastly united when it suits them. Many of them played a major role in the uprising.

“It's hard to know whether to treat them as a single group or separately – yet taken together they will have a majority on the Shura. Which, put simply, means it can succeed with them – and fails without.”

“Indeed,” said Charles. And here is the man who convinced them to join, where all others could not. You never did tell me quite how you achieved that Rajiv.”

Who even knew he was called that?

Even Beth hadn't realised it was his real name until she was ten. He'd been born Rajiv Singh, but when they arrived in England her grandfather had changed their name to Singer and started calling his boy Raymond – hoping like so many other immigrants they would blend in. Beth guessed the American was making some kind of point by using it – while her father suddenly seemed interested in his coffee cup, and spoke into it.

“Cultural knowledge Charles. It can help to speak on their terms.” Which Beth took to mean ‘you can't always ram your views down others' throats’...

The big man laughed heartily. “I am not a complete tourist you know. Why, just the other day I picked up a fascinating piece of local history. An account of how your Federation came about. Shall I tell it to you?”

“Certainly Charles.”

“Many years ago – according to the tribal leader I spoke to – there was a man who came to understand a great truth. This, so goes the story, was so unpalatable to the people of the time that he left his privileged life to go into exile, finding refuge in the mountains of what we today call Isfastan. There he attracted a rag-tag gang of thieves, murderers and other degraded types and became a power in his own right. The local tribes knew him as the Subtle Man, and tell how he gathered them into what we now know as the Q'shanite Federation, enforcing a peace on this little piss-pot country that lasted centuries.”

The big man seemed to be enjoying himself.

“And when I heard that, I thought of how *you* must be a subtle man, Rajiv, to have struck this deal for peace.”

The undercurrents in the room were baffling. Michael was watching his father intently. Charles was grinning broadly at her father – who in turn had his face fixed in a patient smile.

“Well nothing is struck if they don’t sign this treaty,” he replied.

“Indeed. Which rather brings us to our point. Have you decided a location?”

Both the adults turned to Beth and Michael. It was clearly time for the business end of the meeting.

“Michael, why don’t you give Beth a tour of the compound. I’m sure you’ve figured out what scant entertainment there is available. That is if Rajiv approves?”

“Certainly. Just don’t stay out too long Beth, your body clock won’t have yet adjusted.” He was smiling to himself now – no doubt thinking how long it had been since he’d had a say in her bedtime. She realised they were both feeling the irony.

The two teens pushed their chairs back and Michael made way for Beth to go first – the formality making them both feel awkward. They threaded their way between the tables, crossed the lobby, and stepped out into the late afternoon sun on the building’s grand stone front steps. Michael squinted at her from under his dark brows, taking in her mass of curly hair and skinny limbs. She raised a brow.

“Well? Are you going to show me round or not?”

He grimaced and flapped an arm at the sunbaked scene: whitewashed stones, prefab buildings and khaki tents.

“Honestly, the stone house is the only place worth going. The rest is all –”

“Just tents and sweaty soldiers? Yeah, I kind of worked that out.”

The hint of a flat smile appeared and he nodded thoughtfully as if weighing something up.

“Outside though. That’s different. That’s something else.”

“You can go outside?”

“If you know the right people you can.”

She huffed away his attempt to play it coy and poked a finger at his chest.

“Dude. You are taking me on a tour.”

He grinned properly.

“Alright. I’ll need to get some things first. Why don’t I meet you here in an hour?”

She smiled back at him.

“Alright then. You’re on.”

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Evening was coming on as they crossed the compound. Beth hurried in nervous steps, while Michael sauntered, looking like he belonged. She wondered if he had been here before, or if he just looked at ease wherever he went.

Her own body language made her look guilty as hell, she realised, and she made an effort to copy his easy stroll.

As they approached the gates she felt her nervousness drop away. A relaxed almost carnival air had arrived with the lifting of the day's oppressive heat. The gate guards were bantering across the entryway and beyond the barriers the city was coming alive – people emerging to shop, visit friends, and eat in the open air. If she'd been here a few months earlier Beth would have understood how recent this return to normality was. Back when war had crept in from the provinces to infest the cities, twilight had been the time of anxiety and mistrust – of market bombings and impromptu executions. So for now the guards could be forgiven if they were a little lax.

Certainly they weren't worried about who was going out, rather than in. Michael held up his gate pass, more to show that he could get back that evening, and offered a casual fib to explain how two kids were wandering out on their own. "Detail's meeting us out there", he said in a bored voice – meaning security detail, Beth presumed – but the Americans waved them through without a blink.

Outside the compound's blast-proof walls Beth felt a sudden stab of joy. Her first night in a foreign country, on the frontier of civilisation – the kind of place her schoolmates had only seen on TV – and she was sneaking out without an adult. Did she feel safe? The peace here, she was aware, was as delicate as the new skin beneath a scab. But instead of either safe or scared, she felt something else altogether. Felt alive – out here on this twilight street lined by mud-brick walls – alive in a way she hadn't known for a long time.

"This way," said Michael – and Beth sensed he'd caught some of her own intoxication, though he was hiding it. "I can smell dinner". And now she could too. A babble of voices rose up ahead, mixing with a faint odour of charring meat, and smoke and spice.

"Hold on," said Michael, taking her hand and pulling her to a stop. "Let's have a look at you."

His eyes scoured her face and her stomach gave a little lurch. Silly. He was not her type, this American boy with his neat hair and clean, forgettable face – though there was something about him, that was certain. It was *will*, she thought suddenly. There was more will behind those eyes than in any adult she'd ever met – and she'd bet that everyone who came across him sensed it and felt unsettled – despite those skinny, boyish arms and pleasant voice. It was like when you met a friendly dog from a dangerous breed. Pat it, sure – but something told you to watch its teeth.

"Pretty good," he was saying – and Beth saw he was assessing her face. "Brown skin helps – and no girl here would wear those glasses." She coloured a little at the thought they were for looks only; the thick plastic rims held only standard lenses, and her eyes were perfect – though she was hardly going to tell him that.

"...or wear that top. Or jeans."

She'd chosen the heavy, khaki jacket for its lack of femininity – partly as some kind of snub to her father (as if he'd care, she realised now), partly for its shape-hiding effect – and it seemed now that Michael approved. She realised he wanted her to look like a boy.

“Can you put your hair up?”

She knotted it obediently, twisting the wooly mass until she had it in a bun, then he pulled a grubby cap from his back pocket and pulled it down over her head – the visor snugging neatly around her glasses.

“Is it dangerous for girls here?”

He pulled a meh face that said ‘I’m not sure’.

“I don’t think so. I read that they’re pretty relaxed about women in public, especially now the insurgents are disarming – but I figure you never quite know. It’s probably only normal if we were family – and we hardly look like brother and sister.”

Did he think her skin really looked that olive?

“I’m only half Indian you know,” she said tartly, and wondered if his world was really so white.

Wah-wah-wah-wah he went with his hand over his mouth, managing to smirk at the same time.

“Wrong kind of Indian, sir,” she said in a mock Bollywood accent, and gave him her best figure-eight head wobble. It was all good-natured enough, but it irked her having what she thought of as her father’s background pointed out. As much as she disliked her school, at least no one there thought of her as anything other than British.

“Well whatever, just don’t forget you’re a boy tonight. Come on, I’m hungry.”

They left the quiet street and pushed out into the market, Beth’s sort-of disguise making her feel self-conscious, though no one paid them much mind – and those that did only shot a faintly curious glance at Michael’s obvious Western looks. She saw the wisdom of his caution too. The only girls she saw were with their families or an obvious chaperone – and wearing feminine floaty clothes that covered them from the neck down. Yet there were dozens of skinny boys dressed like her in jeans and baseball caps, roaming unsupervised. The unfairness of it was irritating.

They found a busy open-aired shack where a sweating man was leaning over a drum of glowing charcoal, turning chickens on a spit, and claimed two plastic chairs. Michael fished out some money and soon they were pulling their own meals apart and licking their fingers. She hadn’t realised she was hungry.

“So why are you in Isfastan?” Michael asked eventually. The restaurant was busy and he had to lean in to make himself heard.

Beth figured she was done with her chicken and wiped her fingers carefully, giving herself time to think about her answer.

“I don’t really know, she said eventually. “My dad hasn’t paid me this much attention in years”.

“I’ve been at international schools the last while – Switzerland, Malaysia, England – boarding schools where everyone’s dad is an oil CEO or a diplomat, and you’re sent there so you don’t get under your parents’ feet.

“And then randomly I get these messages from him saying he’s been thinking of me and he wants me to join

him over here.”

Beth pursed her lips and looked at the remains of her chicken, conscious of feeling suddenly upset. Perhaps the jet-lag was making her feel emotional.

“I figure – well, school’s not been going so well. Maybe they got hold of him; asked him to take me out – and now he’s trying to work out what to do with me.

“What do you mean?” Michael’s attention was fixed on her, the busy restaurant forgotten. “Are you not getting grades – or are you playing up?”

“Um... both? A little?” she gave a rueful laugh – though it was hardly funny. “It’s like this really driven, serious school, and I just can’t focus on the work.”

“So focus then.”

“I *can’t*.” She was beginning to feel exasperated – but the look on his face said she would have to explain.

“Okay, so I’m top of school in Geography, right? But then something grabs my attention. Last time it was the Romanian royal family in the 1920s, for God’s sakes... but it could be anything. I just can’t stop thinking about it – I’m living and breathing some obsession for three months, and then... nothing. I’m over Princess Illeana and her mother’s affair, and meanwhile I’ve failed Geography and English too.”

Michael seemed faintly baffled. “So if it’s this fancy school, why doesn’t someone pick you up on it; tutor you or something?”

She shrugged. “I have a knack for avoiding attention. To be honest I think they’ve forgotten that I’m there.

“But how about you – why are you here?”

“An argument with my dad. He thinks I should be an analyst for the family firm; I want to be a Ranger.”

“A what?”

He shot her a look – “it’s like a special forces soldier. I do want to join the firm – just in the field, not the office. Being a Ranger would be perfect training.”

“What kind of family business hires soldiers?”

Michael looked at her wryly. “Private security. All round the world.”

“Heavy.”

“Yeah. Dad flipped when I said I wanted to get my hands dirty. He thinks only a fool works in the field if there’s a choice. He eventually came round though – when he realised I meant it. Me coming here was one of his conditions. He wants me to see what life would be like in the forces – see the kind of places I’d be; get a sense of what danger was really like. That kind of thing.” He sucked on a greasy thumb. “So far it seems okay.”

“Yeah, well I might be on your dad’s side on that one – cushy office life sounds fine to me. What does an analyst even do anyway?”

Michael snorted. “Think in shades of grey, basically.” He pushed his chicken away and looked around at the

crowd. “Me, I think the world falls apart when people see shades of grey – and it’s the people who see things clearly that hold it together.

“That’s why I want to be on the front line. Black and white is the only way you *can* see. The safety is on, or the safety is off. You pull the trigger or you don’t. Enemy or friend – what do you gain by mixing the two?”

Beth turned this over in her head, not completely convinced.

“Well I guess that might make my dad an analyst then. A cultural one maybe. Speaking of which,” she added. “Did you notice how our dads don’t get along? Like what was that about?”

Michael straightened and looked to his left.

“Tell you later.”

Beth followed his gaze and felt a little start as she saw who was at the next table. Farzin looked up from his meal – he was eating daintily with a knife and fork, she saw, not tearing apart chicken with his fingers – and met her eyes with a look that seemed at least friendly.

“I think it’s time we went back.”

The two barely spoke as they made their way home in the dark. Beth was thinking about her father – wondering how well she really knew him. Had he told Farzin to follow them? She’d always thought of her dad as a plain little man. Quite senior, in his way, in the diplomatic corp, but completely diluted of any passion by years of service; by all the compromises, and niceties and protocol.

Michael’s father, on the other hand, was clearly some kind of big deal. So the very fact that he knew her own father – even seemed to have some kind of conflict with him – somehow elevated Beth’s dad in her eyes. That and the secret-squirrel possibility that he may have had his driver follow them. To keep them safe, she assumed – but even that seemed rather... spyish.

They reached the gate. Michael was presenting his pass. With dark fallen the guards were more alert to danger and Beth figured she should pull her cap off and let her hair down – at least look like herself. They waved them through.

The pair walked the neat lanes of the compound to where they’d part ways and paused.

“That was cool,” said Michael brightly. Beth was still deep in thought.

“Tell me what you couldn’t say before – about our dads.”

Michael sucked his lip and put his hands in his pockets.

“All I meant to say was... there are big things going on here. You’ve got to realise this peace – ” he motioned up at the night air, out into the quiet dark “this is your father’s doing.” He looked her in the eye, as if he guessed how little she knew of all this. “And I think he’s more than just a diplomat.

“My dad too,” he added softly.

“I don’t get it.”



Michael shrugged. “Look, there are... factions... inside the coalition, with very different views on how this country should be run once the war is finally over. And our dads... are kind of on different sides.”

Beth took a moment to take this in. Michael looked like he was about to leave, then checked himself, as if he was weighing up whether to add something.

“You know, your dad said something about you before you arrived,” he said eventually, choosing his words carefully.

“I met him with my father last week and he mentioned how you were flying in. It was that kind of low-level chat where there’s always a little undercurrent, you know? Anyhow my father said something like he was looking forward to meeting you, because he was sure you were a remarkable young woman. But your dad said ‘no’. No, you were quite *un*remarkable – that was why you were coming here, he said. And I thought... well, I think...

“That he’s wrong about that,” he shot out, and turned quickly to walk away, leaving Beth standing in the dark with a knot in her stomach.

### THREE

For the second time that night the canvas cover of the pick-up was ripped back, letting in the night. Beth realised she'd been slipping in and out of consciousness. She felt they'd been stopped for a while now – the journey after the fuel break had seemed to go on forever; a nightmare of exhausted dozing and jolting - but once they'd stopped moving she must have fallen in to sleep for real.

And now the night air on her face was delicious. Above were diamond-white stars – more than seemed possible – and a blank blotting of their light where a man stood over the pickup, watching.

As she looked at the shape, it turned and moved away.

She held her breath, remembering suddenly that her legs were free. She flexed her feet, checking they hadn't somehow been seen and retied while she was out. They were fine – and the sensation of blood flowing through her ankles now was almost better than the air.

Maybe she should just haul over the side and run?

Just the thought of it made her heart thump – yet this might be her one chance. But as she lay there weighing it up the stars blackened again and a hand gripped her arm, hauling her backwards and up. A knife appeared and she arched away, panicking but helpless as he grappled her towards him to saw away the ties at her wrists.

As quickly as he'd appeared he dropped her roughly back on the deck, turning away as he tossed something that landed next to her with a thump.

Beth lay frozen like a rabbit. After a moment the smell of cigarette smoke and the sound of soft laughter drifted over.

When she finally felt sure she wasn't about to be killed right then and there Beth reached out and felt for the thing he'd thrown.

A water bottle.

Cautiously she raised herself to sitting and looked to where the voices were coming from. Two red dots of light showed where their captors stood a small distance away, smoking. Beside her she heard Michael and the other boy wriggle up too – having a harder time of it with hands still tied. A light clicked on, flicked over their faces briefly – then clicked off.

Why so casual?

Because their feet were still tied – or so the men thought. Michael and the other boy at least were clearly going nowhere – and anyway, what were her chances if she tried to cut and run now? They were deep, deep in the mountains of Isfastan she guessed – in the forested valleys where few Westerners came – and with their lights and guns her captors had only to turn and spray them with bullets the moment they heard her move.

Her fear now was that they would return, find her feet unbound, and retie her – but again that deep voice spoke, telling her that waiting was worth the risk. There would come a better chance, she thought, and maybe even for all of them.

As if to confirm her decision the light flicked on again to scan their faces – and again as she glanced at the others in the light, she thought how she'd seen the other boy's face before.

The torch flicked off. Beth unscrewed the water bottle, pulled her gag down and drank.

It was like the water was pouring directly into her brain. Like a sponge it soaked it up, and with every mouthful she gulped her thoughts become clearer. Deeper she drank, until with a shock she realised the canteen was nearly empty. She lowered it guiltily and saw in the cold starlight that Michael's eyes were fixed on her.

Suddenly ashamed she shuffled to him, pulled down his gag and put the bottle to his lips.

He drank, though with more discipline than she had – and when he'd done she moved to give the last mouthful to the boy. He lifted his head gratefully but Michael shouldered her angrily back.

“Not him,” he hissed.

A sudden movement in the dark made them flinch, but it was too late – the wooden stock of a gun clubbed Michael heavily in the head. With hands tied he hit the tray hard and lay there making retching noises.

The man leaned in and for the first time Beth saw eyes glittering under heavy brows. *Sbbbb*, he mimed, finger to lips. Beth pressed her ankles together, terrified he'd see them unbound but he didn't even bother retying her hands – he simply flung the canvas cover back over them and secured it while they obediently lay back. The doors banged; the engine shuddered into life, and they were off again, driving carefully now along rutted tracks.

*Black and white*, thought Beth. The beating he'd taken shocked her, but she was almost as disturbed by Michael's ruthlessness with the boy.

At least she knew now who the boy was. His face, she remembered, was the same one she'd seen in the attack. The one who'd stood motionless while hell unfolded around him; as if he were oblivious to the noise and death on every side.

A suicide bomber, she thought. She'd heard of this sort of thing. Young men captured or recruited in war zones who were forced – or brainwashed – into becoming human bombs.

Had this boy failed somehow? Was he being taken away to be punished? If he had been part of the attack that made some sense of Michael refusing to give him water – though Beth could still barely believe it. Life was black and white, she remembered Michael saying – never shades of grey – and in his world you were either enemy or friend.

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“Bethany. Bethany?” The voice was musical; somehow familiar. For a moment she couldn’t place it – then something clicked and she remembered: it was her father.

“Can I come in?”

For a moment she thought she might be in the old family place in Surrey. Her father would be coming to chide her out of bed, while the housekeeper clanged breakfast together.

Then her father opened the door wearing military clothing and the weirdness of her surroundings kicked in. She sat up in bed – a single, springy cot with clean white sheets – and saw she still had her clothes on from last night. The light coming under the curtain looked hard and bright – it was late morning at least.

“You slept so long, I didn’t want to wake you – I figured you needed it after the flight. I hope Michael wasn’t terrible company?”

She looked guiltily at the sleeves of her khaki jacket above the sheets – she had been so suddenly tired after their excursion she’d crawled straight into bed.

“No. It was fun”.

Did he know they’d gone out of the compound? Beth figured he’d hear about it from Farzin soon enough. Just best to say nothing for now.

“Listen, if you’re feeling up to it we have a little excursion planned. Michael’s father and I have an important trip we need to make. Beyond the wire. About half a day there and back, and not the sort of thing I can get out of. But I spoke to the security chief here and he’s adamant that it would be perfectly safe for you to come along. So...” her father opened his palms in a gesture that was half shrug, half hopeful offer “...if you felt like seeing some of this country; maybe catching up a little with your much-absent father?”

Beth hugged her knees.

“What’s the important thing you’re doing?”

Her dad looked introspective; measuring what he could say. He sat on the end of the bed.

“Well, you remember last night how we talked about the Shura? The tribal council I hope will form? If it takes shape then the emergency transitional government -”

“Joint Mission?”

“Yes – well done. Joint Mission will cede rule to the Shura, which I believe would be our best chance in decades for peace in this beautiful, blighted country...”

“We’re just at a rather delicate stage. You remember the Federation I told you about?”

Beth nodded.

“Well they’re the only group who still haven’t formally agreed to give up arms in return for a share of power

in the Shura – though they’re set to sign a treaty to that effect in a few days. The only thing they’re not happy about is coming in to the city to do it. Naturally there’s still a great deal of mistrust among the tribes, you see. So it has come down to myself and Charles to select a suitable location for the ceremony.

“It’s going to be quite a hoopla. Imagine a big family wedding with various oddball uncles who haven’t spoken for years – then add Kalashnikovs. Are you getting a picture?” He smiled in that old duffer’s way of his that was so at odds with the things he was saying.

“We’ll need somewhere neutral, but where we can be sure of the security arrangements. And I think we have our place – but I want to see it firsthand to make sure we haven’t missed anything. So that’s what today’s outing is about. What do you think?”

“You really think it’s safe?”

He shrugged.

“In this country nothing is guaranteed. But I’ve learned to trust our security assessments – so I think it’s fine. And you know, we’ll be driving right into the mountains. Seeing the peaks of Isfastan for the first time... I promise you Beth, it’s something you’ll remember until the day you die.”

Beth summoned her best look of big-eyed enthusiasm for her hopeful Papa. “An adventure then!”

“Exactly! So get your lazy bottom out of bed. The convoy is leaving from the main gates in one hour. You know how to get there? Do what you need to do and meet me there before they leave – they won’t wait for you.”

It was plenty of time, but in the end she almost didn’t make it. A sense of genuine curiosity and excitement had filled her belly and she’d shot off the bed to get ready – though only after her father closed the door; she was still too proud to let him see her that enthused. And finding breakfast and getting showered hadn’t taken long – but getting dressed had taken ages.

She wanted to show she could get it right, but couldn’t decide between neutral and casual while culturally appropriate, or outdoorsy and okay-to-get-muddy. In the end she compromised by wearing smart, loose-fitting pants and a long-sleeve top, with work boots and her grubby khaki jacket. It was getting soft with wear, she noticed. When she sniffed a stain at the cuff there was even a whiff of last night’s chicken – and she laughed to feel her father’s folded letter still stuffed in the front pocket where she put it weeks ago at school – but then the clock caught her eye and *oh damn* – she flung open the door of her cabin, flew down the metal steps and ran flat out for the gates with the jacket flapping behind her.

She was breathing hard when she rounded the last building and saw the convoy was far from ready – so she slowed to a walk to get her breath.

There were four big white SUVs parked up with various people standing around waiting. Her father and Farzin were leaning over a map spread out on the bonnet of one, engrossed in whatever they were looking at, and Beth spotted Michael by the front car talking earnestly with three soldiers who looked like they were coming for

the ride. One of them had the mag out of his weapon and was showing Michael something inside. A couple of other soldiers and drivers lounged by the other vehicles, or sat in them with the doors open to catch the breeze. They were clearly waiting for someone.

Unhurried footsteps sounded behind her and Beth turned to see who it was.

“Bethany, so glad to see you’re coming with us. It promises to be quite an adventure. Will it be your first sight of our famous mountains?”

“Hi sir. I think so – though I might have seen some from the plane.”

“Please! It’s Charles to you. If there’s one thing Isfastan teaches you, it’s the pointlessness of formality... And there’s quite a difference between seeing them from above, and driving in amongst them you know. There’s a wildness to these valleys that I’ll admit still gives me the shivers.”

Beth didn’t know what to say to that, so simply smiled – she was feeling happy anyway, and it was good to be addressed warmly by someone so clearly important, even if the faux chumminess was over the top.

“Will you ride with us?” said Michael’s dad. “We’d enjoy your company, and I’m sure your father won’t mind – so long as you drive with him on the way back that is.”

“I – I think he wanted me to ride with him, if that’s okay.”

“Of course! I forget that you two haven’t seen each other for a while. Now, where’s my driver?”

As Charles approached, everyone started moving – it was clearly he who was the star of the show. Beth noticed he had a pistol on his belt. Michael spotted her and gave a subtle wave.

Farzin and her father saw her too and beckoned her over as they put away their map.

“So,” said her dad. “First time outside the compound. Are you excited?”

The comment *seemed* innocent. Farzin caught her eye for a microsecond as he turned to hide the ghost of a smile.

An ally then...

“You know Farzin drove me from the airport yesterday Papa... with no armed escort either.”

“Ah but that was hardly the tribal hinterland we’re headed for. And wait ‘til you see these mountains!”

“So everyone keeps saying. Hey I think we’re leaving.”

And so they were. Her father opened the back door for her and got in after, while Farzin took the driver’s seat, limo-style, with no passenger up the front. The gate guards raised the barriers and the four vehicles eased through and away, Charles and Michael in the lead with two soldiers, followed by a second car of mixed civilians and military, then themselves – followed by the last car with four burly American soldiers in what looked like serious combat kit. Beth fished her phone from her pocket, put her feet up and plugged music into her ears – then gave up in disgust.

“No streaming.”

Her father laughed.

“Welcome to another world.”

She looked out the window to watch the city slide by their car. It was that same jumble of old and new she'd seen on the way in: donkeys, taxis, tribesmen on mobile phones, and the occasional burned out jeep. People stopped to watch as they passed, conspicuous in their clean white cars.

“Papa what was all that yesterday? With Charles and that stuff about the subtle man?”

“That? Yes, he did seem to make a meal of that story didn't he? You know, I'd actually heard that particular fable before, though it surprised me that he had too.”

“You've lost me dad.”

He sighed – though not at her it seemed.

“That's not surprising – it really is complicated. To put it very simply: the Q'shanites are the key to peace in this country – but no one actually knows what makes them tick. Other groups have a clear leadership structure, or are bound along family or religious lines. But the Q'shanites? Very mysterious. To outsiders they're a federation of tribes that have nothing in common – which makes them very hard to deal with collectively. And explains why it took so long to bring them to this treaty.

“They are also very secretive. However I believe there is something that binds them all together – and the key to discovering it lies hidden in that very story Charles told us... for the few who know how to look.

“So if I had to guess why Charles told us that particular tale yesterday... well, I'd say he was letting me know that *he* knew what it meant...” Her father's face creased as he spoke, and for a moment Beth glimpsed the worry and work – years of it, she saw suddenly – that he'd put into this country and its people. “...that he knew – and that he didn't care.”

A frown had camped on her father's face, so she asked something to change the subject.

“Hey so if this meeting is so important then, why choose the place so late?”

“Ah, good question. Can you think of the answer?”

Beth scowled.

“Go on – try.”

“Well if I had to guess... I'd say security again. Choose too early and there's more chance the location leaks out. Someone could plan an attack.”

“Very good.”

Her father looked pleased – the frown was gone at least.

“I thought you said this trip was safe.”

“It is. I wouldn't have brought you here if it wasn't. But these are the things we think about in my profession.”

Outside, the congestion of the built-up inner city was giving way to outskirts; wider, scruffier looking streets carrying traffic from the countryside – pushcarts piled with produce and lines of goats. Meanwhile inside the car a kind of realisation was dawning on Bethany. Her mind seemed to open as years of gentle misdirection became suddenly obvious; all those avoided questions and departures for months to foreign shores. Beth realised not only did she have *absolutely* no idea what her father did – she had never been *allowed* to know. She felt the hair along her arms prickle ever so slightly, as if the air con was on too cold.

“Dad. What *is* your profession?”

He seemed to be watching something outside. The convoy slowed as they edged around a truck that was taking up most of the road. Half a dozen men with bushy red beards were loading melons into the back.

“There go the most hated tribe in Isfastan,” said Farzin softly, turning to watch the men as they passed. He caught her eye in the mirror. “Here the taking and ransoming of hostages is a way of life. Respectable even – an economy in its own right. Yet the red-bearded Edomites have the terrible reputation of never sparing a captive, no matter what price is offered. All must be executed, for the sake of their honour – and the country hates them for it.”

“Unusual too” said her father brightly, without looking away from the lean men stacking melons. “...anthropologically speaking. Did you know they practice a sort of genetic apartheid? Only males with red hair are allowed full participation in their society – the others become a sort of shameful second caste and aren’t permitted to mix with outsiders. Hence the proud displays of facial hair. They’re ruthless in enforcing it – it splits whole families – one brother a slave, the other the master, all for a quirk in their chromosomes. Awful business. Of course they’ll still have a voice in the Shura – thank God there are so few of them is all.”

The convoy picked up speed and her father’s little distraction disappeared behind them. He looked at her; Beth just raised her eyebrows.

A twist of a smile crossed her father’s lips and he gave the kind of good humoured head wobble that she hadn’t seen him do since she was little – that endlessly nuanced Indian expression that here said ‘okay you’ve got me’.

“You are an extraordinarily perceptive young woman – did you know that?” There was a sparkle in her father’s eyes. “Really, that’s the whole reason that I’ve brought you here.”

“Just answer the question!”

“I am Bethany. You’re here because I believe you could do what I do. You could call it being a diplomat. You could call it being a spy. You could call it applied anthropology – it doesn’t really matter. What matters is you have a remarkable set of skills that is being utterly wasted in that school of yours, and I think you would be far better staying here working with me.”

Beth sat in stunned silence. When her father saw she wasn’t saying anything he continued.



“I propose that you tear up your return ticket and stay on. We’ll arrange tutoring for the few years that it’s required, but your real education will be the work you do with me. I’ll create an internship for you where you can begin learning the real ways the world works – here at the coalface; on the frontiers of civilization.”

Now the hairs on her arms were really standing up. Her father’s expression softened as he finished his lofty speech.

“And look.” He nodded in the direction of the windshield. “The mountains.”

Beth turned and saw that towers of rock and ice had somehow sprung into view. The impossible blue and white mass of them seemed at once close enough to touch, yet vastly distant – and everything that everyone had promised.

“Something to think about, no?” said her father.

They spent the rest of the journey in silence – Beth looking out the window, trying to think. Outside the land became barren. The city was left far behind, and the convoy moved through an unfriendly landscape of stony river flats and dry hills, trailing a rooster tail of dust behind them. Farzin’s eyes in the mirror became watchful.

A turn at a junction took them up a narrow road that climbed the flank of a mountainside and the cars slowed as the track became steadily worse. Beth had an occasional gut-churning view straight down into a stream hundreds of feet below them, then the road seemed to reach a high point and began dropping again. As they descended, the tight canyon below opened out until finally they rounded a bend and saw their destination. Far below, a wide plain had formed where three great valley systems met – and right in the middle sat a cluster of buildings surrounded by what looked like a fence-line dotted with towers.

Farzin pulled over at a wide point on the road, and Beth’s father waved the rest of the convoy on with a see-you-down-there smile.

“That’s Forward Operating Base Athena, where I hope our Q’shanites will sign the treaty. Shall we stretch our legs and have a look?”

The three of them got out gladly. The sun was bright but the air was surprisingly cool. They stretched their backs as the sound of the convoy descending to the base slowly faded; the silence after they passed was incredible. Ahead, there was almost two miles of empty air before the mountains bounding the plain on the far side leapt skyward. Beth noticed their flanks were thickly wooded, in contrast to the bare, eroded landscape they’d just traveled through. Beyond that first mountain range, icebound peaks of unguessable height formed a chain on the far horizon.

“What do you think, Beth?”

“It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen, Papa.”

“During the war Athena was by all accounts a very uncomfortable place to be. Very little back-up, and miles

of hostile country on every side. Now, however, I'm hopeful it could serve our purpose well. Tell me what you see."

Farzin had his hands shoved in his jacket for warmth and was leaning against the truck, seemingly to watch the view, but also clearly interested in what she would say. Beth walked to where the road's edge dropped into stunted scrub a hundred feet or so down the slope and looked again, trying to see with different eyes.

"Where will the Q'shanites come from?"

"Up there," gestured Farzin, pointing to the far valley where it disappeared to their right. "And some from the other direction. Roads on the valley floors lead to their main regions and strongholds."

"What about our people?"

"Some will come by helicopter, but most will need to travel by road, on the track we just took," said her father.

"Well," said Beth slowly, "I think this would be a bad road to get stuck on if things went wrong. But then... well the way it comes is very narrow. So you could easily post people at either end in the days before – then you'd know your way in and out was safe. Like, hadn't been tampered with."

Her father nodded, trying to hide his interest.

"Go on."

Beth scanned the valley floor. There were views in all directions – nothing much to hide in, which seemed good. But the base itself was right on the flat with no real way to see anyone's approach.

"That sort of spur thing looks interesting." Beth shielded her eyes and pointed to a long narrow arm of the near mountain that jutted into the plain, looking like a skinny finger pointing right at the base. "Could you get someone up there with a radio? I just think if I was down there and someone decided to turn up with tanks and guns I'd want to know before they arrived. You could have a lookout up there keeping an eye on things, and no one would even know they were there."

Her father was nodding to himself thoughtfully – Farzin gave him a look and grinned.

"Good. Yes... good," said her dad. "Now shall we get down there and have a chat with the commander?"

The three of them got back in the car, and in ten minutes they were pulling up next to the rest of the convoy vehicles parked outside the base. Beth and her father got out while Farzin reclined his seat and fished a book from the glove compartment. She half expected to be told to wait with him, but her father gestured her towards the nearest building.

"We'll want to leave by three, Farzin," he called over his shoulder.

Inside the drab green building a woman in uniform led them to an office where a slight, bald man with olive skin and a big moustache got up from his desk to shake her father's hand. He had badges all over the front of his uniform, and looked in charge.

“Beth this is Major Joseph Pagonis. Jo this is my daughter Bethany, along for the ride.”

The two seemed to be on good terms – her father had pronounced his first name ‘Yo-sef’, like a Joseph with a ‘y’. He smiled at her from under his moustache.

“Nice to meet you Miss Singer. Welcome to Camp Athena, our little slice of Greece in Isfastan. The others are in the hanger, Raymond, discussing seating and other such important matters. We can go see them now, but I waited in case you had other things on your mind?”

“Quite right. May I?” Her father stepped over to a large map on the Major’s desk showing the area around the base. He planted a finger on the contour lines that marked Beth’s spur.

“What’s the biggest calibre that could be carried on foot, up here, at night?”

The Major pulled his moustache.

“A fifty cal maybe? With three men you could get one up there with ammunition – but it’d be a hell of a job, Raymond. Better to call in a chopper and have them drop it up there. You’d have it up in half an hour.”

“Too obvious. Even now, I think we have to assume we’re being watched. And I want something up our sleeve that no one knows about – in case things go wrong and we need to pull everyone back out the road.”

“Everyone? You think it could come to that?”

“I doubt it very much. But we are signing away a whole county here after all – and there could well be Rumpelstiltskins out there annoyed at being left out of the party.”

“You’ve lost me on that one,” grinned the Major, “but I’ll see it’s done. Tonight. They can sit up there reading pornos until meeting day. Under cover of dark you say?”

Her father nodded. Beth leaned over the map, looking at the gap between the spur and the narrow canyon where their road came down.

“How far can one of those things shoot,” she asked, wondering if she’d be told off for asking questions – but the Major seemed happy to indulge her. He traced his finger in a wide circle with the spur at its centre.

“Effective range is 1800 metres. With enough ammo that means they can pin down anything on this plain long enough for everyone to get up that road.” His smile made her feel like she was a precocious five-year-old being patronised, but she asked the next question anyway.

“What happens to your men once you’re gone?”

His moustache dropped. Her father laughed.

“Quite right! You better have them radio their position through to Airborne once they’re in place, in case they need extraction. But no radio after that. Dotting our Ts and crossing our eyes eh?”

The Major seemed to take it in good humour.

“Perhaps we should go see your American friend, now, who seems so interested in seating?”

They followed him outside and found the rest of the people from their convoy milling inside a large

open-ended hangar where a variety of military vehicles were parked in neat rows. Beth cast her eyes around for Michael, but he was nowhere to be seen. His father on the other hand, was at the centre of everything. He was directing people about with considerable bombast, moving men around like a cricket captain setting his field. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he was shouting. “There’s going to be a hundred and fifty goddamned goatherders crammed in that corner – of course you’ll have to move the jeeps...”

And so it went. Her father gave her a conspiratorial look and raised his eyebrows. “Go for a stroll if you like,” he told her quietly. “This is going to take a while.” So she stepped back out into the sun and found a spot around the side of the hangar where she could sit against the wall. She poked a stone with her boot.

Michael seemed to be avoiding her. No doubt he was taking the chance to mix with the soldiers – he seemed popular with them from what she’d seen. But there did seem to be an effort in his absence. She wondered if he felt awkward about what he’d said last night. It was hardly a big deal, though he did seem the intense type – and some guys were like that with girls weren’t they. She kicked at another stone. If he didn’t get over it soon it was going to get boring – he was the only person her age to talk to around here, and if her Dad had anything to do with it, she might be spending a lot more time in this place.

She tried to work out what she thought about staying. She knew the thought of not seeing her school friends again was supposed to fill her with sorrow, but when she tried it out she was surprised how little it bothered her. There was no one she was really that close to... and frankly it would be a relief to get away from the Abbey of St Francis alpha-crowd. Screw them; they could go to law school and breed little alpha children – she’d be out here drinking peppermint tea with gun-wielding tribesmen...

Though did she really want that?

If she was honest the idea filled her with dread. Dread at what she didn’t know. Dread at having a job even. Of being under scrutiny, and knowing everything she did reflected on her father. And it was all just so... unknown.

Yet was that such a bad thing? Maybe she needed a little dread in her life. God knows school didn’t suit her. She realised suddenly that it bored her. Not just the things they were taught, but the people she was surrounded by; their unquestioning ambition. Being here would be frightening, stressful... but exciting. Beth looked up to where the dry mountains were visible beyond the wire and the guard towers, her mind racing with new thoughts, new ways of thinking. Safety. Strategy. She thought of the men who would carry their weapon up a ridge tonight, assemble it in the dark and be burrowed out of sight before the sun rose. These were the things that changed history. To be here, living it... it would be intoxicating.

By the time the meeting finished she had made her mind up. Her father appeared, looking tired but not unhappy and she followed him to the car gratefully – she was tired too she realised. She didn’t bother looking for Michael. Farzin stirred and put his book away, and the convoy formed up and pulled away. Major Pagonis stood

at the gate as the vehicles rolled out, their car last in line, and saluted her father casually as they passed.

In the back seat Beth pulled her jacket around her and tucked up her knees; she must have fallen asleep before they even started up the mountain track, because the next thing she knew they were rumbling along the flat with the familiar outskirts of Rabaz outside the window.

“You got some rest?”

She nodded at her father and dragged her palms across her face to wipe away the sleepiness. The convoy ahead was slowing, bunching up around a truck – the same one they’d passed this morning, she saw. The wiry red-bearded men were still in the back, this time unloading the melons. Across the road another red-beard watched them approach. His lips moved as if he was counting.

“Have you thought about what I said?”

Beth glanced at her father then turned to look out the window. She knew what she wanted now – but there was something she needed to ask.

“Papa, am I just here because I’m failing school?”

There was a tight feeling in her throat that she didn’t want to become tears, so she fixed her gaze outside, where the tribesman was scanning their cars with his watchful eyes, black above hollow cheeks.

“Why would you think that?”

“Did you tell Michael I was... unremarkable?”

Her father exhaled softly. “Ah, Beth. I’m sorry. I had a good reason for saying that – ”

But Beth never got to hear it. As the car ahead drew level with the tribesman his eyes flicked to hers. Then he lifted something in his hand and vanished.

The blast lifted their car off its front wheels, then dumped them back – windscreen cracked, yet by some miracle intact. Dust streamed everywhere. There was nothing to see but dust – and a fierce red glow where the car in front had been.

Her father was shouting, but no noise came out. She couldn’t understand why – then Farzin threw the car in reverse, stamped the pedal, and Beth slammed into the headrest as they shot out of the dust-cloud and into the path of a pick-up.

There was no option but to stop – and suddenly the red-beards were everywhere, guns gripped at waist level, firing like mad men. She saw one of their own soldiers emerge, to be cut down as he ran – then Farzin’s door was jerked open and she watched in a horror of slow-motion as he was sprayed with bullets; saw the very moment that the life in him switched off like a light bulb, while his body twitched and jumped in a frenzied seated dance.

She went rigid with shock then – mouth gaping in a cartoon of surprise – while outside all became terror and motion and noise. Everything but the boy. As she sat frozen to her seat Beth saw the only other still thing in all that chaos: a young man with a round, brown face standing in the middle of the road, oblivious, as if he were

waiting for a bus.

Then her own door was hauled open. Rough hands grabbed her. She gasped – struggled – but it was no use. And the last thing she saw before she was pulled into the back of the pick-up and bound was her father as he was dragged away by men with strong arms and fierce eyes above bristling rust-red beards.

## FOUR

Beth was exhausted – though her head felt strangely clear. The truck had been going slowly on the flat, and in the back Beth was using the time to think.

Things were looking bad. Yet in the last hour or so a faint hint of bravery had been trickling back into her limbs, like the tide returning slowly to an exposed beach. She decided that a few things had gone in her favour.

For starters, she'd managed to get her feet untied – and when the man had returned to cut her hands free so she could drink her instincts had kicked in and she'd pressed her legs together so he hadn't noticed any difference. Beth took a moment to congratulate herself for that: the way she'd even moved and fallen like someone bound; the result of a lifetime's habit of controlling the way people saw her, of changing her body language so that people's eyes slid past her when she wanted to be unnoticed; almost becoming invisible at times. It might have just saved her life.

So hands and feet free was a plus. The problem now was the paralyzing fear the kidnappers evoked in her. She hated the way her body went utterly limp and frozen when one of them appeared. It felt so at odds with who she'd thought she really was inside to become so completely pathetic. Yes, the danger was real – and yes, it made sense to be afraid – but Beth knew that if she wanted to get out of this she would need to find a way to stop the strength washing from her limbs when she needed it most.

And she did want that, she decided. Lying there in the pitch black and cold next to her two silent, bound companions – God knows how many hours into the worst ordeal of her life – Beth decided to live.

At some deep level she accepted that she would probably die – but she promised herself that if the chance came to change that, she would seize it if she possibly could.

The decision made her feel good. And having made it she felt that, when the time came, perhaps not every scrap of strength would be frightened from her.

That time mightn't be so far away either.

For a while the truck had been going painfully slow, picking its way carefully in the dark – and now it eased to a complete stop with the motor running. Low voices came from the cab up front. Beth lay still and listened.

Two men got out of the front, moving stealthily, as if they feared being overheard. Both moved around the back – she heard one go the long way: down the side, past the back, and up the other side again. Why?

So he didn't cross the headlights.

The answer made Beth's stomach flutter. There must be someone up ahead.

Someone who the redbearers didn't know, or were unsure of, who had seen the truck – so in the dark the kidnappers were using the glare of the headlights to cover their movements.

The canvas cover was pulled away, quickly, quietly. A rough hand covered her mouth and she was hoisted over a bony shoulder. *Sbbb*, someone hissed softly in her ear. Beth obeyed and her captor carried her swiftly through dark trees away from the road, dropping her fifty feet from the truck on a soft bank of pine needles. A moment later the other man appeared, dumping Michael and the other boy roughly on the ground, face-to-face with where she lay. The men whispered briefly, then one of them moved swiftly back to the truck.

In the faint haze of the headlights filtering through the trees Beth saw that the man who'd stayed to guard them was the heavy-browed one who'd clubbed Michael in the head. He squatted on his haunches, balancing a long gun with a belt of ammunition over his knees, and whispered his rote-learned English phrase to his three captives as they lay on the forest floor.

“One runs, all dies,” he repeated.

But the menace wasn't in it this time; he seemed distracted, listening to what was happening up ahead. Beth strained to hear too and picked up footsteps moving on the dirt road, away from the truck – then voices, loud and confident. Someone answered from further up.

Their guard seemed intensely interested. He eased the gun carefully off his lap, making sure not to clank the ammo belt, and held it ready in both hands as he tried to peer between the tree trunks, but it was too far to see. Voices – softer now – drifted towards them. Beth concentrated on keeping her ankles looking tied, thankful for the dark.

The guard edged a few steps away, torn between hearing what was happening and keeping his captives in sight. He shot a look at them – seemed satisfied – and moved further into the bushes, beyond where she could see him without moving to look.

Beth risked a glance at Michael. His eyes were locked on hers.

*“It is the night of ghosts, say the strangers. You must not enter.”*

It was the other boy. With a shock Beth realised he understood the faint voices and was whispering a translation.

*“We kill you if you do not move the log, our men say.”*

Beth distinctly heard a branch snap as their guard slipped closer to the voices – and further away from them. At least forty feet she guessed. Her heart was hammering wildly.

With absolute slowness she spread her unbound feet and hands and dug fingers and toes into the earth. She lay there on her belly like a lizard, poised and ready to spring, and looked at Michael.

A fury like she'd never seen was in his face, hard and silent – its message utterly clear: don't you dare.

*“They say even if you shoot us, the road is still blocked,”* the boy whispered. “Our captors are angry.”



This was her chance.

Bound and helpless, Michael bored his eyes into hers and slowly shook his head. His jaw was clenched in anger.

One runs – all die.

The forest floor under Beth's fingers felt cool and soft; the smell of it was in her nostrils.

How could she tell him? How could she explain they would all die anyway? The redbearers were going to execute them regardless. But if she tried to explain... to beg... to ask for permission, the moment would go. Their captor would come back, and they would all be killed in a day or two. That was all she was stealing from him, she wanted to say – just one or two days – but the words were stuck in a giant ball of hurt in her chest. And she wanted to live.

She was going to live.

For a second Beth squeezed her eyes shut against the fury of Michael's stare. Then she sprang.

In an instant she was up and running, leaping over the two bound boys and weaving between the tree trunks – running like she'd never run before. A shout rang out, then another – but they were too late, she was flying through the forest like a deer, the fierce joy of freedom rising in her chest – until the gunshots rang out and she felt her heart break inside her. *Thwack thwack thwack* went the bullets – then the full roar of the machine gun split the forest, and the grief at what she'd done seemed to burst in her chest with the sound of it – yet still she ran. Tears blurred Beth's eyes and seized her throat, as she ran, and ran, and ran.

## FIVE

Captain Kalina Zabek pulled back from her rifle's scope to stretch her neck. Immediately the glowing green realm of night-vision winked out, replaced by the black void of the forest beneath a salt-spill of stars. It was cold and perfectly silent and she was lying on a thick bed of pine needles in a ditch.

Soldiering, she thought, was not what people imagined. When she was young, one of a handful of female recruits in the Polish forces, she'd had all sorts of big ideas. But now, at 45, she'd seen enough – and done enough – to have lost some illusions.

At least 90 per cent of soldiering, she'd decided, was simply keeping up appearances. Then there was about 9 per cent lying in ditches, thinking – and the remainder was about not getting killed.

In Kalina's view that was the only important bit. The trick to it, she reckoned, was developing a sixth sense for when the ditches part was about to turn into the trying-to-not-die part. That way it wasn't a surprise, and your chances of successful 'one per cent time' were much better.

And tonight, she had the feeling that that point was approaching.

Kalina took a calming breath and took stock.

She had six special forces commandos strung along the roadway in teams of two – one man with a firing position on the road, the other up-slope a little, watching his partner's back. It was pitch black; they were all on night-vision, and all her men were reliable: she had four of her own from the Polish division, plus two Dutch snipers. Who were a pain – it meant the whole squad had to speak English – but they knew what they were doing. So she shouldn't be nervous.

Still...

She bent back to the scope.

In the green blaze she could see the two villagers – one man young, the other elderly – sitting wrapped in blankets propped against a tree. The weird world of infra-red vision showed the heat from their small fire and tea kettle as a glowing blob, while their faces and hands looked paler, though still bright. The thick blankets around them let little heat out, so appeared grainy and dark – only marginally brighter than the chilly pine trunks they had their backs to.

The night scopes didn't show much detail, but Kalina knew what the men looked like; she'd been watching them all week. The boy had bushy eyebrows and would be staring in a daydream at his feet, while the old man was clean-shaven and grey. Both wore brown woolen vests picked out in coloured thread that marked them out as ethnic Aziris – skinny bean-eaters who gave little trouble.

The two had been camped by the roadside for several days. At some point prior to her team arriving a log had been felled across the dirt road at a point where the trees on either side were thick. It made the track impassable to vehicles, and Kalina had watched the pair warn anyone who came by that they couldn't enter.

Out here, three hundred miles from the Capital and deep in the mountains, that meant virtually no one, barring the odd goat herder – however the pair had been unlucky. That week the JM Regional Commander – an incompetent Swiss named Schweiger – happened to send a patrol up their valley, out of all the valleys in this vast territory, and they'd come across the rough blockade. Apparently the locals had gotten tetchy and after a heated exchange the patrol had turned back.

This sort of non-event would normally have nothing to do with Kalina – she was on wide patrol and reported straight to Joint Mission central. But Schweiger had been briefed on her presence in the area and had relayed a request for help.

Schweiger was widely known as an idiot, but Kalina figured he'd got this one right. The villagers had spun some bullshit to the patrol about a holy week – a procession of ghosts that would bring bad luck to the village if seen by outsiders – which Schweiger had taken as a weak cover for trafficking narcotics.

If he was right, and this was a trail for moving poppy, then that was much more interesting. Drug traffickers were fair game, and killing them was well within Kalina's jurisdiction.

Virtually all the local players financed themselves by selling poppy, but because no one could admit it, no one could complain when you knocked a few over. It was good for discipline too. It reinforced her command to let the older hands off the leash from time to time, plus it gave her a chance to blood new recruits. It was even considered sporting. Drug couriers were usually armed and aggressive, so no one felt bad if you bopped a few (not even them, if you did it right) – and best of all they were usually foreign to whatever region you were in, meaning you got little grief from locals.

So staking out the trail for drug mules had been the plan. She'd brought her team over a ridge from the south at night and settled them halfway up the slope overlooking the track on the valley floor. It was a perfect set-up; a little holiday of sorts. Comms were good and they'd even run a little solar panel up a tree to top their batteries. They had lines of sight in all directions, and when it was your turn to sleep the pine needles were soft and warm. The people in the small village a few hundreds metres down the track were oblivious to them, and they'd been camped out for five days, watching and waiting, when that evening's message had come through.

It seemed there had been an attack in the capital. Several senior JM staffers had disappeared during the battle, presumed kidnapped, and there were even thought to be children with them. All units had been alerted, so when the call came through, Kalina had moved her team to the roadside, much closer to the roadblock, just in case they got lucky – and now she had that prickling feeling. Something told her they were entering one per cent time, and soon, she felt almost certain, someone was going to get dead.

For the millionth time that night, her breath fogged her scope, and for the millionth time she cleared it with her sleeve, then glanced back at the old man. She wondered if his joints were as bad as hers.

Of course making people dead was kind of the point. The problem with it was it put you squarely in that ‘don’t die’ zone – so Kalina had developed some firm ideas on how you went about it. In her opinion (and out here hers was the only one that counted) you forgot about your rules of engagement – you forgot the Geneva conventions, and all that, and simply killed whoever you had to as unfairly and as quickly as possible. And if there was doubt about who needed to die? You shot first, and regretted later. Kalina planned to carry her survivor’s guilt well into a ripe old age.

The men were standing up.

A second later Kalina heard why – the faint scrunch of tyres and a distant engine, running slow. Her earpiece hummed into life as her team responded by reporting their readiness – all without needing to be asked. They were good soldiers, Kalina thought; here they were, firmly in one per cent time now – and with no surprises. Yet.

The truck had come to a halt, engine idling. By the sound of it, it was about 100 yards away, which meant they had probably come around the bend, seen the barrier and stopped. She had a man hidden by the corner of the road for just that eventuality – and right on cue Stefan radioed in.

“Two men,” he whispered. “No weapon thighted.”

His voice told her exactly where they’d stopped. Stefan was no lisper – it was simply that the letter ‘s’ carried further than any other sound; they must be only feet away for him to speak like that. She remembered that his position had a great view down the road, but had thick bushes in front that would obscure his view; so not seeing guns meant nothing.

Kalina pulled away from the night vision to get her bearings. Ahead she could see a light where her two villagers had lit a lamp and carried it to the roadblock – no doubt nervous as hell. There was a low haze of light coming from the truck’s headlamps down the road, and, she noticed, a silver sheen creeping down the trees. The moon must be rising over the mountain ridge that formed the other side of the valley. She glanced up and had a moment’s vertigo; a cleft seemed to have opened in the dark line of hills – yet she knew there was no pass there. For a long moment Kalina had the disorienting feeling that she must be on the wrong side of the valley, facing the wrong way – but she shook the thought from her head to clear it. Now was the time for absolute focus.

Footsteps were coming.

The two newcomers came into view, walking towards the barrier. Looking through the scope she saw that Stefan was right – they carried no obvious weapons, yet to Kalina their lean frames, their swagger, the predatory stance, told her all that she needed to know. These men were soldiers, and she was prepared to bet their lives – not hers, but theirs – that they were part of today’s kidnappings and attack.

Voices called out: the newcomers, confident and questioning. She didn’t understand the words – though it

sounded like the common Q'shanite tongue. And you could guess the meaning: 'what's up with this roadblock bullshit? We want to come through'.

Her villagers responded, sounding nervous; explaining. Voices babbled back in accusation, anger... followed by a question – then disgust at the answer. Kalina shifted her hands on the grip of her weapon. The newcomers were stomping back to their truck when a shout broke out. Suddenly they were sprinting.

“Fuck,” said Kalina flatly. Her head was spinning. It was don't-die time, alright. *Don't die*. But if these two were kidnappers and made it back to their truck their hostages were lost. “Drop them Janek!” She yelled into her radio – but they had no shot. She scrambled to her feet and burst on to the roadway in full sight, Janek close behind, and dropped to one knee as she brought her rifle up. *Thwack thwack thwack*. The two men fell with bullets through chests, faces fixed in comic surprise as the moon blinked suddenly over the valley's rim, bathing them all in white.

Kalina felt her hands shaking hard. She knew instinctively this was the moment to cement her authority – as a woman leading men in the field she never let herself show weakness. She pulled the radio mouthpiece down so her ragged breathing wouldn't broadcast and took a moment to level her voice.

“Good shooting Janek. Let's take a look at this –”

Gunfire erupted from the forest.

Kalina was on the ground and rolling before she knew it, her body on instinct. Branches and stones smashed around them – bullets everywhere; the shooter somewhere in the forest, the muzzle flash so close it swept tree-trunk shadows across the road. Janek was on the ground – hit – then the shooter ran on to the road, firing.

He had a hostage. Kalina glimpse a pale face; a fist at his neck, and the barrel of something heavy-calibre over his shoulder – the shooter using him as a gun rest as he crouched behind, blasting wildly.

Kalina had a desperate urge to spray the road in bullets, and hostage be damned – but fought it down. God dammit, God dammit! She was going to die here surprised and stupid, she thought, when the shots cut out with a distinctive *schlack*.

Everything went quiet. Kalina risked a look from the shallow ditch where she'd pressed herself.

The shooter was face-down on the road, head in shadow, while the hostage – a boy really – stood reeling, trying to keep his feet. His hands were tied and one whole side of his face was spattered with something that gleamed wet and black.

“Jesus,” Kalina breathed, no longer caring who heard.

“Thank fuck for the Dutch.”

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Michael watched the commando pull herself from the ditch. It was a woman, he saw, small and thickly built, with a heavy Heckler & Koch rifle that she held lightly in gloved hands. She moved to the downed man, checking his wound, reassuring him; waiting until another man emerged from the bushes to take over first aid before she turned to him.

Leadership. You knew it when you saw it.

As she approached he forced himself to look down at his kidnapper, and the sight turned his legs to spaghetti. A neat hole above one ear opened into a ragged mess above the other and something was oozing out in globs.

He'd be damned if he was going faint in front of soldiers. Michael clenched his jaw hard and let the hot anger at Beth inside him hold him up. *Look at it*, he thought. *That's what Beth thought would happen to you. She knew they'd kill you if she ran – and she did it anyway.*

“Are you Michael Spencer?”

Her accent was strong. Eastern Europe. He nodded and felt himself reeling.

“Are there others?”

Her voice seemed to come from far away. Her uniform, he saw, was the new digital camo – a random scatter of light and dark squares that broke up any outline. He fixed his eyes on the pattern, as if it could hold him upright.

“Are there other hostages?”

The squares were different sizes; all mixed together in swirling patterns, yet the light and dark blocks never blended into grey, he realised, no matter how fine their grain. *Black or white*, Michael told himself. *Never shades of grey. Either enemy or friend.* The rage in him was burning hot and white.

“No,” said Michael. “Only me.”

Everything went black.

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Kalina caught the boy as he collapsed. She passed him to Stefan, who dragged him off the side of the road and under the cover of the trees. The poor little bastard must have had a hellish night, but she was glad to be away from him; his nervous collapse made her uncomfortable, as if it might somehow rub off on her. Anyway, the boy

was going to live – and Janek too, despite the shattered elbow. But they needed to be on a helicopter soon. And she needed a drink.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said over her mike – when a crack in the bushes made her wheel about.

Through the scope of her weapon she saw a ragged teen with a round face shuffle on to the road, his hands behind his back.

If there were no other hostages, then who was this kid? It wasn’t the village boy – he and the old man were long gone. The shake was back in Kalina’s hands, worse than before – and noticing it made her angry. Instinctively she stepped back – though it would do her little good if that was a grenade behind his back.

“Americans?” the boy asked haltingly.

*You’ll wish*, she thought, as her Dutch sniper, Ruud, stepped silently from the bushes behind him with a knife. She saw the hard gleam in Ruud’s eyes and knew it was he who’d fired the shot that saved her. The killing look was on him. He asked a silent question.

Kalina answered with a look that only those who had lived and fought and killed together far from the eyes of civilisation could read. *No more surprises*, she thought to herself. But as Ruud glided slowly forward to silence the boy she heard a clear, distant note like someone ringing a bell.

Ruud seemed to be taking forever. She let out her breath and it came out as one long, drawn-out sigh. Even her thoughts seemed to move slowly. The bell sounded again, closer. *Why is everything taking so long* she wondered, as time clogged like treacle round her limbs...

## SIX

A stillness flowed into the valley like sap rolling down a tree trunk, trapping the tiny insects in its path. Beth watched it come.

She had run all she could. She'd fled at first like an animal; flitting between the tree trunks, buoyed up by the joy of escape. Then the branches had torn her face, her lungs had run ragged and she'd collapsed as every fleeing animal had to – utterly exhausted at the end, waiting to discover if she would be torn apart, or if her trembling legs had saved her.

Then the bell had rung. A strange stillness seemed to flow out of it and Beth felt the forest go quiet as a feeling of peace poured down from above. At first she'd let it take her. Even noticing it at all was like trying to realise you were dreaming – the awareness kept slipping away. But then the bell sounded again, closer, and the part of her that wanted to live; the fierce part that refused to sleep shook itself – and she felt the stillness fall off her and flow away down the slope. She stood up.

She was in a clearing of sorts in the forest, some way up the valley's side. Above only the brightest stars were still visible – a wash of white moonlight had scrubbed them from the sky, and brought the little clearing to pale life. But these weren't the only lights.

A few feet ahead a rocky ridge crossed the clearing – and coming down a sort of wooded path that the ridge-edge formed was a procession of lights. They wobbled as they came, as if they were being carried by people picking their way carefully down the slope. And as they approached, Beth felt a wave of unreality break over her as her exhausted mind struggled to understand what she was seeing.

A ragged line of people was passing down the mountainside. At its head came a man dressed in brown. He wore stained leather trousers, soft boots and a wool vest and he lit the way for those that followed with a flaming branch.

After him came a girl, maybe nine years old and dressed entirely in white, who stepped lightly over the rocks. A cap fringed with dangling pearls jangled as she walked and she carried a bell in both hands.

But strangest of all were the four thick-set women who followed her, shuffling two-by-two. On their shoulders they bore poles that supported an ornate red-gold box draped in cloth. As the women stepped awkwardly from rock to rock their burden swayed and Beth saw the fabric part. For a moment she glimpsed something inside – an upright figure wrapped in red; then the women and the white-clad child passed.

The man at the front stayed. While none of the others had so much as glanced at her as they'd walked mere feet away, the man – lean in his tan-coloured clothes – looked at Beth and stepped off the track. He watched her



curiously, though not alarmed, as the litter moved down the slope, waiting to see what she'd do.

Beth saw others pass. While the man waited they each trudged by – many old and bowed, some strangely dressed; of different races and faces, all carrying loads – until they were gone and only the man remained. He looked down the line to where the procession had passed, then back to Beth. The bell rang again in the distance.

There was a village near here, Beth guessed. She felt sure her captors had tried to pass through some small settlement, and knew her best chance was to find whoever lived there and get their help.

But these people were no villagers. In her heart Beth knew she had stumbled on something deeply strange. To have seen it gave her a thrill of fear – and a profound longing for the safety of home; for things understandable and sane, not this strangeness in the moonlit forest. But as that feeling welled in her the memory of what she had done tonight filled her chest with pain. With pain and shame for the boy she had condemned to death; shame for Michael – and the anger in his eyes that she could never now explain away.

How could she go home? And who was there to go home to?

The man stood watching her as she watched him back. Then he reached out and gestured: *come*.

Beth followed him down the hill.

## Part 2

# The Subtle Way

### ONE

R'shad atan al-Q'shani – the main Q'shanite clan's 75<sup>th</sup> ruler since 500AD – stepped into the dingy room and slipped off his hood. Bald and beardless in a nation of bearded men he'd opted to hide his distinctive, notorious face in the cowed hood of a goatherd, and had checked and rechecked that he'd not been followed before stepping in from the street.

He risked everything by being in the capital tonight. Light showed behind a curtained doorway and he paused for a moment to consider before stepping through. The American would be angry; just *how* angry would determine whether R'shad survived the night.

He was no stranger to death – no Q'shanite leader could be: he'd been eight years old when he'd first seen a man ritually killed before him. Years later, on the night he'd assumed the clan leadership, he'd recognised the shock on his own son's eight-year-old face as he in turn witnessed the bloody secret at the heart of Q'shanite culture. And now the time was approaching when his own rule must pass on.

But before that happened, R'shad swore, he would seize this country – with the American's help. And if he could find the valley when he did that? If he could take it for his own? He would see his bloodline rule the nation for the next thousand years to come.

R'shad stepped through the curtain.

In a corner he glimpsed a blank-eyed Westerner with a sleek weapon – one of LHP Security's killers no doubt, and this despite the fact they'd agreed it would be an unarmed meeting. But he'd known this would happen, so he ignored the man and took his seat opposite the Major, sweeping his robes neatly aside as he sat and picking an imaginary speck from the bare table.

"Yesterday," the Major began evenly, "as our convoy came under attack, the door of my vehicle was wrenched open and my own son taken from me by some flea-ridden tribesman. This was *not* part of our arrangement."

R'shad risked a glimpse at the man's eyes. There was fury there, but held in control. His gamble might yet pay off.

“Firstly, let me assure you Charles, that your son is safe – ”

Laughter – the last sound he expected in this bare room – interrupted his careful words.

“I know he is. Joint Mission commandos rescued him two hours ago. He’s on a helicopter as we speak.”

The Major leaned forward, letting the menace in his considerable bulk show. “And let me assure *you* – if that was not the case, this conversation would be happening in a *very* different way.

al-Q’shani straightened slightly, trying to conceal his surprise. He smoothed another invisible speck from the table.

It seemed a change of approach was in order.

“My intention in holding your son was never to threaten or... what is the word? Extort. I am simply aware that I venture much in our arrangement, with little security. Your son was to be held as an honoured guest until such a time as our agreement could be fulfilled, to be released to you then unharmed. This is the truth I speak.”

“The truth? How generous of you. You know R’shad, in my country we consider *trust* to be critical to any business deal.”

The tribesman shrugged. “In mine, alignment of purpose carries greater coin.” He was treading carefully now. “Perhaps there was never great trust in our relationship. But our goals may yet still be aligned.”

There was a question in his statement. The Major paused as if considering – then glanced at the man who stood in the corner. R’shad controlled a flinch as the man passed behind him, then he heard him slip discreetly from the room. The Q’shani leader was struggling to hide his relief; their deal might yet survive the night.

There was a silence as each man considered his position. It was R’shad who broke it.

“Tell me Charles: the men who rescued your son. Did they find... others?”

“None. Michael was the only captive found.”

Another silence.

“And what of *your* men R’shad. Did they find their target?”

“We hold him now in a secret place.”

“Then perhaps we are still in business.”

R’shad at al-Q’shani, 75<sup>th</sup> ruler of the largest Q’shanite clan, pulled his goatherder’s hood back over his distinctive face and stood up to leave.

“It seems we are.”

## TWO

Of their journey in the dark Beth would remember little in the weeks and months to come. When she tried to make sense of it only one detail seemed certain – and that was the thing that made least sense: they had always moved downhill.

At first the man had guided her carefully, but the light from the flaming branch cast shadows that lurched over the ground and she tripped on tree roots and had to move footstep by footstep, always with a hand on him. The bell in front of them sounded fainter and fainter as they fell behind until he cast the branch aside and they moved by moonlight alone, going faster in the dim but constant glow.

She would have fallen asleep on her feet then if the rhythm of their march hadn't been broken: they stepped out of the trees to find lights and low voices suddenly on all sides. She recognised the girl in white and the four women with the litter still on their shoulders. The procession had halted and they'd finally caught up.

Beth realised they were on the edge of the village. In the distance the blocky shapes of low houses were visible, yet every light was out and not even a dog stirred. Except in the house nearest them. It stood apart from the others at the fringe of the village beneath a gnarled old tree and in the light spilling from its open front door Beth saw a man emerge, holding a basket. His face was lit with an expression of awe and he approached the girl in white reverently. As he gave her the basket Beth saw that it was filled with red globes of fruit; the white-clad girl passed it to someone else, then the man backed into the house, bowing to the curtained box that the women bore. As he re-entered the house a child's face peered wide-eyed around the door, before someone inside snatched it back.

The whole scene had an air of ritual – though the rest of their procession were sprawled casually around the clearing like tired hikers taking a break from their loads. None of them had seemed to pay the villager much mind, but when the girl rang the bell they all struggled to their feet and formed a line – this time waiting for Beth's guide to take his place in the lead. He pushed her gently in front of him, and they all set off again.

The rest of the night passed in a blur, Beth's exhaustion turning it into a surreal blend of wakefulness and dream. Several times she stumbled as her eyelids sagged – but each time a hand grabbed her jacket, and she would jolt awake. On and on she stumbled, until a shock of cold air surprised her.

Beth tried to blink the sleep from her eyes. The light had gone morning-grey and a chill wind was buffeting up from a wide valley that opened before her feet. Immediately below them a shale slope dropped into thin alpine tussock – which gave way to scraggly brush, then wide swathes of stunted forest. Far beyond, the rising sun glowed from behind a line of hills.

A savage vertigo buckled her legs and she dropped on to the jagged stones. They had been going steadily downhill all night, yet here they were, high in the mountains. It made no sense.

She felt delirious. Every instinct said they should be far below on the valley floor. Beth looked behind her to where the last of their procession had gathered on the bare knoll. There was no sign of a path above them – no wooded track that they'd just walked down – just clouds and mountains and these strange people shuddering in the sudden cold. The girl tucked the bell into her sleeve, while the man who'd guided them checked the litter that the four bent women carried – then he spoke to Beth in what she swore was British English.

“Not far now, love” he told her, and lifted her gently to her feet. “Come on – you'll rest soon.”

As the sun rose on the descending group Beth was struck by the beauty of the land they were walking into. It was like when she'd watched a corny movie on the plane here. Maybe it was the altitude, or just being awake in the wrong time zone, but she'd been moved by the schmaltzy plot almost to tears – and it was like that now. Her head was fizzing with exhaustion, yet the sight of the land awash with the gold-red light of dawn was so beautiful she felt it as an ache in her chest; an exhilaration that almost hurt.

Someone loved this place, she thought suddenly. Someone knew every blade of grass and rock and loved it fiercely. The thought expanded until it filled her mind, blanking out everything else and she stumbled again – fainting; loopy now with the exhaustion – and as she fell she felt the treacley slowness return, pouring down the slope, stilling even the tussock that shivered in the wind.

The man must have carried her the last of the way. The next thing Beth remembered was being lowered on to something soft. She was on the ground with a blanket around her, tucked against a wall in a darkened room. A halo of hard daylight at a curtained door made it hard to see anything else.

As her eyes adjusted Beth saw that the four bent women were in the room; finally lowering their load. They set it down gingerly and the girl in white appeared, pulling the cloths from the box they'd borne as others lifted something from inside.

It was a man; so decrepit and thin-limbed he might have been dead but for the glint of life in the eyes. Beth glimpsed thick purple lips and an ugly sunken face before he was carried carefully to another room, the girl in white leading the way. Not once did the figure move to either help or hinder his bearers.

Beth sank back and closed her eyes, but now sleep wouldn't come. When she opened them again the girl was standing in front of her.

“My name is Oesha. Can you understand me?”

Beth nodded – too confused to offer her own name back.

“He says you are safe here. He says you may stay as long as you wish. Indeed, I think you would find it impossible to leave.”

“*Who* says?”

The girl looked at her levelly.

“The man you saw carried. He is called The Kushan. And you must never speak to him, unless you are asked.”

Beth sunk back to the floor, feeling more confused and alone than ever before.

“There is one more thing,” said the girl, as Beth finally slipped into the blackness. “He says: you have an enemy.”

### THREE

Farzin pressed his cheek to the paving stones, trying not to breathe. He was half hidden beneath a tarpaulin, but if anyone bothered to look properly under the market stall he'd be found for sure. Noisy feet hurried by, egged on by excited voices. Farzin held his breath, waiting for them to pass – but as the last set of footsteps approached the stall they slowed, then paused in front.

He saw the shoes turn this way and that, as if their owner was unsure where to go. They were scuffed and the trousers showed a darker hem below faded blue where they'd been let down, then roughly stitched as the wearer grew. They told a story that would be the same for many of those roaming the streets these last two days: of being young and poor – and now drunk on resentment. Mostly the riots seemed to involve young men shouting 'let's go!' and 'where's such and such?' – but Farzin had seen enough random savagery recently to know this was more than just some letting off of steam. It seemed like a revolution.

He concentrated on keeping still.

These kids were dangerous alright, though the people after Farzin in earnest would have no rough-stitched clothes.

Farook had owned the tailor's shop over the road for more than 30 years, while Farzin had owned his own business for 18 months – though that was all over now. In the middle of the riots Farook had publicly suggested Farzin was a homosexual, and his nephews had taken the cue to trash his shop, smashing the sewing machines he'd saved so long to buy, while on the street a crowd had cheered. Farzin had been lucky to escape alive. He'd ushered his terrified tailors out the alley before making a break for the maze of the market stalls just in time. Now he was hiding beneath a fish seller's tarp with his face on the cobbles.

The shoes moved off. Farzin let out a breath.

Homosexual? Naïve was what he was – he should have seen it coming. In fact his oldest employee, Mufid, had even joked about it the week before.

He'd not even noticed when the girl had started lingering. She would come from the tailor's over the road, asking Farzin to have one of his men do something tricky she couldn't trust to her father's sewers. Some delicate repairs one day, a new shawl the next. But it had taken teasing from one of his junior tailors to see something was up.

"Boss I think you should talk to her brothers – that girl wants you to ask her out."

Kadeer had that look on his face that showed he knew he was overstepping the bounds.

"If you don't, maybe I should. She's good-looking no?"

Farzin must have seemed shocked at that, because the others laughed. All but Farzin were sat in little booths with their sewing machines, and the rule was for professional silence when customers were in the shop – but in rare moments when it was empty, the gossip would start where they'd left off.

The laugh coming from old Mufid had been mirthless though. Of the six men Farzin had working for him he was by far the scruffiest. Half of the success of the shop came from an air of exclusivity Farzin had managed to cultivate – there were fresh flowers out front every day and instead of being hidden out back his tailors worked in sight of the customers, wearing suit jackets. And all but Mufid wore them well. He never looked anything other than the old tobacco-stained sewer that he was, yet Farzin had no choice but to keep him on – he was by far the fastest and the best. And if he was honest he did like his no-bullshit style; though the knowing eye he cast at Farzin from time to time made him uneasy.

“Yes, yes,” Mufid had droned. “Wonderful idea. Stroll with her back to her father’s one day – we’ll all be turfed out the next.”

“And how do you figure that, uncle?” Kadeer replied in a mocking tone.

“Strolling today, married tomorrow. Pretty good way to deal with the competition, no? If you can’t beat him, make him part of the family. Seen many customers there lately?”

“Quiet now...”.

Three women had walked into the shop. Farzin didn’t like gossip in front of customers – it was a bad look – and Mufid’s comments had made him nervous. He’d looked over the road, and like he’d said there *were* no customers there – just two of the girl’s scowling brothers – plus old Farook himself, peering back at him.

The thing was, old Mufid had been right. Just not in the way they’d all thought.

No one mentioned Farook’s daughter in those next weeks – all the talk had been of the unrest. The way they heard it, it started when a boy playing in the street had been run down by a cabinet minister’s car. It hadn’t even bothered to stop, and suddenly all of Old Town was on a knife-edge. The next thing they knew windows were being broken at the Ministry and the Shah’s name was being burned on makeshift signs. When the army made a point of staying put in their barracks the clerics sniffed change on the wind and suddenly mobs of the angry, devout and poor appeared, throwing stones and fighting running battles with the bewildered police...

Amidst it all Basma – Farook’s young and pretty daughter – did something strange. With the sound of breaking glass audible only two blocks away she came into the shop with one of her brothers and asked Farzin to come to dinner.

‘My brothers would like you to take me out,’ she’d said. ‘You should come over to meet my family’. This was how marriages began in Old Town and Farzin was frankly shocked. Or taken by surprise, more like. He caught Mufid giving him an unusual look – was it sympathy? – before stammering out his politest refusal. Then Basma had stormed out.



Within an hour Farook had made his move. Before Farzin could click to what was happening a small group of locals had gathered out the front, denouncing Farzin as a homosexual. By the time one of the roaming mobs got in on the fun Farzin was hurrying his terrified staff out the back, as bricks came in the front. And now here he was, fearing for his life beneath a fishmonger's stall.

A new set of shoes moved into view. They paused in front of his hiding place and Farzin stiffened as their owner dropped to one knee and a round brown face appeared.

He couldn't help his gasp of surprise. Surprise and relief. It was Rajiv Singh, the Indian import-export man.

## FOUR

It was still daylight when Beth woke again, groggy and desperate to pee. By the ache in her bones she guessed she'd slept all that first day, through the night, and into a brand new morning. She struggled out of the blanket and sat up.

There was no one in the room. From outside came the sounds of a warm morning – insects and high, lonely birdsong – and on the edge of hearing, human voices that only made the quiet seem more empty.

Inside she could see scuff marks on the floor from when they'd arrived. There was what looked like ten years worth of dust on the wooden floorboards and it showed yesterday's footprints like a field of fresh snow. In the middle of the room was a muddle of tracks where she remembered the box being put down, then footsteps led away through the curtain where they'd carried the shriveled figure. Beth shuddered a little. She could barely think of it as alive, though the girl had yesterday called him a man, and said he'd even spoken of her; and in case she thought it was something she'd dreamed, there on the ground next to her were the girl's footprints. Beth huffed a breath at the floor and watched the fine dust billow up into the light and hang there. The place must have been empty for years.

Her bladder was demanding attention. If she could have hidden forever in that safe, quiet morning she would have – she had that horrible first-day-at-school feeling and a dread of having to speak to the people here – but the need for a toilet was worse, and she wasn't going to go on the floor. She got stiffly to her feet.

Everything was sore. She hobbled to the curtained door where light was blazing from around the edges and peeked through.

When her eyes adjusted she saw high mountains and birds – but no people. There were some walls made of rock and the sides of stone buildings but little else – the voices were clearer but there was no sign of who was speaking. It sounded unhurried, as if a group of people were chattering as they worked.

Beth stepped out and hobbled along the line of the building, then peered around the corner. Still no one.

Just a scruffy meadow and a stream that pooled briefly before winding away down the slope. Certain she was out of sight of anyone Beth yanked down her trousers and crouched in the grass.

It was a relief, but she nearly fell over with the effort of getting up again. Her legs were bruised purple all up the sides and her knees looked twice the proper size, swollen from being bashed in the pick-up. She bent down and fingered the band of crusted blood on her ankles where the plastic tie had been. A whimper escaped as the nightmare came back to her: the memory of the pick-up, and of Michael – of what they'd done to him when she ran. Of what *she* had done to him, she told herself. Then she thought of her father – and she couldn't take that; the fact that he might be still alive, was perhaps being killed at that moment – so she shoved away the thought

and looked up at the blue sky until her tears blinked away.

When she looked down again she saw an old woman watching from around the corner. Beth buttoned her pants hurriedly and the woman disappeared.

By the time she got to the corner the woman was coming back with something dangling from her fist. She was short and heavy-set with thick coppery forearms and a wide face; she looked like she'd spent her whole life working outdoors. Her eyes were so black they were like buttons, almost expressionless – and Beth noticed that not a single thing on her seemed modern. She was wearing a shapeless shift and trousers with a thick woven apron at the front that was secured around her middle with knotted fabric. There wasn't a zipper or a logo in sight – even her shoes seemed handmade.

As she reached Beth she offered her the thing she was carrying. It was a little iron pot dangling from three chains – food.

“For me?”

The woman didn't bother speaking – instead she gestured to the little grassy corner by the stream with the back of her hand in a way that was almost dismissive – but Beth got her message. Go, she meant. Sit down, eat. We won't bother you. Rest and take your time. Beth took the little cauldron gratefully and the woman ambled back the way she'd come without a word.

Back on the grass, away from where she'd peed, Beth sniffed the pot cautiously. Its contents turned out to be no more than boiled water, with a rectangle of what seemed to be dried meat mixed with berries dunked into it. It was rock hard but the corner in the pot was going soft so Beth gnawed it until a chunk broke off then sucked it greedily. Whether she would have liked the taste anywhere else she wasn't sure, but here – barefoot, in the sun, aching, starving, yet *free* – the food tasted more wholesome, more filling than anything she could remember. It seemed to be glued together with honey, but there were spices in there too and as the warm chewy meat dissolved in her mouth and filled her tummy she could feel – could literally feel the strength seep into her limbs.

When she'd finished the last of the block she drank the warm, faintly spiced water and stood up.

Her belly felt supremely full – and soon she was going to need to sleep again – but for now there was one more thing she needed. The little pool looked freezing yet utterly clean, and Beth felt disgusting. She looked behind her to check she was still alone, then slipped out of her clothes and waded in.

It *was* cold – so cold it numbed her skinny calves almost instantly, but she sat down in it before she could change her mind and dashed great handfuls of freezing water into her hair, over her face and back. She gasped and puffed and scrubbed her scalp savagely with her fingernails, scraping away fingers-full of dust and gunk and blood and chasing it away down the little stream until she felt as clean and cold as a little fish. Then she hurried out, rubbed the water off with her jacket, got dressed again in her dirty clothes and lay down on the grass in the sun. Slowly the heat soothed away the shock of the icy water, and soon she fell asleep.

When she woke an hour or two later she saw that the girl from last night was sitting a few feet away on the grass. She looked watchful and composed; knees and feet clasped neatly together while the mountain air fluttered her blue silk trousers. Beth pulled herself up to sitting.

“I wished we could have been more welcoming last night. There was much to do and we were not expecting newcomers.”

“It’s okay...”

“Do you remember coming here?”

“Some of it. Your name is... Oy something.”

“Oesha.” The girl’s eyes crinkled with a hint of warmth. Beth thought how her first impression in the forest had been roughly right – she couldn’t be much more than nine or ten. It seemed young to appear so... serene.

“You must have many questions.”

Beth nodded slowly – taking in the blue-white mountains on either side; the stone buildings and the empty air.

“What is this place? Who *are* you people?”

The girl shrugged.

“This is the valley. We are all like you – refugees. And this is our safe place. No one can come here unless the Kushan wills it.”

Refugees – Beth felt faintly repulsed by the word. She wanted to explain that she wasn’t a refugee – she was *British*. But then perhaps she was one. After all, where else could she go? Her only family member had been dragged from a car to be executed. She imagined finding her way back to Mission headquarters and explaining to Michael’s father what had happened to *him*; how she had saved her own skin by sacrificing his son’s life – and had a glimpse of the disgust he would feel for her. Beth looked around her and felt again the sense that this place was cherished somehow. Cherished, and utterly isolated – and safe from the outside world.

There wasn’t really a decision to make.

“You said last night that I could stay?”

“As long as you wish. But here, you must work. We all work to stay alive. We came only with what food we could carry, so now we must find enough to last us all until our crops are grown. Come, I can show you. Can you walk?”

*Barely*, thought Beth as she hobbled after the girl. They followed the stream downhill, and even if she hadn’t been barefoot and bruised she would have struggled to keep up. She’d always been slight and light on her feet – but Oesha seemed to float down the uneven slope in a sort of graceful controlled fall. It would have been a pleasure to watch if Beth hadn’t had to concentrate on her own feet. The girl paused at a grassy little terrace and when Beth caught up she could see what looked like the entire settlement below them.

There were nine or ten low stone houses on an area of flat ground. They were scattered irregularly, though looked well built, with either slate or plank roofs held down with heavy blocks of stone. The stream ran across the plateau to their right. A group of people were busy repairing a corner of one of the houses that had fallen in.

“Welcome to our home.”

“I thought you said you’d just arrived?”

Oesha looked at her sidelong.

“We are returning after many years. You see? All are busy – the houses must be repaired, the crops planted, more food found. You see the women?” Oesha pointed to a group of figures seated in a ring near the stream who were busy doing something. “Today you will work with them; after, they will take you to one of the houses where you can sleep. See the slope below?” She pointed beyond the farthest building where a second, lower terrace was sectioned off in low stone walls. “There our crops will grow. And beyond is the shelter of the Kushan.”

Beth squinted where the girl was pointing and saw that beyond and below the weed-grown fields was a single structure, built on a rocky knoll. It looked as much bridge as building – the stream seemed to disappear beneath it and tumble into space over the bluff it overlooked. It was the only wooden structure she had seen so far – and it looked different from the other houses – older, and more ramshackle.

“That is where I sleep, attending to the Kushan both night and day. Only I live apart. Of the others, all live here in the stone houses, except the Zia – they live beyond in the clay huts, preferring their own ways. Look there, they are coming. Let us go down.”

Beth looked up and to the left where Oesha was pointing and saw a higher terrace clustered with yellow mud-brick homes with cone-shaped roofs. They hadn’t seemed to weather the years of sitting empty very well – several had slumped into rain-smoothed heaps, but it was the people rather than the houses that drew Beth’s eyes. Two teams of four or five figures were descending an overgrown path to the main village, manhandling two huge barrels down the slope and trying not to let them roll away uncontrolled. Oesha set off to meet them; by the time Beth arrived on the terrace, panting, the barrel-handlers had just arrived.

The group of women by the stream stopped what they were doing and came to watch. There was a general air of excitement – and a few curious glances toward Beth. She noticed they had formed a semi-circle around Oesha, as if the girl – the youngest there by decades – was the community’s child-leader. Somehow that didn’t seem so strange. Of them all she was the only one not dressed in rough outdoor clothes; in fact the group who’d rolled the barrels were positively grubby. They were all smeared in the same yellow clay that was stuck to the barrels. Beth guessed they’d just dug them up.

Oesha made a gesture and one of the bandy-legged men produced a tool and with difficulty popped one of the lids; Beth noticed he wore a cone-shaped hat that matched the roofs of the mud-brick houses. Then the

group – men and boys – tipped the barrel over so its contents spilled on the ground.

A groan escaped the watchers – and Beth gasped. A putrid smell washed over them, and whatever had originally been inside the barrel slumped out in a semi-liquid mass. The food was rotten – yet that wasn't the reason for Beth's surprise. As the group recoiled from the stinking gloop Beth saw that one of the boys who'd tipped it out; covered in clay, and looking tired but happy, was the round-faced teen from the truck. The boy she'd left to die.

*You have an enemy.*

She ducked her head, unsure if he'd seen her. When she looked again they were all busy opening the second barrel. That too was tipped over, but this time there was no disappointed sigh. Pale tubers packed in sand – potatoes? – tumbled on to the ground amid happy smiles. Only Oesha's face looked grim.

“Only one barrel. Jarrett will have to be told. If we are not to starve soon it will be the hunters and foragers who keep us alive. To work!” she said loudly and Beth hurried after her, head down, as she turned on her heel.

There was no mistaking the girl's authority as they walked back to the stream bank where the women had been working. The older ladies hurried to keep up, not wanting to look as relaxed as they seemed to feel, while Oesha strode briskly – back straight and chin high.

Beth saw that they'd been coring apples. On a blanket was a small mound of them, of all different kinds. Beth wouldn't have guessed there were so many varieties in the world, yet these all seemed to have been found growing wild in the forest around them. Some were lumpy green masses as big as her head, others were gold globes the size of golf balls. All were being chopped into pieces and fed into pots over two small fires. Another blanket held a small pile of weird root vegetables, with the dirt still on them.

“See?” said Oesha, kneeling by the blanket and taking an apple. “Like this.” She picked up a stubby knife and expertly cut the core out, tossing the apple pieces into a pot. “By night we must have it all cooked and sealed in jars, to feed us in the coming months.”

She stood and looked at Beth's bare bruised feet. “I will see what can be done about shoes tomorrow. For today, stay with the women – they will look after you.”

She paused – obviously wanting to go, but waiting for something.

“We don't know your name,” she said eventually.

“Oh,” said Beth awkwardly. “It's *Beth*.” She said it slow and clearly, in case it was strange to them. Oesha smiled faintly then leaned forward and put both hands on Beth's. They felt light, almost bird-like.

“You belong in the valley now Beth,” she said, and left.

The old women all looked faintly amused. They were coring the apples far less urgently than they had been with Oesha there.

Beth looked at the knife. It seemed handmade – just a strip of metal hammered flat, with two pieces of wood

bound on to make a handle – yet deadly sharp.

“Does she always talk like that?” Beth asked the group of women, without expecting to be understood. The one who’d brought her the food caught her eye with a twinkle.

“*Oesha*,” she said, nodding in the direction of their leader.

“It’s like she escaped from a convent or something. Last century.”

“Mmm,” said the old woman, displaying the scope of her English with a word. “*Oesha*.” Then having done with the chit-chat she waved at the apples – and Beth took the hint.

It turned out to be a pleasant enough day. None of the women spoke a word of English, but they laughed a lot as they talked among themselves – and made a running sign-language joke of how Beth was too skinny and should eat more. Which at least took her mind off things: seeing the boy alive had shaken her. She was sure he’d been killed with Michael – she’d heard the shots – yet now here he was in the valley. It made no sense, so she tried to simply put it out of her mind while she worked.

By the time evening came the pile of fruit and tubers were all chopped and cooked. Beth squatted on her heels to watch the women carefully pour the hot pulp into clay jars, and seal the tops with wax. Then for no reason she could think of they all sat in silence watching the molten wax cool into dull circles speckled with bits of bee; sealing their day’s work safely away, while over their shoulders the sun’s golden disc did the opposite and melted behind the mountains.

The light was fading quickly. The women gathered the jars and beckoned to Beth – the friendly one rubbing a rough palm around her shoulders in an embrace that was surprisingly moving. Then they led her to one of the low stone buildings and she followed them inside.

It was some kind of communal sleeping area. Mats and blankets were piled neatly against the walls, and just the sight of them drew a yawn. A woman pushed her gently in the direction of a mat, and Beth didn’t need telling twice; she slid down against the wall and wrapped a blanket round her.

Everywhere people were getting ready for sleep. There was little talk – perhaps they were exhausted too, Beth thought – after all they’d all just walked in a day ago. And anyway there were no lights inside, which ruled out anything but rest. Beth lay against the wall and watched.

Gradually the movement in the room settled down and sounds of slow breathing filled the air, with the occasional twitch of an adjusted blanket. Sleep wasn’t coming for Beth though.

There was something comforting about the room – the loneliness of communal sleeping felt a bit like the school dorm room, where she’d been just a week ago. The darkness she’d passed through since then seemed immense. In all the dorm rooms of all those schools she’d always felt so alone – resenting her father fiercely for his absence, until his distance had faded into one of the facts of her life; a faint bitterness that came to define their relationship. But now, lying wakeful among the growing snores, Beth understood that she’d never truly

been by herself. Even at the height of her young resentment for her father he was always her external touch-point; a place apart where she belonged.

But now? Now there was no other place, and she belonged only to herself. Her father was gone, and she could think of nothing out there in the world worth going back for.

The thing that had twisted and hardened inside her unraveled a little and she sobbed at the pain. I'm *fourteen* she wanted to cry into the darkening room. *I want my Dad.* But nobody there would even understand the words – and if they had, what could they do? Gradually she breathed through the tears until the sobs were smoothed away. Then with her eyes closed she turned her attention inside – at the flower of hurt in her chest – and slowly, deliberately, twisted it shut again.

Shoes, movies, music, friends. Ski-trips, school, a career – all those opinions she'd carefully cultured; it all mattered less now than the mat beneath her. Lying in the dark she realised there would need to be a new Beth now – one made from none of those things. One who looked after herself.

*You have an enemy*, Oesha had said.

Beth dried her face on the blanket. The knife she'd slipped up her sleeve that afternoon was pressing on her arm – she pulled it out and snugged the handle into her palm; out of sight, and where she wouldn't roll on it. Then she filled her lungs to bursting – held the breath – and let it out again in a long exhalation that bled the tension from her muscles.

Beth pulled the blanket tight around her, lay still, and waited for sleep to come.



## FIVE

Found under a fish stall in a riot, by Rajiv, the Indian Englishman. It made so little sense that Farzin – the unflappable young tailor of Old Town – felt his grasp on reality float dangerously free. For a moment he was sure the plump-faced businessman was here simply to carry on one of the many mild conversations he'd cornered Farzin into during the last month, when he'd seemed to be in the shop every day, having shirts fixed and trousers sewn. Then Rajiv spoke, soft and urgent, and Farzin's focus snapped back into the moment.

“Out quickly and follow me. There's a break in the crowds – I'll get you to my apartment. Move fast but no matter what happens *don't run*.”

Farzin slid out and was up and walking in one quick motion, following his guide as he threaded his way through the market stalls. The square was almost empty but he could hear the sound of a crowd close by, and it seemed to be getting nearer.

He wanted desperately to go faster, but instead he tried to match the movements of the man in front; Rajiv's body-language was loose-limbed and casual; a looter looking for his friends, rather than of a victim hoping not to be caught.

Then they were out of the market square and in the narrow streets, and that was worse; they could have been trapped by a crowd at any junction – there were women hurrying, and running boys in twos and threes – until suddenly they were in the cool gloom of a building's entry hall and Rajiv was locking a wrought iron grill behind them and leading the way upstairs. Like everywhere in Old Town there was the faintest whiff of cat's piss in the stairwell.

Three floors up Rajiv produced another key and let Farzin into his apartment. The curtains were already pulled; Rajiv peeked through a gap down to the street below, then tugged them back in place. He turned to where Farzin was waiting in the middle of the room and let out a long breath, wiping his palms on the fabric of his trousers. Farzin noted absently they were a pair he'd recently made – and that shocked him so suddenly that he had to sit down on the floor right where he was.

His shop was gone; smashed to pieces. Even if he somehow found the money to start again, he'd never survive in Old Town. Not in business, and maybe not even in life, after what Farook had said about him. Everything Farzin had worked towards since he was eleven years old was gone, and his mind was struggling to grasp it.

Faced with a young man in crisis on his apartment floor, Rajiv did what Englishmen have done for centuries: he put the kettle on. When he had made two small cups of oversweetened peppermint tea he sat on the rug in front of Farzin and put the cups on the floor between them. Farzin's eyes unglazed.

“Thank you for bringing me here. You may have saved my life.”

“Somehow I didn’t think your own home would be safe tonight. Or any other night, perhaps, judging by the mood of that crowd.”

“How did you find me?”

Rajiv turned his cup thoughtfully and took an experimental sip. It was still too hot.

“Things got bad here faster than we anticipated – the riots caught us by surprise. I decided to see if you were safe at the shop; when I got there people were throwing stones through the front window. Just lucky timing that I decided to come then.

“On a hunch I went around the back and saw you make for the marketplace. Farook’s gang followed not long after – but they didn’t see which way you went. So I waited until they’d gone and set off to find you.”

Farzin’s brow furrowed as he realised the considerable risks this little man had gone to to get him to safety. He had been a customer for just a handful of weeks, popping in regularly to have shirts made up – handy, he said, as he travelled the region on a month-long buying trip – and now he’d put his own life in danger to save Farzin’s. He wanted to ask why he’d thought to even check on his occasional tailor in the first place, but instead he asked “Who is we?”

“You said the riots caught *us* by surprise. I thought you were travelling alone?”

“My wife. She should be here soon” – he glanced anxiously at the curtains as he said this, but stayed sitting. “I’d like you to meet her.”

“You travel on business with your wife?”

This time Raymond really did get up to check the curtains. He gave Farzin an indecipherable look as he got to his feet.

“I haven’t been a hundred per cent honest with you Farzin. I’m not really in the country on a buyer’s trip. In fact I don’t know the first thing about the import-export business – it’s what you might call a cover. The real reason I’m here is to speak to people like *you*.”

“Oh God in heaven. You’re a spy. They’ll hang us both.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’m a *spy* exactly. Not in the sense of working for a foreign country – though I’ve no doubt the distinction would be lost on the authorities here. As for hanging – well, after seeing the crowd outside your shop today I hardly think being linked to me poses the greatest threat to your life. What *is* the official punishment for homosexuality here these days?”

Farzin stiffened. A certain softness that he’d allowed to creep into his body language vanished as he unconsciously adopted the posture of the typical Old Town man.

“It was a lie,” he said unconvincingly.

Rajiv looked out through the curtains again, his breath fogging the glass as he spoke; his back to Farzin.

“We both know that the truth of the matter, whatever that might be, is irrelevant, now the accusation has been made. Your life hangs in the balance. But there *is* a solution.”

He turned and took a seat on the threadbare couch.

“I’d hoped my wife would be here to discuss this with you, but I think I’d better broach it now. We would have found a way to raise this with you even if the riots hadn’t happened – but they’ve rather forced our hand.”

He settled himself, taking a moment to work out how to begin.

“Farzin... Linda and I work for a secret organisation. A society. Quite an old one, they tell me, and quite large. Though in truth I don’t know more than a half dozen members. It’s how they’ve kept it under wraps for so long.

“We encountered it through our interest in a spiritual movement back home. This was when we were first married, back in England. My wife was rather interested in new religion, as she called it, and was drawn to their beliefs. She dragged me along to some of their meetings, and well, I found that I rather liked it despite myself. I mean, my own father was raised a Shaivite – a Hindu – so it was all quite different for me. But I enjoyed the sense of community.

“Anyway, it was through them that we were approached by someone who belonged to a far older group. I can’t tell you a great deal about them, except that they believe they are advancing the wellbeing of humankind – and they take rather a long view of history. They tweak here, head off the worst disasters there; always keeping themselves out of sight.”

Rajiv shrugged, as if apologising.

“What can I say? We were intrigued. And eventually, we became involved. We’ve since made many trips abroad, for various reasons and under various guises. Some of them quite risky – including this one.

“In fact, we had decided to stop putting ourselves in danger, until this mission came up. We were the only ones who speak the language. And it was too important to turn down. But this will be our last undercover mission. You see, we have had our first child.” Rajiv’s face creased with a mix of pride and concern, and he pressed his lips together anxiously.

“Who we have left behind with people we trust. She’s six months old.”

Farzin got to his feet and started pacing the room. The sound of rioting had grown steadily as Rajiv had spoken, giving his words a swelling sense of urgency, and suddenly it seemed like the mob was right below them, sounding like an angry churning sea.

“And now, Farzin, this is where you ask me something: what is it that’s so important you would leave your precious daughter behind to come to this place?”

“No it isn’t! I don’t want to hear.”

Rajiv stood up suddenly, looking agitated for the first time that day.

“Well I’m damned well going to tell you!”

But he didn’t get the chance. Farzin and he froze suddenly as the sound of footsteps came racing up the stairs.

## SIX

Beth opened her eyes in the dark. Someone had given her a rough but friendly shake and shuffled away – she could just make out their bulky shape moving around the room to the sound of coughs and creaks from the other women. There was no *way* it could be time to get up.

It felt like 4am. The room smelled faintly of farts and straw, and the blanket around her was deliciously warm; Beth lay still on her mat and hoped no one would make her move.

She'd dreamed she was back at school. In the dream her father had been coming to pick her up, and she'd been excited, though frightened too – because someone was planning to hurt him. When he finally arrived he'd burst through the door with a warm 'Bethany!' at which point the Matron had held up something in her hand, and they'd both disappeared in a flash.

Wisps of the dream were clinging to her, trying to confuse sleep with waking life – but the sounds of hefty mountain women pulling on clothes is a no-nonsense kind of noise that dragged her into the present. One of them shuffled up to her, saying "*Bet, Bet*".

Beth realised she was saying her name, and groaned.

"*Up.*"

Well there you go. Another word of English. She peeled off the blanket with a huge sense of reluctance and stood. If anything the bruises hurt more today than yesterday. Her palm went to the handle of the knife where it was still hidden up her sleeve. The shape felt reassuring.

Someone opened the door, and cold air and grey light needled her awake. The old woman who'd fed her yesterday was gesturing to the opening so Beth shuffled after her, bare feet chill on the cold boards. She felt bad suddenly that she didn't even know the woman's name.

That would be the job for today, she decided: learning some names.

The women filed out and Beth squeezed through the door with them, her skinny figure comic next to their thick limbs. One of them gave her a friendly pinch, and someone else ruffled her hair. They seemed pretty affectionate for strangers, and in the circumstances Beth didn't mind; it was better they were nice than not.

She scratched her head. Despite the dip yesterday her hair felt gross and she wondered if she'd ever get a chance to wash it. Then she was led outside – feet curling on the cold stones – and found her answer at a trough filled with icy water. The women were passing a ball of gritty soap amongst themselves and taking it in turns to dunk faces, arms and necks in a businesslike way, though when it came to Beth's turn she chickened out at the prospect of attempting a hair wash. It was barely light enough to see, and cold cold cold, so she settled for a

splash of water in the face – which made her gasp – then lathered and rinsed her hands.

It felt good anyway – and that was something because the next thing she saw was a shock.

The stars were still bright above, but closer to the horizon a light was growing that, moment by moment, made it easier to see. When Beth looked behind her she could make out the slope that Oesha had led her down yesterday, and saw that someone was coming down it again.

Two someones. The little figure in front was surely Oesha, by the way she skipped from rock to rock, and with a tight twinge of fear in her belly, Beth felt sure she knew who the second figure was too. As they got closer it became clear – the tall one following carefully behind was the boy from the truck.

“Good morning to you Beth,” Oesha called softly. They were all awake now, but something about the growing dawn demanded small voices. “I have something for you.”

Oesha held out a pair of shoes. Beth concentrated on them, avoiding the boy’s eyes at all costs – and if she hadn’t been so tense she would have thought they were exquisite. The leather looked soft. They had high tops and Beth saw that the insides were lined with fur. Instead of laces there was a thick strap that could be wound around the ankles. She mumbled something about thank you.

“Put them on.”

She passed them to her and as Beth sat to slip her feet in, feeling suddenly exposed on the ground, Oesha introduced the boy.

“This is Iaqub... I think you have met before? He came the same night as you.”

Beth said nothing.

“He speaks English too. Last night I realised that only I and Jarrett out of all the others know your tongue, and that you would surely be lonely with no others to speak to – so I have decided Iaqub will join your group.”

She still couldn’t look him in the eye. Oesha had pronounced his name like ‘yah-coob’ – Jacob, she suddenly realised he was called, just a version of Jacob with a ‘y’ at the start – and then he said hello softly, and she had to look up at last.

“Do they fit?”

If this was her enemy, he had a gentle voice. Beth took in the gangly limbs, the round, serious face; his grey eyes and dark skin. She got to her feet slowly and thought better of offering her hand to shake – there’d be no getting her knife out if he made a grab for her – but she made a show of shuffling her feet in the shoes and nodded.

Actually, the shoes felt great, but Beth was too distracted to pay much mind. Anyway, they were on the move. Oesha left them to it, and the old ladies waved her and Iaqub over; the boy surprising them all by talking to the woman in her own language. They spoke back and forth for a while, then he turned to Beth.

“It sounds like we’re working before breakfast. They say come this way.”

And she had no real choice but to follow. Work wasn't anything strenuous, though, thankfully. The group went to what looked like a storehouse where a pile of food that the foragers must have brought in last night lay in a heap on the floor. A few apples like yesterday, but different stuff too – berries, nuts, strips of bark and a pile of what Beth swore were hamsters with their little heads bashed in.

Iaqub told her they just had to sort things into groups, then they'd stop for some food. They all sat in a circle around the heap. Iaqub made a point of leaving a space next to him, but Beth crossed to the other side where she was as far away as possible, and could keep him in her sight.

Unfortunately that put her next to the hamsters. She set about sorting some hard berries into piles, while the woman next to her skinned the little animals with gusto. She tried not to look but the sound made her feel sick – the woman was peeling them like bananas, ripping the skin off in one expert move that seemed to turn them inside out – and the whole set-up was making Beth anxious. She shot a look at Iaqub – and without any warning she was back on the forest floor, reliving that awful moment when she'd left the boys to die.

It was too much. As the woman plopped the last flayed corpse on the ground Beth lurched to her feet and bolted for the door. Running, running again, but this time for somewhere to empty her guts; she grabbed the edge of a low stone wall and vomited hard on to the ground, even as a little voice reminded her not to get it on her new shoes.

Someone touched her on the back and she spun around. It was the boy – Iaqub – palms up, unthreatening, but she leaped back anyway, fumbling for the knife up her sleeve – tripped – and sat down hard in the pool of vomit.

The knife flew from her hands, clattering on the stones. Suddenly it was all pointless. Who cared if he was here to hurt her? None of it mattered anyway. She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

When she pulled them away, Iaqub was crouched in front of her with a look of gentle concern. He said nothing, just waited patiently – and when she finally got her breath back everything had changed; her fear of him all washed away. She looked him in the eyes properly for the first time.

“What *happened* out there?”

He sighed.

“Come on, get up and wipe your trousers off.”

He helped her stand and together they brushed the thin vomit off the back of her legs with some dried grass. It wasn't as bad as she'd thought. They moved a little way away and sat down together – and suddenly the words were spilling out of her.

“I *ran* Iaqub! I had to – I'm sorry – I'm sorry. They said the red beards would...”

“Stop! Don't... you don't need to.” He looked hard at her. “We were all dead, Beth. We were all dead anyway.”

A hard shake had broken out all over her, and it was a moment before she could speak again.

“I thought you *were* dead. I heard the shots...”

He shook his head, frowning at himself.

“I can’t really explain it. You ran... and then the shooting started – though not at us. I crawled away through the trees. And then it started getting strange. Everything was happening so slowly. I don’t remember much else – just pictures in my head that don’t make sense. A woman with a gun. Then that girl Oesha’s face and a man in red – then stumbling at the back of a procession, thinking that if I couldn’t keep up I’d be lost forever. I remember coming here like it was a dream.”

She nodded slowly.

“Like a dream for me too. With some stuff that makes no sense.” She thought of the way the high pass had opened before their feet when she’d thought they were on the valley floor.

“But why were you in the truck?”

He wrapped a tuft of grass around his finger, curling it while he stared out over the valley. For a moment he looked like he was about to yank it out by the roots, then he thought better of it and smoothed it out like new.

“Before we came here I was a slave of the Federation for almost a year,” he said eventually. “Then about a week ago they gave me to the red beards to be their bomb.”

An overwhelming sense of pity for the boy welled up in Beth, and she remembered suddenly how he’d looked during the attack, standing still in the middle of all the madness and death.

“...I *saw* you.”

He nodded without looking at her.

“The red beards gave me a choice. Detonate and die quickly, or they’d make me suffer like a dog for days.

“And you know, when they told me this I felt calm suddenly. Almost brave. I don’t know why. But I told them ‘I’m a good person. If I must die, I won’t murder the innocent also’.

“You know what they said then? They told me ‘you’ll die either way, but your family need not. So wear the bomb, or your parents will suffer before your eyes before they are slaughtered, knowing that *you* brought this on them’.”

Iaqub squeezed his eyes shut as a look of pain passed over his features. When he spoke again it was in a whisper.

“But when the moment came, I still couldn’t do this evil thing.

“So they bound me and put me in the truck so that I could be taken to my family, where they would keep their promise. *That* is what I was doing there.”

He looked at Beth and the pain in his face changed to hope. For a moment she thought how beautiful he looked – then told herself off for thinking it.



“But now your soldiers have killed our kidnappers. Maybe my family won’t be harmed?”

Suddenly Beth’s head was in a whirl, all thoughts of beauty gone.

“What do you mean, *soldiers*?”

“You didn’t know?” He shook his head. “Of course you don’t. You had gone by then. There was a woman with a gun. Men in uniforms. I think it was a rescue party from Joint Mission.”

“And Michael?”

“The other boy? I didn’t see. But it’s my hope that he was saved.”

Beth felt a stab of excitement in her belly.

“My father! What about *him*?” She was stumbling over the words. “He’s short – short and round and, and wearing blue – they put him in a red truck. Faded red. Did you see it?”

Iaqub shook his head sadly.

“There was no other truck with us.”

“How could you know? It could have been following behind. We wouldn’t have seen it.”

“I’m sorry. I do know.” He was speaking carefully now.

“Beth, your father was the target of the attack. He was to be taken somewhere else, I don’t know where, but not the way we went. It was so that any pursuit would have to split.”

He looked at her, measuring his words.

“The red beards told me this because they said I must not detonate close to him. They must have wanted to question him before – before they...”

It was so cruel to have her hope taken away. She closed her eyes until she could trust herself to speak again; her voice coming out small and broken.

“Then he really is dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

They sat quietly after that. Above, the sky turned slowly blue, threaded with wisps of white cloud, while the very tips of the mountains lit up like pink-gold beacons. It was a dawn made for grieving.

But grief is a luxury, Beth was discovering – and there are few of those in the high mountain valleys of Isfastan. It wasn’t long before one of the stout old women came looking for them. She called out, frowning, and gestured them over impatiently.

“Come on,” said Beth, getting to her feet stiffly. “Those apples won’t cook themselves.”

But it wasn’t work they were being summoned for so impatiently. It turned out to be breakfast time, which here was served picnic style. The women had gathered in a grassy corner of the terrace and were sharing out handfuls of almonds while a metal pot heated on a tiny fire. Beth chewed her share slowly and was grateful when the pot boiled and someone made tea: it was just a handful of shiny leaves tossed into water that was poured into

three clay cups for them to take turns with, but when Beth's turn came for a drink she found it washed away the bland almond taste and cleared her head. Iaqub took too long with his cup, staring into the distance in between sips, and got a poke in the ribs for it. The women cackled – and then it really was work time.

There was no leisurely pace today though. Every time they peeled and sliced their way through a pile of roots or apples, tossing the pieces to the women who cooked them in stream-water at top speed, someone would arrive from a foraging party with a bundle of something else. Beth was getting a satisfying ache in her hands from all the knife work; Iaqub took her mind off it by asking the women questions and relaying their answers back to her, and together they pieced together an idea of the place they'd found themselves in.

There were about thirty people living in the valley, divided into three different groups. One looked after the gardens and grew the food, their own group cooked and kept house, while a third, led by Jarrett – the man Beth had seen on that first night – spent their days foraging and hunting on the high slopes. Only Oesha sat outside that structure – she oversaw everything (the women simply shrugged when asked about her age), and tended to the old man they called The Kushan. Of him they'd say little, but Iaqub seemed to think they treated him with reverence – and a little fear – and that any authority Oesha held came from him.

When they asked how they'd first come to the valley, the friendly one – her name was Dawa, Beth discovered – told them how most of this group had been outcasts from various villages – banned, almost to a woman, for a relationship deemed wrong. They had arrived in dribs and drabs over the years, stumbling and shamed with scalps shorn, following the rumour of a place where outcasts went. Iaqub frowned at that explanation, as if he'd missed something, but before he could ask more they broke for lunch.

This time there was a square of the dried meaty stuff each, and they drifted away to take a break. Beth sat with Iaqub again, rubbing her sore hand as she chewed and feeling far more at ease than that morning.

“So what about you, then” Iaqub asked her when they'd finished their food. “Why are *you* here?”

“In Isfastan? I don't really know,” she said slowly. “My father sent me a letter. Actually he sent me two – a letter and an email, both saying the same thing: that he wanted me to come. Then when I got here he said he wanted me to stay.”

Iaqub's face creased.

“Why two ways to say one thing?”

“Letter and email?” Beth just shrugged. “He's funny is all. I mean, funny like odd.”

But Iaqub seemed hung up on the point.

“They must have been different somehow. What could he say in the letter that he couldn't trust to email?”

“Nothing,” said Beth, without feeling very sure of it. “He was rambling about tribal politics. To be honest I skipped to the end.”

“That's a shame.” He glanced at her, judging if he was going too far. “Here, tribal politics can mean life or

death. If only you could read his letter again... you might learn why your father was taken.”

Beth thought of the hard square of folded paper still tucked in the jacket she was wearing now. The fact was she could read his words, hear his voice in her head again, any time that she wanted. But as she imagined herself unfolding the letter an image flashed bright before her mind: the man who'd stared at her as he'd vanished – detonating in front of their car – and she gritted her teeth, screwing away the thought.

“What would be the point?”

“Of course,” said Iaqub, the gentleness of his voice reminding her of Farzin – and that was another thought she didn't need to have.

“Sorry.”

“It's okay,” she told him – though they both knew it wasn't really. Then for something to say, simply because it was better to just keep talking, she asked him a question back.

“You said before that you had been a slave of the Federation. Why did they take you in the first place?”

He gave her a wry look.

“Back to tribal politics – you can't escape it here. I can tell you, but I'd have to start at the start.”

Beth spread her hands in a gesture that took in the wide empty sky and the timeless mountains.

Iaqub laughed. Okay. Well do you know what Isfastan means in the old languages? *The centre of the world.*

“It was called that because a very old idea was born here, one that spread to the four corners of the earth.

“A long time ago a scholar in this country draw a diagram that he said showed the three paths to reach God. According to this man there are those who put themselves ahead of all others. This is called the left hand path. Then there are those who put others first – this is the right hand path. And there is the centre path – people who try to find a balance between the two. Are you following?”

Beth nodded.

“So thousands of years ago, right here, that simple idea set fire to people's minds. Before the scholar had grown old, the tribes here organised themselves into one of three groups, according to which path they chose.

“Those who followed the right hand path built schools high in the mountains, and taught that the left hand way was evil. The tribes who chose the left hand path warred with them, and killed them when they could. But eventually the centre way won out.

“That came down to a clan called the Q'Shanites. They emerged about a century later, and dragged all the centrist tribes into a Federation that was strong enough to impose peace on the region.

“It was a long and stable time in this country's history – we all learned about it at school. Yet no one really knows how the Q'Shanites did it.”

“What do you mean?”

Iaqub shrugged. “The left hand tribes had tried to rule with war – but that just caused chaos. And the right

hand tribes tried to win with peace – which got them killed. But somehow the Q'Shanites created a power bloc – the Federation – by who-knows-how? Think of it: all those tribes, still with their own rulers, their own culture – yet somehow the Q'Shanites kept them all in line. For two millennia.

“And then the Federation changed. Somehow they stopped being a balancing force, and began settling old scores. The ancient right-hand tribes were attacked again and their students enslaved. War broke out – this war – and the west was dragged in, blind to the ancient ideas powering the conflict.”

Beth rolled it all around in her head as they looked out over the mountains.

“How do you know all this?”

“When I was young my family sent me to the religious school on the hill above our village. It was considered very – what's the word? – prestigious for me to be accepted. It was a very old place, something like your English monasteries maybe. A school of deep learning; of the right-hand path.”

“They attacked you?”

Iaqub looked away, poking the ground with one foot.

“Some died. Young ones like me were sold to the red beards, to be used in the war.”

“To be used as human bombs”. Beth shook her head. “And all because of one stupid idea.”

Iaqub snorted. “Well, you know what? After all those years of study, being kidnapped was what changed how I see those stupid ideas. I think I finally understood the centre path.”

Iaqub gazed out over the valley, frowning as if he was explaining all this to himself as well.

“All those years they taught us to purify ourselves. Polishing the mirror they called it, so as to better see God's reflection in one's heart. But when those men threw me into the truck?” He paused, remembering that first nightmare of ropes and stifling heat. “I understood then that the grime and dirt that obscure the mirror, this *also* is the stuff of God, so that the violence and horror and grief of the world mixes always with the beauty and the love.”

He seemed very still as he fixed her eye with his.

“And so it was that I chose to condemn my own family to die, and I with them, to save the lives of strangers. Because good and evil truly can be one and the same.”

Beth wanted to speak, but nothing would come out. Her throat seemed to have stopped working – and suddenly she was there again, in the forest, choosing to sacrifice Michael to save her own skin. The guilt of it came pounding round her ears.

Iaqub looked back into the far distance as his voice went low.

“Beth. I think there is more sorrow in you than you can possibly bear. If you want I can teach you to understand your pain. Not to banish it, but to carry it inside you in a place where joy can also live.”

A crushing sensation seemed to bear down on Beth, like a giant foot from the sky. The death of her father;

her betrayal of her friend – her utter aloneness here – it hit her suddenly like never before.

“Please,” she whispered to Iaqub.

“Please.”

## SEVEN

To Farzin's eyes Linda Singer was half graceful and half grotesque. He had never met a Caucasian before today, let alone a redhead, and watching her shake out her long straight hair as she took off her headscarf was both shocking and intriguing. With her long limbs and waifish waist she looked like someone from a Western fashion magazine – while the corpse-like paleness of her skin and coppery hair seemed queasily alien. She took a seat coolly as Rajiv fussed.

Moments before they had heard her running up the stairwell, and the same thought had occurred to them both – rioters had broken in, or worse, it was the secret police. But instead of truncheons and shouts the footsteps were followed by an urgent key in the lock before Rajiv's wife had burst in and secured the door behind her.

Now she didn't seem surprised by Farzin's presence at all, and she only acknowledged his presence with a courteous nod after she had composed herself.

"It's getting worse out there," she told her husband, as he handed her a newly poured tea. She waved away Rajiv's worried questions about what had happened to her, while she sipped and got her breath back.

"Forget about that, Raymond. Tell me, where are you up to with our friend?"

"Your real name is Raymond?" Farzin interrupted.

"It's both," Rajiv replied. "In England I am Raymond, but I was born Rajiv, and it raises fewer eyebrows when I'm away from home. You may call me whichever you like."

Then turning to his wife "And darling, I was just explaining why we are here in the first place."

Linda took over after that. She explained to Farzin that their group knew the country was destabilising, and they had been sent to urgently recruit new people. These would replace those who'd previously been carefully placed within the government, in the civil service, and yes – even in intelligence agencies – over many decades. In the shakeup they were sure was coming many of those institutions would be dissolved, leaving their group blind and powerless in whatever regime might follow. So they needed new people – people with a clean slate, who could be maneuvered into new roles by whoever survived the change. That was why they were here, at considerable risk to themselves and despite everything they owed to their tiny daughter: because it was utterly crucial that they find new people, to maintain a presence in this land...

Farzin put his head in his hands, taking it in – then he shook his head and barked a hollow laugh.

"You left your child behind for me? That was foolish. I am not a useful person to you. I am a *tailor*. Now not even that."

Linda leaned forward. There was a fervor in her eyes, and dreamy idealism on her pale face.

“Not foolish: calculated. Those who wish to build a new world must put principles first, personal lives second. If all the world lived that way, there would be no conflicts at all.”

The look on Rajiv’s face was far more down to earth as he interjected.

“And you’re much more than just a tailor, Farzin. You’re a chameleon. We’ve seen how you live – adapting yourself to your surroundings. Your inner self puts you in danger here, but you’ve learned to hide it; to navigate the realities of this place. *That* is what you can do for us.”

Farzin felt shocked to have had his façade seen through – and he looked it.

“What Farook accused me of... they throw people off buildings for that here.”

“Not where we come from,” Rajiv told him. “And it *will* change here. It’s evolution. And *we* are the people who help make evolution happen.”

Linda got to her feet and clasped Farzin’s hands in her own pale grip. The fervent light was in her eyes again.

“Farzin, we’re giving you the chance to work towards a world where education, rights, and equality are universal. One where the need to hide would be gone.

“And besides,” she added, her voice flattening. “What option do you have?”

Farzin slid his hands gently from her grip, and her fingers lightly met; a pale flower closing for the night.

“What *are* my options?” he almost whispered.

Linda Singer closed her eyes. She spoke as if she were reciting a prayer.

“In three hours a plane of consular staff is taking off. Our people in one of the embassies have secured two places on it; Raymond and I will leave tonight. You will stay here. In the morning two men will arrive. They will take you to another city. You will have a new name, a new identity, a simple job. You’ll be safe there. And then –

“

Her eyes flicked open.

“ – a stroke of luck! You’ll find a new job in a government role. What exactly we cannot say, but whoever among our people rides out the coming chaos will see to it that you thrive. You’ll rise. You won’t quite know how. But luck will be on your side – luck, and the chance to help change the world forever.”

## EIGHT

The two grew closer after their talk – Beth and Iaqub – and so naturally and easily that Beth never understood afterwards how she could have mistrusted him so intensely at first. There was nothing romantic in it – they just seemed to be the same kind of people, despite their vastly different lives: one a religious scholar from the Isfastani mountains, the other an orphaned British school girl – yet both on the same wavelength.

They each slowly adjusted to life in the valley, though it was Beth who struggled most. Not only were there none of the daily comforts she was used to – toiletries, showers, shops to buy snacks – there was virtually nothing here from the last two centuries. There were no phones, no electricity, no running water – other than what ran through their mountain stream – and there was nothing that worked on petrol. They had no generators, no motors – no transport beyond their legs. And so there were no roads or pavements either; no concrete even. In fact in all the valley there were no machines of any kind. The closest thing Beth saw to a piece of technology was a huge loom that was dug up one day. Like the barrels of root vegetables, it looked like it had been too heavy to carry on their recent exile from the valley, and had been dismantled and wrapped carefully in oiled cloth before being buried in a heavy box. Once assembled it allowed the community to make their own clothing, and that was a revelation in itself: Beth realised that virtually everything they wore they'd made themselves.

More than anything though, Beth struggled with the routines. Discovering 4am was the daily, non-negotiable wake-up time shocked her to her core – but gradually she found her place and learned to take care of herself. There was a communal soap lump for cleaning and she bathed in the pool once every three days – which weirdly was enough. In her old life that would have appalled her, but up here even though the sun was hot, the air was cold and dry and you didn't seem to sweat. And somehow not having a daily shower simply ceased to matter.

The bruises on her arms and legs ached constantly, until she realised one afternoon it was the work, not injuries that was making her muscles complain. One day she surprised herself by pitching in on the repair of a wall and spent the best part of a day hefting rocks the size of her head into place. She was sore for two days after, but the next morning she woke feeling invincible and marveled at how hard her arms and legs had gone. Every day she felt stronger and surer, and every day Iaqub made her sit with him for a few moments of meditation – the beginning, he said, of her learning to live with the trauma that she'd been through.

It seemed pointless at first – even absurd – but soon she was able to sit for at least a few minutes without feeling irritated by it, and after a week she found she could follow his instructions – controlling her breath,



ignoring her thoughts – for long enough that it did some good. She started thinking of the calm, empty space she went to in those sessions as a real place, and looked forward to her time in there, always leaving refreshed and lightened. And once or twice she glimpsed a real power in there too: moments of timeless euphoria, where she felt the top of her head might float off, and she surprised herself with bright insights that she struggled to recall in her normal life.

Finding time for reflection wasn't easy though. The technological level in the valley was literally medieval, which was not so much uncomfortable (when you got used to it) as time-consuming; every waking minute seemed to be needed for tasks that in Beth's old life would have taken seconds. Making a hot drink wasn't a matter of flicking the kettle on and getting milk from the fridge; it meant gathering kindling and starting a fire, and filling a pot from the stream – and when it was that much trouble you never just did it for yourself.

That was a big adjustment too, losing your individual life. Meal times, breaks, sleeping – everything became a communal affair. It was a new way of living that chipped away steadily at her sense of autonomy – and yet you gained something too, living so intimately with a group to which you unquestionably belonged.

She'd gained a lot, in fact. The sense of security and acceptance Beth felt there was something she'd never had before. No one knew anything of her life before the valley – and no one cared. That seemed to apply to all the others too; everyone seemed to have something in their past that they'd rather forget, and so their focus was on what they had here, together. She was part of a community, and with it came all the affection and care of having a family.

The group was everything – and gathering and storing enough food was the task that consumed them all. In fact as she settled into her routines enough to pay attention to the others Beth sensed a growing anxiety around the food issue. She saw it in the frown Oesha wore without realising, and the way the banter amongst the women died slowly as they bent to their work with real concern. And soon she saw it in the meals they were given – the dried meat ran out and the food they shared was always a little less than you wanted; never quite enough for the work you had to do.

It came to a head about three weeks after Beth arrived. The foragers had been returning with less and less food, meaning Dawa's group had little to do. The solution was obvious really – so on a morning where everything that could be preserved, sealed or salted had been finished well before midday, and Beth and her group were idling in the sun, Oesha arrived to tell them most of the team would be sent to join the foragers. More food had to be saved against the coming winter or they would all starve, and the extra hands would allow the foragers to comb wider through the valley. It would also free up Jarrett to pursue the migrating deer that grazed the high slopes at this time of year. Chasing wary stags was less sure than picking fern fronds in the lower gullies, but success would bolster their stores like nothing else.

When the foragers returned that afternoon hot, scratched and empty-handed, Oesha ordered tools down and

the whole community gathered on the plateau. A bonfire was made, extra rations were broken out, and Beth helped Dawa carry blankets and skins down from the sleeping huts for everyone to sit on.

Iaqub stretched out next to Beth and propped himself up on an elbow.

“You know, it’s the first time since we arrived here that we’ve seen everyone together.”

They had a handful of dried fruit and nuts between them and they were picking out the good bits as the sun dipped below the valley wall. Beth found one of her favourites and popped it in her mouth – a pale yellow dried fruit with an elusive taste. She chewed, trying to pinpoint the faint perfumey flavour, and shook her head.

“Not everyone.”

He followed her gaze, beyond the freshly weeded gardens where a first blush of green was showing on the raw earth, to the wooden building at the edge of the lower terrace. Somewhere inside was the decrepit old man she had seen on her first night. What was he doing, she wondered? She noticed a few others glancing down at the building. Refugees, Oesha had called them – and they all seemed to think their life here was thanks to him. But what did *he* do with his days? She pictured him playing solitaire on a laptop and snorted. Iaqub gave a quizzical look, but she shook her head and turned back to the people gathered around the fire.

“Come on – they’re telling stories. You can translate for me.” She shoved Iaqub towards the group and they dragged the skins they were lying on into the press of figures.

## NINE

You wiped your palms on the sides of your trousers, and two minutes later they were sweaty again. The last time Arvin remembered being this nervous he'd been sitting his med school exams – and he'd certainly not had a handgun down his pants back then. He'd passed of course, and gone on to swear the Hippocratic oath to his faculty head as part of the traditional welcome to the fraternity. How did the old words go? 'First do no harm'... how that fit with the lump of metal down his waistband he had no idea.

He could feel the gun in the crease of his back as he pressed against the wall. The riots had been raging for six hours now, with no sign of easing off, and the dusty street still felt a dangerous place to be. It was empty now – scattered with chunks of concrete – but all afternoon he'd seen shoals of young men materialise, then disperse, clashing suddenly with the police and their thug militias before melting away to another flashpoint. Anywhere, at any time you ran the risk of being set upon for no other reason than looking wrong – looking vulnerable – or looking like you might support the other side. Arvin had untucked his shirt to conceal the weapon he'd been given and felt ridiculous – no doctor he knew would wear their shirt out, or rolled their sleeves – but tonight, the rougher you looked the better.

Arvin stiffened as two young men appeared on the street, but they ignored him. The pair paused to adjust the masks around their lower faces, then loped off to find conflict elsewhere. Arvin felt a flash of guilt for not being at the Emergency Department tonight – it would be chaos there.

Not that the Head of Department would mind. It was Doctor Panday himself who'd recruited him. On the same night that he'd taken the oath, and earned the right to be called Doctor, he'd sworn another oath, altogether more solemn and secret, just Panday and he in his dark-panelled office. Arvin kneeling, his boss' hand resting lightly on his head. He'd sworn to uphold the values of a group he'd never met – and never would. To advance their cause both here and abroad – a cause he still struggled to define, and yet believed in with all his heart: a path of non-violence; a path of radical peace and acceptance, and all the social change that flowed from those simple ideas. And now here he was with an instrument of death warming to body temperature in the crease of his arse, waiting to meet another man he'd been told – who Dr Panday had told him – belonged to another cell. A man with whom he was to help rescue two foreign Group members caught up in this chaos: high-up Group people. Internationals. People for whom Arvin had sworn he would, if needed, lay down his life to protect.

Hands on trousers again: it was impossible to keep your palms dry.

The contact was here.

Arvin picked his out-of-placeness immediately. A short, well-built man on the other side of the road who walked to an upended box and sat – as if riot-rent streets were a place where you paused and passed the time of day.

Worn out by a day of caution, Arvin kicked off the wall and approached him directly. The man watched impassively as he crossed the road, then nodded as he drew close. Somewhere a few blocks away gunshots broke out and Arvin winced, ducking reflexively. The man looked at him altogether more coolly. Arvin noticed thick forearms beneath rolled sleeves and wondered at his background. Perhaps police. Perhaps army or intelligence he thought – though he knew better than to ask.

“It’s getting worse,” he offered. “The boss wants them out.”

The maybe police, maybe army or intelligence man nodded soberly. “You know where we’re going?” he asked.

Arvin nodded back. “The apartment’s just here.” He wiped his palms again. “Come on. Follow me.”

They passed into a fruit shop that had been looted clean that morning, Arvin guiding the man to the rear where they passed into a darkened room behind the shop. “Just up the stairs,” he said and when the man looked about, trying to find the passage, Arvin pulled the gun from his waistband and pressed its square muzzle into the man’s thick neck. He could smell the fear in his own sweat now, his stomach doing loops. The man went still.

“Say the words.”

Slowly the man turned around to eyeball him, palms raised. Arvin stepped away.

“No words I say can bind me,” the heavy-set man said slowly, grey eyes meeting Arvin’s own. “For I choose the path freely, of my own will...”

It was the same oath he’d sworn to Dr Panday the night he’d joined. An ancient secret society sworn to the cause of peace? It seemed too absurd. With a shock he realised he’d never truly believed it was real until this moment, here in a looted fruit shop with a gun in his hand...

“... and serving only the advance of all,” the man finished. Arvin nearly dropped the pistol in sheer relief.

“Sorry.”

“I was about to do much the same to you” the man said, smirking slightly. Arvin felt a flush of affection for him, tinged with irritation at his seeming cool.

“Now really – do you know where we’re going?”

“Yeah, the flat’s nearby,” Arvin told him. “But the plan has changed. We were going to get the Singers to the airfield tonight, then drive the recruit out in the morning. But the Doctor thinks it’s getting too dangerous, too fast. Says there’s something else fuelling this. He wants everyone to leave tonight.”

Arvin tried desperately not to ask the question that was on his mind, and failed.

“Do you *really* think it could be the Others behind the riots?”

Immediately he felt stupid for asking. The existence of the other side had never been proven. Panday had once told him that the Group had its own dark mirror – an organisation just as old, that strove to undo their own efforts. There were people, he'd said, who believed with religious fervour in the exercise of power itself as the highest principle of man... which Arvin had privately passed off as paranoia, until tonight.

But the grey-eyed man ignored the question.

“If the doctor wants them all out now, we get them out,” he said simply. “Though we’ll need to separate.”

His eyes flicked over Arvin’s frame. “No offense, but I’d like to take the Singers.”

Arvin weighed it up. The other man clearly was the more useful if things got nasty. But who was it most important to protect? It was impossible to know the true value of the new recruit, which meant the two foreigners were surely their first priority. What he’d said made sense.

“Do you have a gun?”

The man shook his head. “No time.”

Arvin offered him the pistol, conscious of the slick of sweat on the grip. The man looked like he wanted to say ‘are you sure?’ but took the lump of metal silently. The relief Arvin felt at losing the firearm was so strong it made him blush.

“Come on then. This way.”

## TEN

Two days later Beth woke inside a thorn bush.

The morning after the bonfire evening they'd all slept in – in fact half of the group had fallen asleep out in the open. They'd eaten a late breakfast – there were extra rations again – then Oesha had gathered them back on the plateau.

Jarrett had been there; the man Beth had first seen leading the procession on the night she made her escape. He was the head of the foraging group so spent almost all his time away from the houses, and Beth was intensely curious about him. Mostly because he was one of the few people in the valley who spoke English, and on the dawn of that first walk in she'd sworn it was *English* English – from somewhere near her home. When he stepped forward to address the crowd there was no mistaking it. He spoke in the mountain language most of the old women used, before switching briefly to his native tongue, presumably for her sake. To Beth he sounded just like someone from Bristol, though there was a twang she couldn't quite place.

Jarrett explained what Oesha had already told them; they were all to be drafted into the foraging crew. The reason they were gathered here was to tell them who went in which group. Beth had a horrible flashback to sports teams being picked at school, and true to memory, once all the men and women had been called out by name and directed to one side or the other, Beth was left standing in the middle, alone.

She stood there, feeling stupid and mortified while Jarrett explained what was to happen. Dawa's group would look for food in the lower valley, plus tend the gardens, he said. The others would glean the forests for any fruit that had been missed, while the Zia – the people from the clay huts who liked to stay separate – were to comb the middle slopes.

"But *you*." Jarrett had pointed a finger directly at Beth, then. "You are coming with me."

She saw Iaqub glance at her enviously – he looked despondent at being stuck with the gardening crew – before Jarrett tossed a waterskin at her and started walking up the slope.

She had no choice but to follow him. She'd even forgotten to wave good luck to Iaqub in the scramble to catch up with Jarrett as he strode up and up and up.

It had turned into a nightmare morning. The sun beat down from a frying pan sky and Jarrett pushed the pace all day, always staying ten feet ahead no matter how fast she moved. At first she'd hoped to question him as they trekked – why *her* if this was a hunting trip; she was a scrawny know-nothing teen. And what the hell was an Englishman doing here? – but she soon forgot her questions as her world narrowed into a little cone of misery: her aching legs, the heat, and a thirst that water wouldn't fix.

Finally, at nightfall they reached the edge of the vegetation, a place where thorn bushes and tussock met bare shale in sight of the first patches of dirty snow. Jarrett stopped at last, but she was exhausted – so exhausted that when he threw her a thick rolled-up blanket (she'd never have made it up, she thought, if she'd had to carry that) her arms wouldn't work to catch it.

They ate and drank a little, then he showed her how to wrap up in the rough blanket and wriggle inside a thorn bush until she was almost out of sight. He smiled for the first time in many hours at her quizzical look.

“Leopards” he told her. “But you'll be nice and safe in there. I'll see you in the morning” – and she was asleep before he could wriggle beneath a thorn bush of his own.

Of course ‘morning’ was an ambitious word for it. After a month in this place her blasted body clock was well and truly programmed and she was wide awake at the usual 4am. She was on her back on the stones with the thorn bush above her, a milky slash of stars showing through the branches.

Lying there she imagined she could feel the earth rotating beneath her shoulder blades, as the stars inched from left to right.

Left to right. That means my head is pointing north and my feet are south, she thought with satisfaction. Then she noticed a light to her left – the east. There was no real dawn light at wake-up time in the village below. Have I slept in, she wondered? But she thought no, this feels like the right time. It must be because we're higher, she figured – almost at the peaks. Dawn comes earlier there.

A scabbling from a nearby bush roused her properly. It was Jarrett, getting out of bed, so she took a deep breath and half-slid half-wriggled herself out on to the stones as well. There was no point making a bad first-day impression. And she felt bizarrely rested despite where she'd slept.

Jarrett stretched, then pissed noisily on the rocks.

“Do you know what we're doing here?”

“Hunting?”

He nodded.

“And do you know why it's *you* with me, not someone who could carry a stag, or use a bow?”

She shook her head.

“No. Me neither,” he returned flatly as he adjusted his trousers. “*He* ordered it. Or so Oesha says. It seems I'm to make you my apprentice and teach you everything I know. Do you think you can handle that?”

A little flutter hit her heart for no reason she could think of. Had the Kushan really said that? She looked Jarrett in the eye – or as close to his eye as she could guess in the faint light – and gave him a confident ‘yes’.

“Alright then. Let's make the best of this shall we?”

He handed her a piece of wood that was smoothed and shaped and about as long as her leg. She wasn't shocked when she realised what it was; in this archaic place she would have been surprised to see a hunting rifle.

“Your bow. We won’t string it; just get used to the way it feels. Try not to knock it around. Do you know where we are?”

“Not really.”

“You’ve been up here before, or close enough – the saddle where we dropped into the valley the morning you arrived is *that* way, just a couple of gullies across.

“We’ve come this high to beat the wind. So this is lesson one: valleys *breathe*. When that sun rises and warms the rocks they will heat the air in turn, which draws it up the slope. The opposite happens at night – the air cools and slides slowly down. One breath in, one breath out, every single day.”

“Which means the deer would smell us?”

“You got it. If we walked up to the deer from below while they were feeding at dawn, the rising air would carry our smell ahead of us and they’d scarper before we saw them. But coming *down* from above in the morning gives us a chance – the wind blows from them to us.”

Beth saw the light had been growing as Jarrett spoke. The pale east had turned subtly golden, framing his head and hiding his face in silhouette. All she could make out was a halo of hair resting on his shoulders.

“Now for God’s sake, try to keep quiet. Just follow me and do what I do. Move when I move, keep still when I stop.

They dropped down the hill, moving quickly at first, but slowing as they encountered more vegetation. Jarrett was studying the ground intently and watching the bushes for signs of stripped leaves. Beth concentrated on moving like a ghost, smirking inwardly when Jarrett made a sound and she didn’t, then wincing with shame when she cracked a branch or sent a stone clattering down the slope.

At a point that seemed arbitrary they stopped descending and started sidling the slope, crossing the shallow gullies that ran down the sides of the mountain. Beth saw that each little gully edge gave them cover as they approached new territory – and that the sheltered inner ‘scoop’ seemed to gather more rain, with greener bushes and more food for deer to graze on. Jarrett slowed their pace to a crawl.

They moved like that – gully to gully, heads down, knees bent – until her thighs burned and her back was aching. Finally, just as she’d decided that hunting was worse than peeling apples – twice as hard and just as boring – she heard something: a noisy tearing of grasses, shockingly nonchalant against their strained silence. Jarrett froze. Beth could feel her heart pounding in her throat. There was silence for a minute or two – long enough to think she must have imagined it – then it started again, *rip, rip rip*, sounding even closer. Jarrett was turning his head side to side, trying to get a fix on its direction. Silently he produced an arrow.

It was coming from the next gully over. Beth realised her hands were shaking, and suddenly her boredom at the hunt seemed to narrow into a single focused point. The moment took on an intensity that she’d never experienced in her former life. Every sense strained to reach over the little ridge to where the animal grazed; every



leaf and rock, every detail, became hard and real. She wanted desperately not to be left behind – to see the wild animal they'd worked so hard to find. Jarrett turned slowly to her – she could see him weighing that very question. Then he gestured her forward with a resigned look. They crept to the gully's edge together.

Beth saw it first. She thought she knew what a deer looked like, but this was... exquisite. Long-legged, rust-red, it grazed its way towards them, oblivious, its antlers performing an exaggerated dance above its head as its mouth worked busily on the grass.

She wanted to gasp, but the feeling she'd had in the forest that night, the treacley slowness, seemed suddenly to be taking hold. It felt different this time, not so strong, and for a moment she imagined that *she* was doing it – pouring out something that slowed the world down, and left her rich in time...

Then Jarrett spotted the stag and drew.

He was going to kill it. She could see that now – seemed to have time to see everything. She saw its ear twitch at the creak of the bow – but not enough, not in alarm – as Jarrett steadied the shaft above its heart.

She shouted 'no'.

"NO!"

And her voice seemed to set springs in the stag's legs.

It exploded forward, spattering turf into the bushes, as Jarrett loosed the string. The arrow flexed, leapt, and skipped harmlessly off the stones. Beth had a glimpse of the deer as it sped past them, head thrown back, eyes wild – and then it was gone, crashing through the brush, the sound of its escape fading into the distance.

Jarrett didn't move until the ruckus had tailed off completely. When he finally turned to her, the fury in his face was terrifying.

"What the hell was *that!*"

All the tension of the morning stalk was in it; all of yesterday's grueling march. For a moment she thought his hand would drop to the knife on his belt, and she stumbled back...

"You precious little *bitch*. What do you think we'll eat?"

He could barely get the words out, so contorted was his face. With a guilty pang she realised it wasn't just the wasted effort of the hunt making him angry – it was knowing what turning up empty-handed really meant. Might they *actually* starve? Suddenly her compassion for the animal, so intense just seconds ago, felt like the indulgence of a child.

His hand was lifted and she saw that he truly wanted to hit her – a backhanded slap across the face, and she raised her arm to shield herself. But it never came. When she looked again he had his anger under control. Somehow, she felt, Jarrett wasn't the modern type who thought hitting kids was wrong. Maybe the Kushan's favour had saved her.

She dropped her guard. There was an intensely awkward silence.

“What do we do now?”

It seemed a simple question, but they both knew what she meant. What do we do now – now that this whole thing has gone sour? You can’t just leave me, she was saying; but I kind of get why you have to, too...

Jarrett took the bow from her hand. He fished a length of cord from a pocket, then strung the bow by bending it under his knee and slipping the cord over its ends. When he handed it back to her she could feel the tension in it; a little ‘D’ shape of controlled energy and potential violence. She thought it summed them up quite nicely.

“Take this, hunter girl, and practice.” His voice was flat with scorn. “This is lesson number two – so you’d better pay attention. I won’t repeat it.”

He slipped three arrows from the fur-lined quiver he wore at his back and held them in front of her. They had little diamond-shaped knife-blade heads.

“Arrows.” Still angry at her.

“Nock.” He showed her the back ends, where the arrows had little grooves to fit the string. He dropped two, and put the last one on his bow.

“Pull it back like this: two fingers below the arrow, and one above.”

He turned his back to her, pulled the string back and released it in one fluid motion. The arrow plucked a leaf from a bush and plunged deep into the earth behind it. She could just see its white feathers sticking out above the grass.

“You pull back until the feathers touch your lips, and aim by feel. If it doesn’t touch your lip in the same spot each time, it’ll never go straight.

“So now, Beth Singer, stay here and shoot your bow. Maybe by the time I’m back you’ll be the hunter that he thinks you are.”

His sarcasm found its mark as easily as the arrow.

“Well where are *you* going?”

“To try and rescue this hunt from the disaster that you’ve made it. I’ll come back for you before evening – later if I get something, sooner if I don’t. Either way, we’re walking down in the dark.”

He gave her a final scornful look before setting off down the slope. The light was stronger now – proper morning – and she could see for miles: the great gulf of the valley stretching out below them, and in the distance the far wall of the valley that it joined with, wooded and wild-looking.

“Try not to break my arrows,” she heard him mutter as he left.

## ELEVEN

He'd been told what to expect, but the strangeness of Linda Singer still took him aback. When she opened the door to her two – what? Couriers? Bodyguards? – Arvin noticed her arms first, so pale and bare – then her height, and then finally her eyes. A dreamy intensity was there, but mingled with a terrible hardness of will. You saw at once why she was so high up.

Her husband, not so much. The pair stepped into the room and Arvin saw that Rajiv Singer was a small round man, bobbing anxiously between his tall wife and the curtains, peeking through regularly to watch the street. The recruit was sitting on the floor. No one bothered with names.

The grey eyed man did the talking.

“The plan has changed. The boss wants you out. He says it’s not safe. That something’s moving.”

Linda looked at her husband, eyes gleaming.

“I *told* you. I told you they were here.”

The portly man brushed her off. “*Farzin* is here. He is our concern.”

Arvin looked properly for the first time at the young man sat on the rug. There were dried tears on his face, he noticed. Suddenly the atmosphere they'd walked into became apparent; there were words still hanging in the air.

“I’m sorry,” the young man said. “It’s still no.”

Rajiv rounded on him.

“Farzin, I don’t think you understand. These people – he gestured emphatically at the curtain, out to the mobs and their chunks of concrete – they’ll *kill* you. This isn’t some passing riot. Things are changing here tonight; it won’t be safe for you without our protection. *Ever*. Let us help you.”

The young man shook his head.

“I can’t hide any more.” He looked up at Rajiv, plaintive. “They burned my shop. Everything I had – because of who I am. I couldn’t hide that.”

Linda joined her husband.

“Farzin. We left our child to find *you*. We need you.”

He lifted his face to hers from his place on the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” he said gently – looking right into those strange, pale eyes. “I just cannot – will not – hide any more.”

Linda Singer dropped her chin, sympathetic. “I understand.”

She looked sharply at her husband.

“Farzin will take my flight.”

Rajiv’s lips were pressed flat. Arvin could see him weighing his words – picking the line that had a hope of breaching this woman’s fierce will. A crash sounded across the street. The young medic addressed the room for the first time.

“Whoever is coming to the plane, we have to go now.”

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The argument raged in the kitchen, their hushed voices doing nothing to conceal their words, but rather adding to the intensity. Farzin remained sitting on the floor. Arvin and the burly man stood – listening openly.

Rajiv had beckoned his wife into the kitchen, where he was battling to change her mind. So far he was gaining nothing. He’d spoken of protocol, of their instructions, even tried to claim seniority – and now he was playing his ace – the only one he had. His last and only card.

“Linda. Think of Beth.”

The moment he played it they all knew that he had lost. Through the crinkled glass of the breakfast bar they saw her in silhouette step closer to her distraught husband and take his hands. “I am, Raymond. Truly. I’m thinking of her – and of all like her -”

“No!” he hissed – desperate now. “Not all others – not the world’s children. Ours. Our Bethany – our child who needs her mother. Whose mother *must* come back to her.”

“I will come back Raymond – you know I will. I just need to stay a while. Think of the chance we have.” Her voice dropped a little more, and Arvin craned forward to catch the words, alive with curiosity. “The others are here. You’ve felt it. The patterns and the speed of this. Something is driving it. To think we could get this close to them. Finally expose them to the world – it’s an opportunity we can’t pass up.”

“And if you don’t find them. What if they find you first?”

But they all knew that he’d lost. You could hear it in his voice. Linda Singer would stay here to hunt out whatever it was she believed they’d stumbled on, while Rajiv escaped to England with the young Farzin in tow. Rajiv knew it, Linda knew – the three of them listening in from the living room knew it... there was an awkward silence while the couple in the kitchen embraced, then Arvin almost jumped as the pair returned silently, holding hands. Rajiv’s face looked grey.

The distraught young man on the carpet lifted his face to them. “I would like to...”

Linda interrupted. "No Farzin. Rajiv is taking you out of the country. To somewhere safe. To where you won't need to hide."

"I can't take your seat!"

"Even if you'd didn't go Farzin, I would stay behind. There's work here I need to do. And think of this: we've told you a lot tonight. It's we who can't risk leaving you here, just as much as you can't risk staying. If you were questioned we would all be exposed."

Arvin thought that Farzin would keep arguing, but he stopped protesting, his face a mixture of gratitude and guilt.

Rajiv, still ashen faced, offered his hand to Farzin and helped him off the floor.

"Come on," he said to the young tailor of Old Town. "We've got a plane to catch."

## TWELVE

It took Beth a while to get over her disbelief that Jarrett had simply left her here. She felt like a child sent to her room for being naughty, and like a child she sent all her hurt and anger outward, blaming Jarrett for dragging her up this blasted mountain only to abandon her on the slope.

It was at least an hour before she began to see another side to it. It began when she realised he hadn't left her any food, and started wishing she had a strip of the dried meat she'd eaten the day she came. That in turn got her wondering where the meat came from in the first place. Which was obvious, when you thought about – it was just she never had – and suddenly her cheeks were burning as her resentment turned into something more like shame. She had been happy enough to eat the meat when she was hungry; just not prepared to see the dirty work of getting it done up close...

With her anger eased Beth suddenly became aware of what a long day she had ahead of her, with nothing to do. After a while she picked up the bow Jarrett had left behind.

In its way, it was almost as beautiful as the deer had been; or at least beautiful in a similar way, its elegance coming from simple functionality and slender lines. It had been carved from a single piece of wood, then finished so that the middle part of the bow, the thickest bit, fit perfectly into her palm. She tried pulling the string back, and only managed to move it a couple of inches; perhaps it needed the arrow on it to really work.

After a frustrating few minutes she managed to keep an arrow on the string long enough to pull it back – they kept falling off – then gave it her mightiest pull. This time she managed to get it three-quarters of the way to her face before her muscles gave in and she let the arrow fly. Or flop, rather. Somehow the front part slid off the bow so that when she released the string the shaft lurched six feet through the air before hitting the ground sideways.

The next one did the same, and the next, until eventually she worked out how to tilt the bow so the arrows stayed resting on her hand. Even then she never managed to pull the string back far enough for the feathers to touch her lips – and on her best pulls the string, released, would whip the inside of her left arm so hard it raised crescent moon-shaped welts that stung so bad they made her cry.

With each pull her arms got weaker until with a yell of frustration she threw the bow on the grass. Even when she was fresh she simply hadn't had the strength to send the arrow more than a dozen feet.

And who was she doing this for, anyway? She was irritated at herself for trying to prove something to Jarrett, who'd been so awful to her; then doubly irritated for having failed. Annoyance spilled back into real anger when she took a drink from the water skin and finished it without curing her thirst. With no one there on the

mountainside to see her, she actually stamped her feet.

Far below, Beth could make out wooded ridges that she was sure were landmarks she'd seen from below in the village. Angry, thirsty and frustrated, she made up her mind to walk back down alone. Purely out of spite she considered leaving the bow on the hillside with the three arrows, but she'd developed a new understanding of how long a thing like that took to make – and anyway, she wasn't sure how far the Kushan's favour, if she really had it – might extend. So she looped it over her shoulder, where it seemed to fit quite naturally, draped the empty water skin around her neck and started the long walk back to where she guessed the houses would be.

In the end she only missed them by a hundred yards. She'd stumbled and tripped all day down the mountain – doubling back when her route was cut off by cliffs, constantly doubting if she was going the right way, and chiding herself for not paying more attention on the way up the day before. By the time she drew level with the first buildings the sun had long ago dropped below the mountains and she missed them in the gloom, passing the entire village without knowing it and only realising her mistake when she was half a mile further on. She only twigged when she looked up at the slope she'd just come down and recognised – silhouetted against the stars – the little waterfall that spilled below the Kushan's shelter.

Climbing back up that slope, exhausted and in the dark, would have counted as the most terrifying experience of her life, if she hadn't actually been kidnapped less than a month ago. As it was she barely made it back up the spray-slicked rocks, and when she finally reached the wooden building above them it was all she could do to crawl, four-legged, beneath its eaves.

Eventually her strength trickled back and her fear subsided. Seeing a faint light coming from an open door frame she got to her feet and – heart beating now for a different reason – stepped inside.

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The Kushan stared into the distance, seeing nothing. Beth had crept into the wooden building where she knew he lived, exhausted, unable to walk much further – just hoping to find a dry corner where she could hide until morning. Instead, she'd found herself in the main chamber of the house, standing behind the Kushan's shrunken frame.

He was sitting cross-legged on a wooden platform, the light from a fire pit flickering on his face. It was the only light in the room; and the only heat. The far end of the room had no wall, leaving it open to the air, and the A-frame roof made a triangle-shaped gap that overlooked the bluff Beth had just climbed. The Kushan was facing the void, motionless in his blood red robe.

Had he heard her? Beth edged around the room, watching for a sign of recognition as she came into his view. Nothing. She could see the ancient, sunken face now; the ugly purple lips. He would have looked dead but for the eyes: bright, hard – staring out into the darkness. Beth shivered. Here it was, the centre of everything that was strange about this place. She was sure of it. Her skin prickled with it.

Had this thing really spoken the night that Beth had come? *You have an enemy*, Oesha said he'd told her. It was hard to believe it now. The firelight wobbled gently; the old man's frame stayed still.

The posture reminded Beth that she'd skipped her own meditation exercises. Iaqub would be disappointed. It had been a hard few days, both on her body and her mind. She desperately needed to rest. Did she dare stay here, next to this living statue? In a funny way it seemed the safest, quietest place – somewhere she could avoid people. And hide from Jarrett's anger.

The Kushan stayed motionless, hands resting in his lap like dead, curled leaves. Beth sank against the sloping wall, and sat where a rafter made a corner of shadow. She allowed the timeless, empty feeling to clear her mind.

It was always a surprise to her, when you moved from mental overload to mental rest, how big the difference was. Her thoughts became clearer – suddenly more her own, as her breathing slowed. The room seemed utterly still.

Why. Why had she behaved that way with Jarrett today? It seemed madness to her now. She *knew* how much the hunt meant to their survival. And she knew how important her place here was. Nowhere else in the world offered shelter to her now, yet she'd put her position here at risk.

Why?

She remembered the way the stag had looked on the mountainside and felt her heart beat harder in her chest.

It was Michael. It seemed so clear now. There was something about its wildness – about its will.

And how its death would help them live.

The memory of lying next to Michael and Iaqub on the forest floor came back to Beth, and she bowed her head in shame. He might even be alive out there, she knew that now, but it didn't change what she'd done. When the moment had come she'd betrayed their friendship: offering up his life to save her own.

That was why she'd warned the stag. And yet the fact was she now regretted her shout. Killing that wild creature would have been a violent, disgusting act. But if it kept them all from starving? If she was honest with herself, she knew what had to be done.

And what did *that* mean, she wondered? Could you really do right by doing wrong? She knew what Michael would say to that – it was all black or white in his view, never shades of grey. But it was *her* choice she had to live with, not his. For a moment Beth pictured what would have happened if she hadn't warned the deer. If I can live with that, she thought, then maybe I *can* forgive myself for leaving Michael – when the sound of footsteps shocked her into the present. She tucked her feet up tight, pulling them back into the shadows as Oesha walked



in.

She was wearing the clothes Beth had first seen her in – white trousers and tunic and a cap fringed with pearls. She carried a steaming bowl and a cloth past Beth, placed them next to the Kushan on the platform, and began removing his robe.

His eyes remained fixed forward. Bright, alive, but unseeing.

As the robe fell away Beth gasped. The skin on his chest and arms was puckered with scars – dozens of them – reflecting the faint orange firelight like lines of melted plastic. Oesha looked over her shoulder.

“If you’re going to stay, you could hold the water.”

Beth stepped reluctantly from her hiding place.

“Lift it up to me while I wash him.”

Without speaking Beth joined Oesha on the platform and held the steaming bowl while the girl tenderly washed the old man, dipping the towel in the water, wringing it, then wiping the coppery skin. Beth kept her gaze down, fearful of catching his eye.

“Now the oil,” Oesha said, pointing to a tiny pitcher. Beth picked it up and poured a little on the girl’s hands. She began massaging it into the old man’s skin. Each limb was gently straightened and the muscles worked; each finger uncurled. The two girls worked in silence, as if they were performing a religious duty. The Kushan maintained his trance throughout. Finally Oesha wiped the oil from her hands on to the towel, took something from the bowl and placed it under the Kushan’s tongue. The mouth opened obediently then closed again, and Beth had a glimpse of the tiny object with the fire flickering behind. It seemed a geometric jewel the colour of blood: a single pomegranate seed.

The spell was broken by the sound of someone clearing their throat. Beth looked to the doorway to see Jarrett lit by the orange glow, his bow and bag still over his shoulder. He beckoned, and she followed him out of the chamber with a feeling of dread, leaving Oesha to busy herself with the Kushan’s robes.

They stood facing each other in the cold air outside. Jarrett broke the silence.

“He looks like a bloody checkerboard with those scars, don’t you think?”

Beth faltered and he caught her elbow.

She’d imagined apologising to Jarrett when she saw him next, but the last half hour had wiped that from her mind. Leaving the Kushan’s presence felt like waking from a dream.

“Jarrett,” she whispered. “What’s *happening* here?”

He sighed.

“Why don’t I show you. Can you make it back up to the houses?”

Beth nodded – then started back.

“Just a second.”

She ran to the side of the building, where she'd first sheltered after climbing up the bluff, and picked up the water skin, the bow and the three arrows. Then she followed Jarrett up the hill in the dark.

He led her to a small stone building at the far edge of the plateau, on the opposite side from the house where she slept. It seemed he had a place of his own. After some fussing he got a collection of oil lamps going and Beth saw they were in a small bedroom, generously carpeted in animal furs. Jarrett was pulling a wooden chest over to her and opening the lid. He rummaged at the bottom, pulled out a bundle, and unrolled it.

Something about it set her ill-at-ease.

It looked like a uniform. The top part was a tan coloured jacket; the bottom looked like tight, dark trousers. There were several leather belts and harnesses and a pair of leather boots, long since worn out.

Jarrett was sitting on the ground – Beth sank down too. She felt defeated and didn't want to know why.

"They probably don't teach you this at school any more, Beth, but we Brits were in these parts long before the modern messes started. Afghanistan, 1838."

She shook her head – she was getting a sick feeling in her stomach.

"I was in a scouting unit. We got overrun by a Pashtun tribal chief, and it was only me who made it out. Bloody Colonel didn't believe the locals had the nous to beat British troops – this was early days you see," he laughed bitterly.

"The pompous prick decided that we'd all deserted, and I'd just had the bad luck of getting caught."

A bitter look passed over his face.

"I was to be shot the following morning. Thankfully my Sergeant saw sense. Let me out of the clink at night – poor bastard probably got shot for that himself, for all I know. He even brought me my boots. Can you imagine how far you'd get in this landscape without your boots?"

"Anyway, I knew the border wasn't far to the north, and I set off straight away.

"They came after me as soon as it was light. I made for the mountains, hoping to lose them in the rough, but they were on horseback and I was on foot. I came over that saddle – up there, where we were the night you arrived – and I couldn't go any further. Up they came, scrambling their horses up the shale, and all I could do was sit there, exhausted, waiting in plain sight.

"And then... nothing.

"I couldn't make sense of it. Just as they came into view they veered away; turned aside and carried along the ridge without coming into the valley. I stumbled down the slope. Oesha met me. Took me to see *him*..."

A frown was on Jarrett's face.

"I don't know how to tell you this any other way Beth. They've been here nearly two thousand years. Oesha was the first – after the Kushan I mean – and the rest came over the centuries, in dribs and drabs; refugees from their own cultures, castaways, murderers some; leftovers from places conquered and forgotten. Time flows

differently here, and no one from outside can get in – not unless the Kushan lets 'em.”

Beth was gripping her ankles tightly, trying to stay steady as vertigo buffeted her, making her feel as though she were rushing somewhere at speed despite being motionless on the floor. She felt like she was going to vomit. And yet, deep down, some part of her felt she had known about this all along.

“Who *is* he?”

“I don't really know. Oesha might, but she doesn't say much. Told me once he was a soldier who got sick of the killing and walked into the mountains to sit down and think. Kind of thank so hard he couldn't stop. Said she found him almost starved, covered in shit; a skeleton with scars and matted hair. His people were from the Kushan Empire, and now he's the last, so he's *the* Kushan. The Kushan who came into the mountains and found a place inside him outside time.”

## THIRTEEN

Arvin was sweating again, though the night had gone cold. It was the kind of sweat that smelled bad – you caught it sometimes on patients when they came in to Emergency with a serious injury. Not on the worst ones, the ones who were really smashed up and out to it, but you got a whiff once in a while on people who'd had time to get scared. Fear sweat. He flapped his clammy shirt in the cold air, conscious that Linda was just behind him.

“This way.”

They scurried across a road into the relative safety of the maze of alleyways on the other side. Even in daylight it wouldn't do to be seen with an unaccompanied woman, especially one so clearly foreign, but tonight it could well be deadly.

Old Town at least seemed deserted, though in the distance they could hear the roar of a crowd in one of the city squares. The sound got under your skin and made you hurry. There was danger in the air, and while for now it was far away, the sense of risk was palpable.

Finally they made Arvin's flat. Linda stood in the shadows while he fumbled for his keys, and then they were inside. The crowd noise cut out as he shut the door behind them and flicked the lights.

Linda seemed more at ease, though to her credit she'd been far cooler than he on their nighttime journey. It had been her plan to go by foot. At first he'd offered to go alone to get his car and then return for her, but she'd argued otherwise, and he'd quickly agreed. Perhaps the car *would* have been safer, but Arvin sensed how hard she'd been working to hold herself together. The farewell with her husband had been quick – they'd both seemed to prefer it that way – but he could tell that their child was on both parents' minds, and she clearly wanted to be active, rather than fretting alone, waiting.

The neon bulbs blinked erratically, then settled into their hard, white light.

He smiled at Linda, as much to show that they could relax.

“You know, when I took an apartment in Old Town, I never knew it would become a safe house for an international *gnnnk*”.

The wire sliced into his windpipe, choking off the words.

Strong arms hoisted him off his feet. The sense of *violation...* the garrote opening his throat in ways that could never be fixed – would not be fixed. Someone was jerking him up and down – the man behind him, tall, *tall* and strong enough – jerking the wire deeper into his throat. And now he was desperate. Gurgling. But he knew what to do. Arvin scrambled frantically behind him, reached under his sweat-damp shirt for the gun in the crease of his back that wasn't there – and died like that, terrified, never seeing the man who killed him.

His body hit the ground heavily. There was no pain. But deep in the black of his oxygen-starved brain, some final vanishing part of him... *bearing was the last to go they said...* registered the rolling, cultured, jocular voice.

“Mrs Linda Singer. It is a *pleasure* to finally meet you.”

## FOURTEEN

Iaqub was infuriating Beth by failing to get the point. After she'd recovered from her initial shock, Jarrett had walked her over to her usual quarters, where she'd spent the night getting very little sleep. As soon as it was light she'd found Iaqub and repeated everything Jarrett had said.

Frustratingly he seemed to take the whole thing with only mild interest – his main focus was on whether it was all possible according to the teachings of various religious scholars. Beth on the other hand, was in a spin – and trying to do the maths.

“If it's really true and he's been here two thousand years, then us staying here three weeks would mean... if he was twenty then and he's eighty now. Would you say he's eighty? Or older? *Iaqub?*”

“...of course al-Amin said that God is outside time, yet immanent in all temporal things. That could be one way to approach...”

“Iaqub! I'm saying that your family might all be dead. We have no way of knowing how much time has passed out there. *Iaqub!*”

It was like talking to a doorpost. When Iaqub started mumbling something about the paradox of divine grace Beth lost her cool and stormed off up the hill.

She was still on hunting duty, apparently. Jarrett had said they'd leave again that night. Which meant in theory that she needn't spend the day helping out in the gardens. The trick would be to avoid being co-opted into some other job. So she kept her stomping up until she was above the last of the clay huts, and well out of sight. Then she sat down and tried to clear her head.

That proved harder than usual. Her brain was racing with mad ideas – and when she finally managed to hold those thoughts at bay for a moment and close her eyes, an image from the attack on the convoy – something she hadn't thought about for days – started looping viciously in front of her eyes. No matter how she tried to will the images away and calm herself, the pictures ran on repeat. The man who lifted his arm before exploding. The streaming dust... she snapped her eyes open, unable to take it. Then clenched her teeth and tried again. But every time she managed to quiet her thoughts the pictures welled up, unbidden – and intolerable. Tears started tracking down her face.

For some reason the image of the Kushan as she'd seen him last night came to her – upright and staring. *He* had managed to disengage from life – why couldn't she, she thought. And then the memory of a strange idea came back. The day they'd walked in, as she'd stumbled down the valley she had been suddenly convinced – absolutely convinced in her delirious state, that the valley was *loved*. That every rock and insect was known,

watched and loved. And now, she thought to herself, now I know who watches...

Just *watch* then, Beth told herself – stop fighting the thoughts and watch. So she sat straighter, took a breath and let the pictures come – just come, without judgment. And as the whole show-reel of horror unwound before her mind's gaze – Farzin leaping and jerking in his dead-man's dance; her father being dragged out his door – Beth pulled her attention away from the images as something subtle floated up from the depths of her mind.

It was so faint she dared not look at it directly at first, so she waited, waited while the idea formed. Slowly it came up; a fish pulled to the surface, where it shows the colour of its flanks. What was it?

The red beards, her father had said. They practiced a kind of genetic apartheid – only those whose hair grew red were free in their tribe. They were hated, Farzin had said. The most hated tribe in the country. Because everyone knew they always killed their captives. On the images ran, while she waited in a state of focus that was totally disengaged. The red beards: she saw them firing into the dust cloud. Grimacing madly. And before that: stacking melons, with their white tunics rubbed red by the dye in their beards.

The dye in their beards.

Like the stag when she'd shouted, Beth leapt from the ground, stones spraying, sprinting for the houses below.

"Iaqub!" she yelled. "Iaqub! My father is alive!"

His captors had *dyed* their beards. The true red beards' colour was natural. Her father had told her that himself. Someone – some group – had disguised themselves – because everybody in Isfastan knew red beards killed their captives.

Why the disguise? Because no one would keep looking for a captive after red beards took them. It would be futile; you'd know that they were dead. But Beth knew the truth. Someone *wanted* everybody to think he was gone, but her father was alive. And she was going to find him.

The dust gathered in a little tail that floated down behind her as she leapt and skidded down the summer-dry slopes. She vaulted a stone wall without slowing, drawing a shout from one of the gardeners as she ran heedless through the crops, then over the next wall where she found Iaqub.

He looked up at her dumbly, still bent over with a weeding spike in his hand.

"He's alive Iaqub – my father. They never killed him."

He straightened as she blabbed the whole story to him, then he looked at his dirt-caked hands when she finally had it out.

"Well?"

"Well," he replied slowly. "I think you're right. He must be alive. No one would go to the trouble of making it look like he was dead, unless they intended to hold him."

“Oh thank you,” breathed Beth. And suddenly the relief was too much for her. Her legs turned to spaghetti and she sat quickly to save herself a fall. She hadn’t realised what a burden those moments of hope had been.

“But how will you find him?” Iaqub asked earnestly. “How can you even start?”

Beth looked at the skinny boy from below. The sun was a white glare in a sky of just the palest blue. Sweat had made rivers in the dirt on Iaqub’s arms before drying. He has an African face, Beth thought, oddly. Why did I never notice that?

“By reading his letter,’ she told him.

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She wanted to find somewhere nice to read the letter – somewhere where she wouldn’t be interrupted as she heard his voice. But in the end the only place she could get privacy was the little corner where she’d peed that day she’d first arrived. It was nice enough, she guessed, with the little stream running by and the green water-fed grass. So she stooped, drank deeply from the clear water, then sat and pulled the folded paper from her jacket pocket.

The faint whiff of spice that she remembered was long gone. But her father’s words were there just the same, when she unfolded the fat wad of paper and smoothed it flat. She laid it on the ground. *Dear Bethany*, it started...

*I’m writing this in the knowledge that I have been a too-distant father for too long (and a poor letter-writer forever).*

*It’s evening here in the Ifastani hinterland. We’re on our way back to the capital having concluded a piece of business that required travelling further than was strictly comfortable – though it was an exhilarating journey – and tonight we are staying in the home of strangers; people whom we met as evening was coming on and who have invited us in. I’m writing on paper they have kindly provided me, in the kitchen/dining/living/everything area, beneath a sooty kerosene lamp, after a rather wonderful meal. The hospitality here is something to be experienced.*

*You have been in my thoughts a lot lately, Beth.*

*Not in the last few months, admittedly. Those have been hectic in the extreme (and more on that later) but with my project now coming to a close I have had more time to think. And what I have been thinking is that I have been a rather poor excuse for a father.*

*What can I say, after all these years, that might mean something?*



*We haven't spoken about your mother for a long time. But you must know that her disappearance affected me deeply. I had always planned to be an attentive father – I was to be the stay-at-home parent, if you would believe it – but when she never returned from that last trip I found I somehow couldn't face that. So I threw myself into work instead – at first, simply as a way to cope, and then later in the hope that I might actually find out what had happened to her. But I should have given it up when it was clear that the trail was cold, and returned home to my daughter – and for failing to do that, Beth, I am sorry.*

*I'm not sure that's worth much, all these long years later.*

*But it is important, I think, to try to make things better. I would like to spend more time with you Beth. In short, I'd like you to join me here.*

*I know that the Isfastan you might see upon the news seems fraught with violence, but a remarkable change has taken place here recently, and I'm excited to have played my part.*

*Do you know much of Isfastani tribal politics? Humour me for a moment while I explain.*

[It was at this point, Beth realised with a guilty flush, that she had skipped to the letter's end the first time round.]

*The wars that have plagued this place for so long are fuelled by tribal differences. With so many clans there is no single group large enough to conquer all and rule alone – and when the West came here and so naively tried to impose a central government, that same diversity meant the effort was doomed to fail.*

*Some believed that military power could enforce a peace – I won't go into the grim statistics of that particular recent failure.*

*My view, however, was that self-rule along traditional lines was the path to stability here. And as all other options became exhausted I found my own views gaining reluctant approval.*

*So a year ago I told Joint Mission command that I wished to begin a deep research of traditional tribal modes of rule – the region has enjoyed long periods of peace in the past, after all – and in the middle of some of the most savage fighting to date my proposal gained the green light.*

*Cue your father – short, plump, suburban Raymond, would you believe – making trip after frightening trip into the hinterlands, until it stopped being scary and became second nature. And what I learned, spending all that time with the real people of this nation, was truly remarkable.*

*I'd decided to target a loose group of tribes known as the Q'shanite Federation, simply because I knew that in the past they had been key to maintaining balance amongst the tribes – and because taken together they are large enough to make either a success or a failure of any national government, if they so decide. But what would sway them either way?*

*You have to understand, first, the mystery of the Q'shanite clans: they have nothing in common. They have different religions, different ethnic backgrounds, different laws, and each has its own leader – yet throughout*

*history they've at times acted in cohesion.*

*What was their link? What was their lever?*

*I had my guesses of course, but it was only by spending months and months living with these people (the ones not yet at open war with Joint Mission, at least), that I began to close in upon the truth: there is a secret ruling dynasty that controls the tribes. And not from within their ranks either, but outsiders: the Subtle Men: a line of rulers who are somehow both feared and revered enough to have made the Q'Shanites – at select moments in history – act as one.*

*And then I found them.*

*Or at least their spokespeople – which was as close as I was allowed to come.*

*All the stories I was told lead me to a remote village, and a single family of pomegranate farmers. I tracked them down. I told them my vision of a country that was self-governed, and peaceful, and where a unified Q'Shanite Federation played an equal part in ruling. I asked them to relay that message on. And then I left.*

*Within a month a remarkable thing happened. One by one the Q'Shanite clans laid down arms. Some had been fighting Joint Mission; some had been fighting each other. But slowly they all fell into line, until I could no longer doubt that it was I who had found the lever that would move them.*

*So now we have had months of peace, and a treaty that is almost signed. And all that time I have guarded the secret of what made the Federation move, for fear that other forces – those with an interest in war rather than peace – might seek to shift the lever for their own ends.*

*Of course with peace breaking out, my time in this country may be coming to an end. But before I am shifted to another posting I want to see you again – to spend some real time with my real family, in this country that I have come to love. And see how my Bethany has grown.*

*Will you join me?*

*By the time this letter reaches you, I will likely be back in the capital. From there I can email you tickets – and send you permission to leave your school. But if I'm not back by the time this finds you – if I'm somehow delayed – then I ask just one thing: come anyway. My driver Farzin Golshiri will collect you (and work out any money needed for your tickets) and you can stay with his family in the city; they are close to me and know my business – all of it, you understand – and can keep you safe and sound until I return. Though I'm sure that won't be necessary.*

*So study hard, keep safe, and please join me out here on the frontiers of the world: it would make an apologetic father a happy man.*

*Yours truly,*

*Dad*

Beth folded the letter and breathed until her throat came unstuck...

*Golshiri*. Was that all she had to go on? Farzin's family name? She couldn't make much of the whole Q'Shanite business – was it them who'd taken her father? Or was it some other group opposed to peace? But at least she knew two things now, rather than just one: she was still convinced her father was more likely alive than dead, and now she had Farzin's surname. Golshiri. They lived in the capital, her father had written, and they knew his business. All of it. Beth clenched her teeth, her decision already made. She slipped the letter into her pocket.

## FIFTEEN

“Pagonis! *Pagonis!*” Major Hornbrook bellowed. “Bloody Greek” he added – but under his breath. Major Hornbrook had been stationed at The Villa for a week now, and as mission head he’d naturally read Pagonis’ file. He’d been surprised to learn the twinkly eyed little soldier had earned his security chief role with the kind of combat experience that was hard to come by these days. It was hard to reconcile with the bald young Captain’s friendly demeanour and the mis-match confused Hornbrook. Being confused made the Major belligerent, and though he’d never admit it this whole posting was hard to understand. The house they’d rented in the middle of Lebanon’s countryside was smothered in rambling scarlet bougainvillea flowers that choked the verandahs and window frames and made the Major think of his wife back home – while the interior was crammed with an assortment of soldiers, ‘cultural engagement officers’ and ‘regional experts’. The point of the whole package was hard to fathom, and the faint suspicion that him *not* understanding was the whole reason he’d been posted here made the Major even more belligerent than usual. “Pagonis!” he bellowed from his stuffy little office. “Why is there a man passed out on my couch!”

“Sir?”

The Captain appeared, an expression of pleasant curiosity on his nut-brown face. The Major thought suddenly of some of the choicer passages in the Captain’s file and immediately became flustered.

“Who the hell is this?”

He gestured at the similarly short but distinctly less athletic-looking man slumbering on his couch. Were there no height restrictions in foreign militaries? It seemed absurd.

“That’s Singer sir. From cultural. I believe he’s one of yours.”

“Yes but what’s he doing here?”

“Outreach, I understand. Drinks a lot of tea with the militias and makes sure that they’re on our side.”

The Major scanned the Greek man’s face for any hint of mockery, but found nothing he could get a handle on.

“On my *couch*, I mean.”

“Oh, drunk I imagine,” said Pagonis cheerfully. “Had a bit of a rough time of it lately, has our Singer. Hold on, I’ll get his man Farzin.”

As if by arrangement a tall, slender civilian appeared in the doorway and took in the scene – the bristling Major in his cramped office, the security chief making a heroic effort to appear deferent and sincere, and the dishevelled Indian man asleep on the only space in the room not cluttered by files.

“Be a good sort and take his legs would you Farzin? I think we’ll need to carry him,” Pagonis said as the Major slumped exasperated into his office chair.

“Please do not tell me, Captain, that this Singer chap has his bloody butler on my payroll?”

Farzin, who had lifted Singer’s feet as Pagonis lifted him under the arms, managed to appear gracious as he inclined his head towards the Major.

“Unpaid, sir,” he told him, and the two men carried the still slumbering Raymond Singer out of the office.

Down the hall they found a tiny storage room. Propped in a broken chair and ministered black sweet tea by Farzin, Raymond began to revive. Pagonis sat on a crate and sighed – his bright-eyed expression replaced with worry.

“What are we going to do with you Raymond?” he said softly.

“I’m *fine*,” he said. A defiant snarl was on his face, though his eyes were closed.

“You should be at home in England, raising your daughter,” Pagonis told him, speaking softer still.

Raymond slammed his hand angrily on the chair arm, still snarling, but there was nothing he could say.

“I can look after him,” Farzin said gently – and then Raymond was up and out of his seat, backing Farzin against the wall and gripping his shoulder with surprising strength.

“You don’t have to man! There’s no debt” Raymond told him – fixing him with his eyes so that he would know he was sober down there, underneath the booze.

“She was obsessed! She thought she’d found them. She would have stayed no matter what...”

Raymond’s head dropped to Farzin’s shoulder and he pressed fingers into his closed eyes to stop the tears.

“You were a side-note Farzin,” he whispered hoarsely as his grip collapsed into a needy almost-hug.

“It was all her choice. You don’t owe me a damned thing.”

But Farzin didn’t see it that way at all.

## SIXTEEN

Jarrett was out of sorts. He tried again to light the lamp – a simple bowl of animal fat mixed with spices to hide the smell – and swore as he dropped the coal for the second time. With the metal tongs he plucked it from the floor, where it had already singed another hole in the deer skin mat, and this time managed to maneuver it against the lamp's little wick long enough that it began to glow. Dropping the coal on a metal tray where it could do no more harm, Jarrett sat back – taking the time to watch the lamp slowly bring his room to life as the tiny flame grew – the bed with its furs, the wooden chest – until a sudden irritation at the sheer wastefulness of all this light flared in him. He clapped the lid on the lamp, killing the light, and splashing drops of molten fat on his hand in the process. Jarrett swore again – creatively, quietly – and stormed outside.

As always the night air calmed him. A faint, steady drizzle settled on his upturned face. After a while he sat, hugging his knees to his chest while the mountain mist laid nets of raindrops in his hair.

It had been ten years at least since there'd been a newcomer in the valley. A decade in which Jarrett had been happy to pretend the outside world didn't exist. Ten years – he shuddered to think what that meant in outside time. And now he shuddered again, out there in the cold and damp, as he thought for the first time in a long time of the people he'd left behind. Damn the girl, Beth Singer, and her unwelcome whiff of the world. He imagined for a moment all those people alive beyond the valley, scurrying like ants over hot rock, rushing through time – rushing into decay while he waited behind: a schoolboy wagging off while the world moved on. He thought of his sisters, and of his friends, all long gone. The worms burrowing through their graves; the headstones falling; buildings springing up over the forgotten soil only to fall and rise and fall again. Damn her for coming here.

She'd left the valley that morning, just as they'd been due to hunt again. He'd imagined they'd restart their training – felt maybe that the Kushan truly *had* seen something in her, despite the last disaster with the stag. He'd been looking for her among the sleeping huts when she'd bowled past him, full of hard fury. Not for him, but for her father, he'd gathered afterwards; for the chance that he was alive. She'd simply shouldered past and dashed down the hill. Jarrett had followed after.

There was nothing he could say to stop her, and little point in doing anything. So he'd watched as she pillaged the stores modestly, taking food for a few days and a waterskin, plus the knife that she'd taken a fancy for, and set off down the hill – brows fixed in a determined frown. Iaqub, the boy who'd come in with her – the one who'd settled in so much better, almost as if he belonged here already – he'd hurried after her while Jarrett had waited above. He'd watched as Iaqub caught up with her beneath the Kushan's shelter, watched as they

paused, speaking – though he'd not heard any of the words – then they'd embraced and the boy had turned and walked slowly back up the hill. As Iaqub climbed Beth had descended towards the line of the pine forest, heading for the bottom of the valley far below. Jarrett had seen her turn one last time to look back, and even at that distance he knew that she saw him watching. Neither of them waved.

And now he was out of sorts. For what he could have done – should have done – all those years ago himself.

He'd had a family, friends, a country – but had he ever tried to leave? He shook his head at his self-indulgence for thinking these things. As if it could make a difference now.

He stood in the dark and stretched his calves. He'd go and see Oesha. The hunt was off now, and he knew there was no point trying to sleep.

Oesha heard him coming down the slope and pulled the door curtain aside to light Jarrett's way. Another irritation. After all these years his feet were surer in the even light of the stars than in the tricky shadows that firelight gave. He slowed his descent to lessen the risk of turning an ankle on the scree above the Kushan's home, and bit down his annoyance at Oesha's misplaced gesture.

Irritated at being irritated; if that was the worst of it he would soon forget himself – and talking with Oesha would do him good. Anyway, he wanted to ask about Beth and what her leaving them might mean.

Oesha's face turned up to him, reading the disquiet there as she welcomed him in wordlessly, stepping aside so he could duck into the door.

Jarrett shivered minutely as he entered. She had always been his closest friend here – his confidant and mentor, so that he'd forgotten who she had been. He remembered it now and the strangeness of it fell on him all over again: the child vessel, who'd once been worshipped as a goddess. Pampered, dressed up like a doll and venerated as an avatar of the deity... for as long as the doll was deemed suitable. Not by a long shot was Jarrett the only one who'd fled the world.

He looked at the unlined face – in appearance no more than ten, yet somehow old beyond them all – and thought he saw troubles in there too.

"You're cold Jarrett, come by the fire."

He followed her into the Kushan's chamber, which as always was both warmed by the fire that burned in a pit there, and open to the freezing air.

"How is he?" he asked, ignoring her concern.

She shrugged. They looked at the Kushan's withered body, where it sat cross-legged on the platform, motionless with blank and staring eyes. "As before. Deep. I doubt that he would know we're here."

Jarrett watched the ancient man's face as he crossed what you could hardly call his line of sight. Not a flicker. He gathered a handful of dry branches and busied himself feeding them into the flames.

"The girl left."

“Yes,” Oesha said, studying Jarrett’s face. “That troubles you?”

Jarrett snapped a branch and poked it into the embers. “Old memories is all. Her voice – my part of the world.”

“You’re sad that she’ll die out there?”

Oesha was studying his face, and Jarrett smiled for her concern – not for Beth, but for him; worried that he was grieving a new friend. Or perhaps grieving his past anew.

“You think? I don’t know she’s as delicate as all that.”

Jarrett had observed the girl in the highlands. Up there you saw more clearly. Or rather, people could be *seen* more clearly – away from others, in the quiet of the mountains, far from the noise and bustle that people cloaked themselves with.

Beth, he’d noticed early, had a talent for listening. Not the kind you did with your ears, but with your whole being. He knew she’d noticed something different about the valley; had somehow sensed the way time gathered here in thickening coils. Eventually it would be wound so tight they would need to leave again, to let it release like an overwound clock-spring, before they could return and settle for another season. But for now they were at the beginning of the cycle, and for Beth to have felt the subtle changes in this place so early was remarkable.

“No,” Jarrett told her. “I think young Beth Singer has more to her than that. Whether she knows it yet or not.”

Oesha raised her head to reply, but was startled by a crash outside. The firelight trembled on the Kushan’s face as the two friends glanced at each other. Uneven footsteps were coming down the hall.

“Right on cue,” said Jarrett dryly, as they both got to their feet.

Beth was sodden.

Her hair hung down her face in wet ropes and she moved with the heavy gait of someone in the depths of exhaustion – though her face was fixed and fierce. She lurched into the room without pausing and was on the Kushan so suddenly that Oesha and Jarrett were for a moment caught unawares. She grabbed fistfuls of crimson robe and half fell, dragging the old man with her. Oesha cried out, catching at the Kushan as he sprawled forward. As the three of them struggled his eyes flickered into life.

“Let me out!” the girl was shouting. “I *know* you can hear me! You have to let me out.” And as Jarrett leapt forward to support the old creature’s limbs a sudden shift jolted his equilibrium so that he had to steady himself against the floorboards. Oesha and Beth’s wide eyes told him they had felt it too: a pulse, a change – to something as fundamental as the background gravity, yet not that – such that the shock of it stilled them all. Jarrett gaped as the Kushan, now sprawled on the floorboards, slowly came to life. A welt had formed above his eye where the papery skin had hit the ground, and he rasped as he tried to form words with a throat that was dry from lack of use.



In all his years in the valley he'd seen the old man speak no more than half a dozen times, and only then in an inaudible whisper into Oesha's ear. Now Jarrett recoiled as the Kushan's eyes swiveled across the room and he croaked slow English words that addressed them all.

"Salt the meat," he said, raising himself back to sitting with difficulty. Even Oesha was too shocked to help. The old man's lips worked grotesquely as he tried to lubricate his parched mouth.

"Salt the meat and leave."

Beth was staring at the old man with a sort of holy terror, her wet clothes beginning to steam so close to the fire.

Jarrett had an idea of what she was going through. Soaked to the skin – that meant she must have set off for the valley floor, only to find herself inside the freezing rainclouds at the mountain's top. She'd travelled through a loop in reality so confronting that your mind would not take it in, then had all the pitch black hours of the climb down to where she'd started from in which to try...

"*I don't know what that means,*" Beth was saying.

"Go," the Kushan croaked. He was gathering himself into his familiar form, like a praying mantis composing itself after a strike. Jarrett could see his gaze retreating behind the eyes, though there was anger there still to be seen. His last words were barely audible.

"Your intrusion... has consequence..."

Jarrett could see that Oesha was appalled. What had this cost the old man? Was his time left now measured in days, or even hours?

The form went still and again that sense of slowness began to flow, weakly, and then more steadily until it was a thing you could barely notice. Jarrett gripped Beth's wrist tightly and hauled her to her feet.

"Come," he said not unkindly. "I'll tell you what it means."

As they left for the short walked up the shale to Jarrett's hut Oesha was straightening the Kushan's robes, her face fearful and concerned.

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For the second time that night Jarrett was struggling with the coal, though this time the shake in his hands had a different cause.

"Do this for me would you?"

Beth, still dripping from her trek, bent to where Jarrett was trying to relight the lamp, and took the tongs

with their hot coal from his hands. She held it delicately against the tiny wick until it began to glow under its own power, then placed the ember carefully on its tray. He marvelled silently for a moment at her composure.

“You came all the way down here in the dark and cold. You’re lucky to be alive. If you’d stopped moving in those wet clothes you would have died.”

She was slumped against Jarrett’s sleeping cot, finally giving in to her exhaustion.

“My father is alive. I have to find him.”

“I get it.”

“You don’t! He was dead. I grieved for him. And now I find...”

For the second time in their lives, Jarrett caught Beth as she collapsed. He grabbed a fistful of her jacket and held her until she could sit upright again unaided.

“Jarrett,” she said thickly. “I was up there. Up at the tops. But you *saw* me. I set off walking down...”

“I told you girl: no one comes in or out if he doesn’t want it.” He shook his head. “Don’t mistake him for some kind of holy man. He protects this place – but we’re trapped here all the same.”

“But he said I could leave...”

“...when the meat is salted. Yes.”

Jarrett sighed, his thoughts again touching on his family, dead a long, long time ago.

“There is a village beyond the bottom of the valley. Do you remember we passed through there the night you came?”

“They have a legend that every twenty years a procession of ghosts passes through their village. For a week at a time they board up their houses for fear of seeing something they feel they should not.

“And those ghosts are us Beth. The Kushan’s will holds this place suspended, even as time outside moves on. But the world cannot tolerate that forever. So, once a year he releases the valley – lets time lie fallow. And on that night, we pack everything perishable that we can carry and travel down the hill – as you saw us when you first came here.

“The Kushan is carried on a litter, and as he reasserts his will we re-enter, passing out of the bottom of the valley and travelling in again from the top – just as you did tonight. And when the last of us has passed in, the valley is closed again to the outside world, for what in their time is many years.

“And what do you think we find when we return? You saw it yourself – or you would have if you’d been awake. Even though for us only one night is spent on our long walk out, when we return to our homes we find many years have passed without us; our fields are rank and weedy, our houses succumbing to the seasons. And *that* young lady is the meaning of ‘salt the meat’.”

Beth looked at him, half curious, but mostly exhausted.

“I still don’t get it.”

“It means that, if the Kushan lets you leave – and it seems he’s willing – then the valley must be opened. We’ll *all* need to leave with you – even him – then re-enter while you remain outside. It means that when we go we’ll need to carry a great store of preserved food, for there’s little that we leave behind that’ll last the many years we’ll be away. Do you see how it goes? If we leave before our crops are ready to harvest and carry away, then all our work in the fields this season will be wasted. And then what will we eat when we return?”

Jarrett looked at the whip-thin girl and marveled for a moment at everything she was taking in. He at least had been a soldier when he’d come here, and had been steeled somewhat by the world. Yet this one – this was little more than a child, and yet she still fixed him with something close to fierceness, even though she was swaying again where she sat.

“The short story lass: we need to bowl over that stag before we go. And I think he wants *you* to help me do it.

“We kill the stag. We salt the meat. Then we all walk out together – and you stay out.”

She nodded – finally comprehending.

“And find my Dad.”

Jarrett made a maybe-maybe face that reminded Beth of her father.

“If he’s still alive...”

“...then I’ll find my Dad.”

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They left for the tops two days later, when Beth had fully recovered, setting out without saying goodbyes. Normally a hunt lasted a few days at most, but this time they raided the stores ruthlessly, with the intention of staying out until they’d made their kill – however long it took.

That was fine by Beth. On a normal day the gossip levels in their little mountain community were at least as bad as her old school – Beth had found this deeply amusing when she’d first worked it out – but now it all seemed to be about her. Word had got around of her encounter with the Kushan, and it seemed to have spooked a lot of people. Plus the old ladies had gotten the pip. They knew now that the Kushan was letting her leave, and Dawa in particular seemed to be taking it personally. They’d probably never understand how she could want to leave her place with them, and it was both touching how they so clearly felt her to be one of them now – and irritating that they could be so senseless of her need to go.

Iaqub was the worst though. Beth realised now he’d never truly grasped what was happening in the valley, despite all their talk. And now, having watched her depart in one direction, only to reappear from another he

was shaken to the core. Sure it was weird – really weird. But for Beth the strangeness of the valley – the odd way time worked – it was all part of dozens of shocking things she'd had to accept. Yet for Iaqub, who loved talking about mysticism and religious ideas, finding all of that stuff from his books intruding on the bright daylight of reality had been too much.

He'd retreated from Beth as well, and a pain had set up camp in his eyes that she guessed was the realisation that his family could be growing old without him. Before she left with Jarrett she'd cornered him by the food store. Come with me when I go, she'd urged – but he'd turned away frowning, too preoccupied to answer – so she'd left him to his thoughts, and she and Jarrett had hit the trail.

And now, up here on the heights, she was as happy as she could remember being. A cloud lifted from her as they climbed, and the very fact that she was taking action to shape her own destiny filled her with life again.

Her path was clear. What she wanted most in the world now was to find her father, and to do that their hunt must be successful. The death of a deer would mean food for them all. And food they could carry meant they could leave the valley, opening it again to time so that Beth could pass out: the knowledge of it spurred her on. Life became simple – the hunt was her purpose, and for the first time in a long time Jarrett was feeling his age as Beth's young legs drove her up the slopes to the high pastures where the red stags fed.

She was sharper now too. Jarrett watched in those first days of the hunt as Beth's eyes devoured the landscape; no longer just seeing but *reading*. A scrape in the moss, the flattened grass – she began to find meaning in it all. And soon the other senses followed. A bird began scolding from a ridge over and Jarrett saw her stiffen. Was it clucking at a stray leopard-cat making its way home late in the morning – or could its telling-off be directed at the prey they sought – a stag straying into the bird's territory? For Jarrett there was a thrill in seeing her awareness opening, and he caught himself wondering more than once what she was truly capable of.

From Beth's side, Jarrett now seemed much more open – though definitely out of sorts. The man she'd first met in the valley had been the archetype of composure – a hunter and leader who knew the value of his place in the community. Yet the Jarrett of late seemed shaken up. For Beth it made for better company – he began talking about the outside world, for one thing. Though at times she caught him gazing at their campfire at night with real sorrow and she wondered if he was thinking of the sisters that he'd told her about – or of their children's children as it now would be. There was something of the father-daughter in their relationship these days, and she was aware enough of her role to know how it must affect him: how he might wonder about the family he had left behind when he'd chosen to stay in the valley. Yet for now she was enjoying his company, and thrilling at the almost equal role she now played in the hunt.

They fell into easy routines. By day they scoured the slopes, pursuing the herds of big-bodied reds. Jarrett would shoot the rock gerbils they came across, which kept them fed – his accuracy with a bow was incredible

(good practice, he told her; the rodents were the same size as a small deer's heart) – and when their true prey eluded them for another day they would build a campfire and fall asleep next to it, bundled unselfconsciously together against the chill, or else slid beneath the thorn bushes for safety if the fire would not light.

A week passed that way, and still they took no deer. And now it was getting desperate. Until one still, silent morning when they shouldered their packs, high above the world, and Jarrett turned to her with a grimace.

“Beth – ”

She cut him off.

“Don't worry. Where shall I meet you?”

Jarrett thought a moment while Beth bit down her disappointment.

“Here. If there's no luck today we have one more hunt – the far gullies northwards – and then the game is up. If I'm not back tonight it's good news, for I'll have taken one and be heading down. If that happens, wait the night then travel back down to meet me. Otherwise I'll see you here, and we try our last gasp tomorrow morning.”

Beth slid her pack to the ground. She knew Jarrett hunted better without her. It stung to admit it, but the Kushan's favour – his request, for whatever reason, that Beth join Jarrett on this hunt – had at last collided squarely with the community's need to eat. Even if it only gave Jarrett the slightest advantage to move without her, she knew he needed to take it. She sat on her pack to save her trousers from the jagged stones and watched Jarrett slip into the morning greylight.

Perhaps she'd gotten from this trip what the Kushan had wanted anyway. She'd wondered about it, for hours at a time – you had more than enough time for thinking up here. And she'd settled on the explanation that made most sense to her: the Kushan had wanted her toughened before she left the valley. There were dangers out there that she'd not even begun to think about – who had taken her father? How would she find him and get him back? The Kushan knew she'd need to fend for herself if she was to survive out there alone, and this gruelling week among the shoulders of the mountains was his idea of a final hardening before she left.

If that was it, it had worked. The last softness of the naive girl who just a few months ago had boarded a plane for Isfastan had been boiled away. The pre-dawn starts from a bed among thorns and rocks... the hours on her feet with a few dried fruits to last on, or a fatty bone to chew if they were lucky – it had given her a hardness and a focus that would frighten the school friends she'd left behind – the ones she'd once envied for their self-assurance. She doubted they'd even recognise her today. Beth remembered how she'd marvelled at Oesha's grace when she first arrived and had seen her moving over the rocky ground – yet now Beth surpassed even Jarrett in her speed and sureness over the earth. She closed her eyes on the pink-gold dawnline that was forming above the far mountains and turned her thoughts inward, pulling her limbs into the meditative stance that Iaqub had taught her.

She had learned this valley almost by heart. Almost *with* her heart. Knowledge and love for the place had grown together. At night she would hold it all in her mind, exploring the gullies and thickets in her thoughts, and as she grew in knowledge her waking mastery of the land had grown too. Beth held it in her mind now as she meditated. She pulled air into her lungs and tasted it; listened to the land through palms on the cool rocks – letting it all fall into her mind. Time passed.

She opened her eyes on a morning almost come.

Above her the light had lit the bare peaks, though where she sat the warmth was yet to arrive. The valley's cold out-breath was still flowing down the slope and Beth watched its passage in the nodding grass heads as it slid past her to the deer that grazed below.

The sight shocked her.

It was one thing to see an animal when you were stalking it, keyed-up and focused, and something else to find it before you when you were so open and unexpecting. The moment of awe seemed to last longer than she could bear – then Beth's fingers found the handle of her knife.

Surely not? It was thirty feet away, and as many below her; not yet straight beneath, but grazing from right to left so that any second it would cut her wind. It hadn't seen her – you could see that in the unhurried motion of its antlers – yet any moment the slow flow of air would bear her smell to its nostrils and the tawny red bulk would bolt for safety.

And then she had it. The slow air. If she moved faster than it she would outpace her own scent trail, and for those few moments be invisible to the stag's nose – undetectable.

Something crystallized in Beth's mind then, and she thought of the way the Kushan's valley seemed invisible to outsiders. Her mind seemed to light up with understanding, her thoughts becoming bright and sharp. Something about the way time seemed to flow more slowly in this place: a slow catabatic breath slipping down the slopes, and all of them somehow moving ahead of it, unseen by the world outside.

Knowledge seemed to freeze the moment. The stag was nearly beneath her. She needed to move before this knife-edge clarity left her.

Beth leapt to the right, and then down, curving away from her scent stream; falling faster than the current of air. Her feet sought out mosses – silent patches of grip – it was more controlled fall than run – and then she was above the stag; it was still blind to her, oblivious – until the flash of movement was on him and he reared up, too late, as Beth sent the knife in deep behind his foreleg.

As the animal kicked, Beth reached beneath and gripped the far leg, heaving it up and under so that the two of them tumbled over – the knife driving deeper – up to her wrist now in hot blood and hair – and she felt her face crush against the animal's flank as they crashed down the slope together, the spicy scent of deer filling her nostrils.

By the time the two of them had rolled to a halt the stag was barely alive; panting shallow breaths as the dark red heart-blood welled out of it. And then it was over. Beth rose to her feet, shaking with adrenaline. Her right arm was red to the elbow and already the dry mountain air was making the blood tacky, threatening to glue the knife to her fingers. The stag's eyes had gone fixed and glazed.

Jarrett found her like that an hour later. He'd doubled back on a sudden gut feeling, and spotted her standing above the stiffening corpse. She still had the knife in her hand.

He stood next to her for a moment and whistled at the sheer size of the animal, then they set to work silently – gutting the beast, setting aside the organs that they would keep and discarding the rest – then preparing the body for the gruelling carry down the hill.

There was no real question of Beth taking the load. Jarrett wore the deer like a grotesque backpack, his skinny legs comic beneath its bulk, one hand gripping the antlers to keep its head from lolling round. Beth walked slowly beside him, carrying Jarrett's gear and her own and picking out a path for him as they made their crippled way down.

They were half an hour off full dark when they finally made it back. Beth could just make out Jarrett's face in the gloom – a mix of pain and concentration. As they approached the first houses a crowd appeared, murmuring appreciation; they surrounded them, lifting the stag from Jarrett's shoulders and spiriting it away, four to the load. Jarrett collapsed gratefully to the ground.

As the people dispersed a white figure appeared from below. Beth watched as Oesha picked her way toward them, a faint smudge that grew solid as she drew closer, until the girl-priestess stood before them, unearthly in her pale robes. She looked up at them wordlessly as the sweat chilled on Beth's shoulders, reminding Beth of that first strange night when she'd arrived – the sense of exhaustion, and the strangeness, and the memory of violence. She rubbed her fingers absent-mindedly, crumbling off the last flakes of blood. She was different now, she knew, to the girl who'd come here then. A new Beth.

Oesha turned and they walked together to the Kushan's home.

Four days later when Beth emerged again the whole community was gathered, waiting. The Kushan was brought out in his crimson palanquin. The women lifted him to their shoulders while the others hoisted their own packs. Beth saw jars that they'd sealed together amongst the bundles; meat newly salted. Then they formed into a loose line – Jarrett at the front, Oesha following, then Beth and the Kushan's litter, with the rest behind – and together they began their departure from the valley, threading their way downwards, back into the world beyond.

## SEVENTEEN

“It is a matter of tradition!”

R’shad atan al-Q’shani slammed his hand on to the table and stood, real anger showing on his face.

Colonel Spencer stayed seated. Time had not been kind to the Q’shanite leader, the Colonel mused. His face looked drawn and fierce, the years of warfare showing there – of conducting his rebellion under the ever-present threat of death from above. Of moving only at night, and sleeping with no thought for comfort. He had been a remarkable ally in this great game they were playing, but he was becoming bad-tempered in his old age.

“I wish you would sit down”.

The wiry figure huffed at him.

“You think the traditions of a thousand years can be changed at a whim by me? You think a leader is so free, to do as he pleases?”

“I simply point out that I have learned all I can from Singer. And he is the only remaining end that’s loose. *Please R’Shad...*”

The Colonel gestured at the table. The tribesman scowled – but sat reluctantly.

They had met here before, the Colonel remembered, back when they’d first begun this game. If the stakes had been high then, they were higher now. He might have explained away having met a tribal leader in secret in those days – but now that the Federation had seized more than half the country, while Joint Mission had remained a mere spectator to the violence at his own, very public, insistence... Indeed, the stakes were high. Best that all remaining ends were neatly tied.

R’shad picked an imaginary speck from the heavy table by way of calming himself, and chose his words.

“Believe me Charles, if it were up to me, he would be dead tonight. But very soon you must deal with a new leader of my tribe. And he wishes to make of our captive a final test.”

“I’m not sure I follow all your tribal politics as closely as I could. *Why* must you step aside? Is your position weak?”

He thought that might have angered the man again, but he only sneered.

“The opposite, Charles. It is very strong. Like the traditions of my people.

“Our way demands that when my first grandson reaches his eighth year, I must relinquish my rule to his father – my eldest son – and on that night be judged.”

The Colonel gave a quizzical look. The tribesman began measuring his words, as if being careful not to say too much.



“It has always been this way with the Q’Shanite tribes. Our leaders enjoy absolute power. But power checked by the knowledge that one day they will be held to account.”

He shrugged.

“In truth, it holds not the fear that it once did. But my son is a cautious man. And superstitious. He waits to see how I will be measured, now that my time has come, before he follows in my path.”

“He *will* be an ally to me then?”

The Colonel looked at R’Shad shrewdly as the old man shrugged again.

“Surely. And he will seal his own alliance with you in the blood of the man we hold. But you must be patient until he has claimed my place. Soon the warlord father will cede rule to the peacemaker son. He will secure the country with forces from your own firm – and pay for it with the treasure that I won. Then the world will look on the peace you made and praise your name, unknowing of the game we played.”

The Colonel drummed his fingers on the table, seemingly satisfied.

“Another matter then. Have you seen my son?”

R’Shad started, then spread his arms theatrically, showing the voluminous arms of his robes.

“I am old, Charles. But I am not a *fool*.”

“I don’t mean to suggest that you might have taken him. *Again*. But I thought you might have word...”

“Word of what? Your son is missing?”

The American shifted his bulk in the wooden seat.

“I’m not concerned for his safety. But our relationship is not what it was. Our men in the field are close to him. Control is... blurred.”

R’Shad’s incredulous face seemed calculated to infuriate, but the Colonel remained controlled.

“Your son has gone rogue? I have to ask, Charles. Was the boy in your confidence?”

“Hardly a boy now. And no. But he is not stupid. He may suspect some part. Perhaps he has considered that it was I who allowed his life to be put at risk that night. Our relationship did seem to suffer somewhat at the hands of your men.”

R’Shad nodded genially at the dry remark, as if in genuine sympathy.

“I can imagine it might. But you know, the mountains of Isfastan are a stranger place than you imagine. Many things might have happened out there that could change a boy. And I *have* heard talk. Of that night that your men killed mine...”

The Colonel looked at him strangely.

“Women.”

“Pardon?”

“A woman killed your men. Rumours reached my ears too. So I took the liberty of finding the Captain who’d

led the rescue.”

“And?”

The Colonel seemed to ponder.

“Worth speaking to. She’d left the forces by the time I got around to finding her. Didn’t seem very happy about the whole affair. It sounded like it might have been... messier... than they let on. And there was something else. Something I could tell that she wanted to get out but that she wouldn’t say.”

“Maybe it was she who killed the girl?”

“Beth Singer? My son said she wasn’t with them. Are you suggesting he’s a liar?”

It was supposed to sound menacing, but the threat wasn’t in it.

“I’m *suggesting* that maybe you don’t know your son as well as you thought...”

The Colonel sighed heavily.

“It crossed my mind. Your men say she was in the truck; my son says she wasn’t. In truth I doubt we’ll ever know what happened. Died in the wilderness most likely. A shame really – there was potential there that the father never saw.”

The Colonel looked thoughtful a moment.

“Her mother was a remarkable woman, you know. I met her once, many years back. But no matter. All that’s important now is that the father dies.”

R’Shad rose to leave, confident that their business was concluded. He nodded his acquiescence as he wrapped himself in his robe.

“As soon as my son takes power.”

It struck him suddenly that he would be unlikely to see this man again. The Singer man would die, his own rule would pass down to his son, and while Spencer gnawed at his plans, heedless of the true stakes, R’Shad would seize the valley for himself. Safe in the great sanctuary that he’d finally found he would be feared, revered... deathless; directing from afar. He paused a moment before he opened the door into the night.

“Family is important Charles. I hope you find your boy.”

## EIGHTEEN

Oesha stood alone above the houses, watching the wind buffet the valley. Many years had passed in the night they'd been away. The crops they'd tended so carefully that summer had gone to seed and grown wild. Generations of weeds and buckwheat and tubers were tangled over the neat stone walls of their gardens, the vines dead and dry now that autumn had arrived. They would need to glean what they could before trying for a final crop ahead of winter, but for now, watching the tangled mess being thrashed by the wind was as close as Oesha could get to expressing how she felt.

She was old. Had she been here a thousand years, or just a few? It was impossible to know. She might be the oldest person alive, apart from Him. Yet at some level she was still the nine-year-old girl she'd been when she arrived here – and today it was her nine-year-old's heart that was breaking.

Jarrett had left them.

Their annual procession from the valley had always been at the same time. For Oesha – who lived for order – it was unsettling to leave mid-year. And doubly so for the villagers they encountered. In outside time their arrival normally happened at set intervals – you could guess it roughly by the changes that you saw. There had always been one family of pomegranate farmers who met them, even as the rest of the village cowered in fear, and if you watched closely you might see a girl's wide-eyed face one year, and see the same face in a young woman a season later. Next year, if you saw them, their face would be weathered and lined – with other children gathered round her skirts – and if you saw her again she would be old and close to death.

Everything changed. The only constant was the effect their arrival created – a kind of holy awe for the ageless beings who appeared, decades apart. But this time the awe had been tinged with terror. They were early, and unexpected. No gift came from the pomegranate family, and as the sound of Oesha's bell had carried down the slope the others had clearly run in fear. Livestock grazed unattended. An axe lay abandoned among uncut wood. And from somewhere close by a child's wailing could be heard. The change had frightened them, just as it had unsettled Oesha – and as they'd paused in the village, as they'd done every night on their yearly march, Jarrett had made up his mind on the spot.

"I'm going with them", he'd told Oesha simply.

The Kushan's litter had been laid down for a moment while the bearers rested and the girl, Beth, prepared to leave. She was the reason for this disruption. Oesha was sad to see her go, though she understood why. But when the boy Iaqub had announced, unexpectedly, that he would go with her Oesha's heart had filled with foreboding. As the pair had shouldered their packs – both pausing to embrace her – Jarrett had stepped forward

with a strange look upon his face.

“I’m going with them,” he’d told Oesha. “They need protection.” But in her heart she knew that was not his reason. The two children from the outside world had set a thought in Jarrett’s mind that could not be banished: where were *his* family? Where were *his* people now, after so many years had passed? And Oesha knew he would not return.

Father, brother, son – he had been all these to poor, strange Oesha. Ageless woman, or little girl – she knew not what she was. In an entire life given over to service his friendship was the only thing she could truly call her own – even her name belonged to someone else – and now she had lost him forever.

Change. She could feel it coming. The Kushan was dying; he could not last much longer, and when he was gone what would she do?

A commotion below brought her back to the moment. A knot of the old women had formed around something in the gardens and their voices were raised in alarm. As she watched, Dawa broke from the circle and ran up towards her, gesturing for Oesha to join them.

Oesha smoothed straight her silk shirt-front and moved quickly down the slope. The women parted their circle as she approached.

On the ground was the object that had alarmed them – a square of fabric the same size as her palm. She bent to inspect it, then picked it up.

The first thing she noticed was its texture – impossibly smooth, it crackled unwholesomely beneath her fingers. And it seemed to weigh nothing at all. The sense of foreboding she’d felt last night at Jarrett’s departure rose again in her belly.

It was a pouch of some sort, torn open at one end, and there were words on it in the English letters Jarrett had taught her.

Their sound as she read them aloud was like the toll of the bell to the terrified villagers – an omen of dread that nobody could understand. None of those gathered knew what the words said – though they all understood what they meant:

Everything was changing.

“LHP Security,” Oesha read slowly, glancing up to see the expression on Dawa’s face.

“Meal, Ready to Eat.”

Part 3  
Kushan Empire

ONE

Something was forcing Raymond awake. He *wanted* to be awake, it was just so hard to make it happen. After all the weeks, months, years he'd spent a captive that was the worst thing – being endlessly semi-conscious. Never fully sleeping, never fully awake, and utterly lacking the willpower to drag himself from the nightmare.

But something was forcing him awake. A blessed gust of cold air stirred round him; something was hurting his eyes. With a tremendous effort he forced his eyelids apart to stare at the figure silhouetted in a rectangle of painful light.

It stepped through the doorway and closed it; the light cut mercifully out. Raymond jolted fully awake.

He was in the stone stable that had been his universe for longer than he knew, chained over a wooden bench. He tried to lift his head to see who had come; tried to talk – but the figure spoke first.

“Rajiv. It has been a long time. It’s good to see you.”

Impossible!

Raymond yanked against his chains, trying to sit upright, casting his head round excitedly.

“Charles? Charles, I can’t... I can’t... you found me!”

Hope and relief overwhelmed him, so pure and fierce that he began to weep. Tears blurred his sight; he tried to wipe his face on his shoulder, looking eagerly to the door for whoever else would come and cut him free.

Charles stood against the wall patiently, watching Raymond’s face.

No one else came through the door. Raymond looked back up to his rescuer.

“Charles?”

All those years. All those years of work; of plotting and sacrifice. All the selfless service – it all became worth it to Charles Spencer in that exquisite moment as he watched understanding spread upon Rajiv’s face.

“*You.*”

“Yes, Rajiv. Me.”

Charles looked for something to sit on, found a feeding trough, and thought better of it. He stayed standing.

“We danced with each other so long, didn’t we Rajiv? Knowing *of* each other, but not *who* the other was. Until I worked it out.

“And you know what? In the end you disappointed me. I might have even let you go free. I did think about just having you watched; picking off the people you made contact with over the years. And then I realised what your true usefulness would be: to start a war in Isfastan.”

Raymond was breathing heavily, head hanging. Gurgling sounds came from his throat.

“Well. *Re*-start a war. You really nearly did it, you know. Peace in Isfastan – who would have dreamed!

“The Shura...”

“Hmm?”

Charles bent down to hear the ragged captive better.

“The Shura would have worked. I *made* it work.”

“I know you did! You forced me to act. You’d found someone. Your lever. This ancient ruler of my allies. It was something I could never have anticipated; you deserve credit for that at least. I had to pull you out, and quick.”

Raymond was gathering a hold of himself now.

“So why didn’t you kill me?”

“Why indeed. You certainly complicated things. You’d put your finger on a superstition that runs deep. Even if I’d had you killed the message was out there. My allies the Q’Shanites believed that you, Rajiv Singer, had passed a message from the Q’Shan – their ancient judge, jury and executioner – to join the Shura. R’shad would have shrugged it off – he’s a practical man. But his son is not, and he takes over the rule so very soon. So I need him to believe that his superstitions about the Q’Shan have no basis.”

Charles leaned forward a little.

“I need him to see his own father commit blasphemy and get away with it. Do you understand what that means?”

Raymond grimaced.

“Of course you do. So on the night that the son takes power, you’ll lose your head – and he will see that the boogie man they’ve lived in fear of all these years is nothing but smoke and mirrors. *That’s* why you’re alive Rajiv. So I can kill you at precisely the right time to make these people mine forever. These people, and this country.”

Charles straightened.

“I understand if that’s a little bitter.”

“You *knew*.... you knew who I was all along. What gave me away?”

Charles moved to the door, opened it; stood again in the rectangle of light. For a long moment he held Raymond's eyes and said nothing. Understanding finally dawned on Raymond's face.

"Yes, Rajiv." Charles almost whispered it.

His adversary crumpled in utter defeat, tears rolling into his gaping mouth, snot dribbling on the dusty ground.

"We chose two different paths, Rajiv. You thought that kindness could match cruelty, severity, *discipline*. But mine is a higher order than yours; to pass our way is to be utterly changed. Or else destroyed."

The chains rattled as Raymond strained at them, desperate and broken.

"Please wait – *please!* Beth! What happened to my Beth?"

Charles Spencer turned and closed the door.

## TWO

War had come to Isfastan. The further from the valley they travelled, the clearer it became. Dead livestock. Untended fields. And now, at the far edge of the mountain grasslands, where the line of the north-south highway bordered the desert, its mark was unmistakable. Burned-out cars lined a road that was dotted by the sooty scars of mortar fire, like a strip of meteor-pocked moon laid on the land. Beth wrinkled her nose at the smell of bitumen, and looked beyond the road to where dawn was waking the desert.

It was a landscape of pebbled hillocks stretching to the horizon – as if a sea had turned to stone, then been baked and shattered by the sun. A single green island rose in the near distance – a last outpost of the mountains they were leaving, and the site of Iaqub’s monastery home. They were close enough for Beth to make out the shape of its buildings on the closest spur. But between them rose the smoke.

It was a single column, a pale rope in the still air, barely visible. Iaqub, Beth and Jarrett stood at the edge of the grasslands and wondered what it meant.

“A cooking fire. But it could be anyone.” Jarrett shook his head. “We don’t even know who’s fighting who.”

Beth squinted. They were standing in dry waist-high grass on a gentle slope that dropped to the road about 200 yards away. The smoke seemed to be coming from the top of a rocky dome perhaps a mile beyond the road. The little hill rose higher than the rest, commanding a broad view of its surrounds. The land felt empty; watchful.

“Who’s fighting who – or how long we’ve been away,” she added.

They’d been travelling for over a week now, walking down the long river flats that led out of the mountains, and already her time in the valley felt like a dream. Back there Jarrett had told her he’d been born some 200 years ago – that he’d fought in the Anglo-Afghan wars far before her time – and nothing she’d seen in that strange place made her disbelieve him. Out here, life felt sharp and real – but she felt cut adrift, unsure of the world they’d now rejoined.

“Can’t we go around?”

Iaqub’s face was nervous. Of the three of them he was the least comfortable out of doors, Beth had discovered. He’d been born in Isfastan but spent most of his life within the monastery they were now trying to reach – and a life of study and praying meant the wilderness to him was full of fear.

Beth on the other hand had spent her life in a series of privileged private schools, yet she now felt so intimately in touch with this place she could scarcely remember her old life. She studied the curves and contours of the land below them, and considered what route they could take across the open ground. There was no



denying it – it would be hard to reach the monastery without being spotted by whoever was on the hill. There was little cover; no vegetation that she could see. As she watched, the glare of the rising sun washed the faint white smoke from the sky. If they'd arrived here a moment later they would never have known there were people there.

“We should meet them head on.” Jarrett was looking at her grimly; ignoring Iaqub. “If they're unarmed – all well and good. But if they *are* armed... well then...”

“Well then, what?”

She looked at him, incredulous.

“You can't kill someone just because they happen to be armed. That's just *wrong* Jarrett.”

The huntsman sucked his teeth.

“What's *wrong* is getting yourself killed because you stop to ask if someone's nice or not. There's a war on here Beth. Nothing's black and white in war, and I mean *nothing*.”

She shook her head.

“No way. That's a cop-out. Anyhow, you don't know what it's like here now. If they have guns, they'll be automatics – like nothing you'll have seen. You'd never stand a chance.”

That was a lie. She knew how Jarrett could move; if he could reach them unseen he had as good a chance as any. The truth was she couldn't bear the thought of taking that path. She'd once chosen to leave her friends to die in order to save her own skin. If she was ever going to live with herself she needed to grasp whatever moral clarity she had left.

“Sorry,” she said as emphatically as she could. “Iaqub's right. We should go round.”

Jarrett looked at her like he guessed what she was thinking.

“Look lass, I know it sounds harsh. But if we let those guys get behind us, we're blind. We'll drop Iaqub at his monastery but then we've gotta back-track to the road to follow it south down to the capital. We can't leave armed men on a path we have to take.”

Beth frowned, disoriented suddenly.

“South as in that way?” she pointed down the road, to their left. “Nuh-uh. We need to turn right. To the north”.

Jarrett was getting frustrated.

“If you want to reach the capital, then we need to turn *south*. And we're not leaving those guys behind us.”

Iaqub looked at them blankly, happy to acknowledge he had zero direction-sense. Beth paused, weighing her self doubt against her confidence as she ran through their route in her head.

“Sorry Jarrett. You've got it wrong. We need to go north.”

Temper flushed into his face.

“You’ve been here a few months Beth! I marched across this God-forsaken country bottom to top, while the officers trotted by on horseback. You don’t get to tell me what way’s what.”

Beth could feel anger prickling her own scalp now, but Jarrett kept talking over her.

“If we turn south and follow the road by night we’ll be in Boaz in two weeks; you find your Farzin’s family, I’ll find a boat for home.”

Understanding dawned on Iaqub’s face. He looked to Beth then back to Jarrett.

“Jarrett,” he said gently. “Boaz hasn’t been the capital for more than a century. *Rabaz* is where we’re going.”

Jarrett went pale as Iaqub’s words sank in. For a moment Beth thought he might actually be sick. He sat down heavily in the grass, all the fight gone out of him.

“*Rabaz*? That was a trading post...”

“Two hundred years ago it was a trading post. And you know what else?” Beth felt a flush of guilt for driving home her advantage. “You ain’t gonna be *sailing* to England.”

Jarrett shot her a look so full of confusion she almost felt sorry for him.

“Come on – get up. We’re going north. And we’re skirting that goddamned hill.”

Beth set off down the slope, the dry stalks swishing round her knees. She was a hundred metres ahead when Jarrett pushed himself back up to standing.

“Wait! Beth, wait. We’ll go round. But please, you stay here with Iaqub while I scout it first. It’s safer.”

She looked at him, weighing it. Deep down she knew she was putting them at greater risk – and why? Because of the shame she carried? But she knew she couldn’t bear the alternative – and what Jarrett said made sense. Let him scout a path around her guilt. She flopped into the long grass and let the tall stems conceal her. A moment later Iaqub sat quietly beside. Soon the sound of Jarrett moving carefully down the slope faded into nothing.

“Don’t be long.”

### THREE

Sulemein sat bound on the red earth, watching the man dig his grave. Soon he would be knelt on the edge of the hole, shot without ceremony, and his body ragdolled into the ditch. But for now he was alive – wrists and ankles tied with plastic cord, his red beard clotted with blood – and all that was left was to watch the man with the shovel labour.

It was puzzling. What kind of man dug graves while prisoners of war sat idle? Sulemein would have forced his captives to work, then had them lie in the hole to be killed. Indeed he had done as much more than once. He would never understand these Americans.

Perhaps the man would be shot too? He was obviously one of the soldiers who'd attacked the Edomite village. He wore their uniform, with the LHP insignia on the shoulder – or had until he'd stripped off to dig. He was fit, strong, slight – shorter than the other men who watched their captives, but clearly one of them. Maybe he'd betrayed his comrades somehow – tried to desert and was now paying the price? That would explain the way the others avoided looking at him. Certainly there was something uncomfortable about his presence. An intensity that made you hope he'd not look your way.

The man threw down his shovel and climbed from the ditch. No, he thought. None of the guards so much as blinked. This was no deserter. This was the leader of these men.

The man approached him, boots sinking into the freshly turned earth. The smell of burning reached Sulemein's nostrils and from close by came the sound of gunshots – the last hopeless moments of a fight they could have never won. He thought of his village and winced.

“Do you know who I am?”

Sulemein looked up from beneath deep-set brows. Red earth was running in sweat-runnels down the man's arms.

“A pig.”

He said it flatly. Hoping to anger the man and have this hurried. There was only one way it could turn out.

“My name is Spencer,” he replied calmly. “Michael Spencer. Now do you know?”

He exhaled slowly.

“Now I know.”

He lifted his head to his captor's eyes. He realised the sound of gunfire had stopped. Behind the man a line of figures – his own kin; Edomite fighters of his own village – were being led by soldiers towards the ditch.

“You are the lamb.”

Michael cocked his head in polite curiosity. One of his men handed him a gun.

“Every redbear knows who you are. The sacrificial lamb. The boy whose father had him captured so he could start this war of profit.” Sulemein looked over to the fine men being shoved, some wounded, towards the raw hole in the earth. A tremendous sorrow washed over him. A mix of pride and anger and contempt for the men who had bested them.

“Every one of us will die tonight. But not one would trade their place for yours – the boy who was sold by his father.”

The foot moved so quickly he never saw it. One moment he was holding the young man’s eyes, the next he was on his back, lips mashed by the boot, head pressed into the newly dug ground.

Michael squatted on the earth beside him.

“*Your* people dragged me from that car. *Your* people would have killed me that night. This war was started by *you* – and this is what we call justice, redbear.” Michael bent lower, speaking softly, almost in sympathy. “The actions of your own people, returning to you.”

Sulemein’s broken mouth twisted into a smile.

“Not even a very smart lamb....”

Michael cocked the gun. Sulemein’s eyes brightened suddenly.

“Before I die – tell me. Is it true you saw them? The people who don’t grow old? I always wondered if the night of ghosts was real.”

Michael felt his face flush cold, as if he were going to be sick. He found that his legs had turned to spaghetti, just like on that night all those years ago. The man’s words had knocked him badly. He sat back on the claggy clay, his weapon forgotten.

The red-bearded soldier was looking at him quizzically. Michael waited until he could be sure of his voice before he spoke.

“Let the others go,” he told his men. “And get this one on his feet. You’re coming with me.”

## FOUR

Jarrett was late. Beth could feel her irritation turning to anger, and from anger into dread – which irritated her more. She sat up and kicked her heel savagely into the earth. Iaqub was asleep.

“Bloody-minded prick”.

No matter that it had been she who’d insisted that they skirt their way round the watchful hill. Now Beth found herself blaming Jarrett for going alone to scout their path. It was almost midday. The sun was hot in the sky and Jarrett had been away for hours. She kicked the dirt again, spattering it over slumbering Iaqub’s clothes.

“God damn you Jarrett!”

She got to her feet and threw her water skin on to Iaqub’s belly, startling him awake.

“Stay here. I’m going to find out where he’s gone.”

Iaqub sat up, watching Beth stomp down the grassy slope. Halfway to the road she stopped.

A fresh column of smoke was rising from near the base of the hill, uncoiling into the sky in greasy billows. Beth began to run.

## FIVE

“Why am I alive?”

Sulemein was still bound, but now just at the wrists. He'd been made to walk all night and all day and now he was sat inside a circle of men, like a goat surrounded by wolves. The soldiers watched him, or sprawled, relaxing. Others, he knew, were outside the small dell they were hidden in, out in the dark amongst the trees keeping watch. Only the one called Michael sat with him inside the circle. Sulemein could see his eyes in the starlight looking at him thoughtfully.

“That’s a good question, redbear. I hope we can find out. What do they call you? What’s your name?”

“Sulemein”

“I like it. Like Solomon, no? The king who was tremendously wise and tremendously rich. I want you to sing me a song, Solomon. Tell me what you meant by ‘night of ghosts’.”

The tribesman shifted, wary at the odd question.

“Children’s stories. That’s all. Told by fathers to their sons when they camp at night, watching the herd.”

Michael tilted his head, considering the bound man. His eyes were unreadable.

“We were children, all those years ago, when your people dragged me from that car. The redbearings wronged me then – and I’ve been digging holes for you ever since.”

The menace coming off Michael was palpable. He moved closer, speaking softer.

“But there was one who wronged me most of all. I want to find her very much.”

Sulemein tried to hold his eyes, and failed. He shook his head.

“You should have put me in that hole. I can’t help you.”

“Maybe. But I’ve heard that phrase before – a few years after that night.”

Michael looked at him sidelong.

“When I was old enough I went to find one of the soldiers who rescued me. A woman – their Captain. Retired. You could tell someone had been there before me, asking the same questions – the fear of it was on her. And she drank. But one thing that she said struck me: *the night of ghosts*. It was something the local villagers had talked about, she told me. Something very strange had happened that night, and that was all she could say to explain.”

Michael jiggled his leg, thinking.

“You got me curious, Sulemein, when you asked about the night of ghosts. So I want you to tell me that story – before I put you in your hole.”

Life was strange, Sulemein thought to himself. This American was not much younger than him – still in his twenties – yet their childhoods could not have been more different. He cast his mind back to those early years with his father, when they first camped together in the summer pastures high in the hills. They would build a fire and his father would sit back, sometimes with a baby goat inside his jacket to keep it warm, and tell stories that his own father had told to him. What could that possibly mean to this man? No matter. On a night like this those memories came back easily. If he was to die here he would be glad to have remembered those times.

“As you wish, Michael Spencer.”

Sulemein breathed deeply, thinking back to the way his father had told the stories then – the old-fashioned tone he used. He settled himself cross-legged, bound wrists laid in his lap. Out in the dark the silence deepened. He sensed unseen men straining to listen.

“It is a very old story – about the Master of Isfastan in the long-ago times.

“As you know, for many years the tribes of Isfastan have fought each other for control. But a long time ago this country was ruled by a single man. It was said that he lived in a far valley that no one could enter, venturing out only to cast judgement on his subjects – and the people we call Q’Shanites today venerated him and took for themselves his name.

“Yet he in turn ruled them with disdain. He slayed their leaders if they ruled poorly, yet only passed judgement when they were old and grey, so that the Q’Shanite chieftains lived in fear of his final visitation, and for the most part ruled fairly. In this way there was peace between the Q’Shanites and the other tribes. And Isfastan enjoyed its golden years under the master’s rule. Or so it was believed – for few men ever saw him, and they said he did not grow old in his hidden valley, and only once every 20 years would he appear. And the people were afraid of him, for his attendants aged not, and it was forbidden to look upon them.

“And so the centuries passed and with them passed away the knowledge of the Q’Shan, as the master was known, and the time of his appearance was forgotten. The night of ghosts it was called. Or else the longest walk – and many other names – but the people knew it no longer.

“So the rule of the master became a thing of legend. And though the judgement of the Q’shanites continued, some said it was but a gruesome play, crude theatre through which the powerful controlled the weaker clans. And so the balance was lost, and the golden years ended and the wars came. Yet still fathers tell their sons about the night of ghosts, and a hidden people who never age. And in the deepest mountains it’s said there are still people who know the secret times when they shut themselves away in fear, and that the master of Isfastan walks there still.”

Michael watched the hunched figure carefully. In the silence after his story, under those Isfastani stars, anything seemed possible.

“You know what Sulemein?”

The darkness masked Sulemein's face.

“Tell me, Spencer.”

“I think you and I are going to find your hidden valley. Maybe they’ll know there what happened to my friend.”



## SIX

Crossing the road was the hardest. She crouched for an age near the edge of the bare tarmac, trying to work out how she could make it over the open ground without being seen. In the end she simply picked what felt like a good moment and walked across without hurrying. As she reached the other side she entered a strikingly different landscape, all yellow dirt and stony mounds, and was soon out of line of sight of the higher hill. Beyond it she had an occasional view of Iaqub's mountain with its pale stone monastery buildings.

She moved carefully parallel to the road and soon saw what she was after: a faint scuff upon the ground. Jarrett had come this way.

She picked up his trail and began to stalk in earnest. No movement made until she was positive she could not be seen. And when she passed from point to point – the shade of a rock, or a stunted shrub – she moved like something mindless; with no more intent than paper blowing in the wind. The world's attention slipped from her like thoughts from a forgotten word as she moved unseen towards the base of the hill. The smell of burning petrol carried on the air. With utter slowness she crept towards its source and stopped, peering around a rock.

It was a man. Burnt. Dead and doused with petrol, still on fire, blackened beyond knowing. Beth's face became a mask of grief and horror. She pressed her head hard into the stone and closed her eyes as the waves of shame and fear crashed through her.

When she could lift her head again she forced herself to look.

There was no way of knowing. But there was no doubt in her – it had to be Jarrett. Beside the body was a can the fuel had been in, while above...

Beth's heart froze. On the slope above the gruesome scene there was a man, hidden, watching the very approach she'd taken. The barrel of a gun rested on a rock.

She hadn't been seen. That much was obvious. She thanked herself for the extreme care she'd taken coming in. Heart hammering she carefully lowered her head and began to crawl back into cover, until she was safely out of line of sight again.

The journey back to Iaqub was excruciating. All she wanted to do was weep and run, but instead she picked her painstaking way back through the desert to the road as silent and invisibly as she'd come. She crossed the tarmac and passed up through the grassland to where she'd left Iaqub, dreading what she would say.

She saw him before he saw her, so she stood a moment to watch.

He seemed so alone. As she looked a bird called from above and Iaqub startled. He was afraid, Beth realised. In the strangest way he was so much more alone in this world than she was.

What would they do? Should she leave now and take Iaqub back to the valley? The loss of Jarrett would hit him hard. But what of the loss of his home – the chance to return to his monastery? Suddenly Iaqub was all of Isfastan – this country she'd found and fallen in love with. She felt a fierce need to protect him, this quiet boy whose life had been torn apart. She forced herself to picture the body burning in the desert beneath those watchful eyes and felt something terrible harden in her – a rage settling in her stomach like swallowed stones. Beth melted away before Iaqub could see her and slipped back down towards the road.

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It was late afternoon by the time she got back to the spot. The air was still; she thought back to that first evening when she'd snuck out with Michael. It felt like years ago – but then maybe it was? The thought caught her unawares – disorienting her – and she forced herself fully back into the moment. Now was the time for absolute focus.

She peered carefully around the rock. She'd been dreading this, but the burned figure was unrecognisable now, and the flames long gone out. Sorrowful more than horrifying. She tried not to look and scanned for the watcher instead. He was gone.

Beth crossed to the hillock's base and climbed to where he'd been hiding. She could see the dusty spot where he'd sat, watching who would come to see the flag he'd flown. From here she could see the approach she'd taken – it was mostly luck that she'd not been seen, the route she'd used shadowed by an overhang. From now on, she told herself, she'd need to make her own luck.

Beth leaned down close to where the man had crouched and breathed in. The scent of him was still there, right at the edge of perception – a faint hint of spice, like the letter her father had sent – with a grassy underarm smell that lingered. He was not long gone.

She cast her eye back and forth, began moving uphill from side to side until she saw what she'd been looking for. Yellowing tussock brushed the wrong way – and then further up the faintest fresh scuff on the soil's crust. Almost on all fours she followed his trail upward, quickly and silently.

There was little doubt where the trail would end. A campsite on the top of the hill would command a wide view of the lands around, and as she neared the top Beth slowed until she was barely moving. Every step upwards revealed another few inches. No step was taken until she'd scoured each new inch with every sense she had. The sun passed below the horizon, and still she crept forward.

Finally, as the last colour drained from the sky she saw what she'd been straining for: a corner of cloth. The woolen cap of a watchman at the edge of a camp. Beth sank to the ground.

Now she brought to bear everything that she'd learned in the valley. She pressed her face to the earth. Breathed in the air that flowed over the round hilltop until she smelled him. Sent her senses beyond her until she could feel his breathing. She crept closer, lay on the ground and was still.

An hour passed. The great billowing clouds on the horizon were still with the distance. Their shapes blurred as blackness washed the last details from the sky. A cold wind stalked among the rocks.

Another hour. Stars prickled the blackness. Beth heard the tribesman's breathing change. She slid her knife from its home inside her jacket sleeve – the same square-ended blade that she'd peeled and chopped with on that first day in the valley. She eased into a crouch, paused a beat, then sprang silently up the slope, reaching the man in an instant, clamping her hand over the sleeping watchman's mouth as she dragged the blade hard across his neck.

If she'd not been expecting it she'd have been flung right off as he kicked to standing. As it was she managed to wrap her skinny legs around his middle as he rose. Her hand barely covered his mouth so she dropped her blade and clamped both arms around his head, stifling what would have been screams but for the gash that had opened veins, arteries, windpipe...

He threw himself on the ground, knocking the wind from her, clawing desperately with powerful fingers, but still she held her grip, until his hands weakened and the kicks became twitches and then tremors. Blood that had gushed over her arms and soaked her jacket now pulsed weakly and stopped. The night became silent save for Beth's hard breathing.

She lay like that for half an hour, petrified that their thrashing had woken the men she knew were sleeping near. When she finally peeled her arms away it took a grotesque effort; in the dry air the blood had glued her to the poor man's face.

She got shakily to her feet.

A few yards away three men slept on bedrolls around the ashes of a tiny fire. Between them three kalashnikovs were propped together in a little pyramid that kept them off the dirt; a Christmas tree for violent men. Beth stepped forward into the circle; took a gun – eased the others to the ground in silence.

The men slumbered on. It took a while to work out how to load it. She had to turn it this way and that in the weak starlight until she found a safety catch – she slipped it off. Next was a lever that ran up the body of the gun. She drew it back. The mechanism crunched. Somewhere inside the machine gun a golden round fed into its chamber. A man stirred. She held the barrel, pointed it at his body, and squeezed.

The gun roared and jumped, its kick lifting the barrel. Rounds thumped into flesh – thigh, guts, chest, head – the body jumped too, lifeless, dead before the man could wake. The second man was up and reaching for his

weapon faster than she could have believed – rounds thumped into him too, her arms aiming on instinct. Dust and blood sprayed up – he was scrabbling, still dangerous, but she stepped forward, clipped the top of his head off with a final savage shot, then swung the weapon for the third man as he sprinted for the hilltop edge. She fired desperately as he disappeared into the dark and heard him grunt as a wild round hit something soft. She heard him stumble, stand again, and crash noisily down the slope. The footsteps stopped.

Beth sank to her haunches and looked behind her. The last kalashnikov was gone.

She tried to slow her ragged breathing so that she could hear – straining for some sound. Somewhere below her in the dark, her foe did the same. There was little for it. She slipped off the edge of the hillside and began to stalk.

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For all the brutality of what she did that night, it was the deadly game with the last survivor that haunted Beth the most. Each was armed – at least she hoped so; how many bullets did these things take? And each knew that giving away your position by firing might be the last mistake you made.

At times she heard him shuffling; even the occasional gasp of pain. Other moments she knew he was listening, straining, rifle ready, weighing whether to take a shot. For over an hour they played their game among the rocks and stunted bushes until the tension nearly made her scream. But for Iaqub's sake – for Jarrett – she knew she had to finish what she'd begun.

Finally she understood the tribesman's plan. He was moving, slowly but determinedly, up the adjacent slope. A little ridge ran opposite to the hillside they'd both come down, and he was inching his way upwards, trying to make it to the other side where she wouldn't be able to hear him escape. She thought a moment, then moved sideways and up, hoping to cut him off. Starlight printed a pale light on the tops of rocks – to pass in front of a bright patch might invite a bullet – but the shadows were pure blackness and by staying low she made it just below the ridge without being seen. She crouched and strained her eyes in the dark for movement.

She could *hear* him. He was dragging a leg – crawling somewhere not far away. Badly injured, by the sound of it, but making stealthily for the ridge's edge.

Still she saw no movement. But the stars were a net of lights behind the ridge; when he passed over he would be silhouetted against their light. She would get her shot. Beth pulled the stock into her shoulder, ready to fire, and cradled the weight of the gun across her knee.

A stone rattled below. Way to her left. She shifted quickly, sighting down the gun with a thumping heart, ready to pull the trigger the moment she caught movement. Then something made her look back over her shoulder towards the ridge and she saw a dark mass pass over and roll down the other side with an audible grunt.

God damn him. He was cunning alright. She blushed to think she'd been fooled by a thrown stone. Anger made her reckless and she stood, hurrying to the spot he'd crossed over, hoping to get a shot before he made cover on the other side. She peered carefully over.

Stone shards sprayed into her eyes. The stink of burnt rock filled her nose as she pitched backwards – she never even heard the shot. He'd been lying in wait on the other side, aiming, lined up on the spot where he hoped she'd follow over, ready to shoot her when she showed herself. The bullet must have smashed a stone right next to her, missing her face by inches.

She blinked the dust from her eyes. Weirdly calm. She'd seen him on the other side, in that moment before he fired. About 30 feet down. He wasn't coming back up over the ridge. The image of him was printed in her head – one leg useless, lying on his back, knowing he had this desperate chance. Beth stood again and moved back to just below the ridge, then sat and waited.

She could hear him whimper. With the waiting would come the pain. Trying to keep the gun up, trying to stay alert, knowing that if he let his guard down she would shoot him as he tried to crawl away. Beth tried to drive the pity aside with thoughts of Jarrett, but that didn't seem to work. She heard a stifled moan. She felt sorrow for the both of them. But she *was* going to kill this man.

They stayed like that for hours. Some time, well after midnight, he began to weep. A word, repeated over and over, came across the ridge-top to her ears.

Asha... *asha*. He was delirious – repeating the one word in his misery. Beth felt her throat closing. Shame and grief and horror seemed to press her to the ground. She wiped hot tears of her own with her shoulder and gripped the rifle hard. *Asha*. She didn't know what it meant. But it was the worst thing she'd ever heard.

The pleading drifted into silence. At some point later the moon rose, washing the rocky gully with startling white. Beth listened carefully, chose her moment, and popped above the ridge-edge with gun ready.

The man was stretched out motionless in the moonlight.

She shot him through the chest.

## SEVEN

Sulemein was thinking about money – Michael could see it in his eyes. He watched his captive with faint amusement as he took it all in. Money. It changed everything.

They were in the APC, rattling and bumping their way along the god-awful roads, heading away from the plains into Isfahan's mountainous east. Already Michael could see the landscape changing through the tempered glass peephole by Sulemein's shoulder – fields and orchards giving way to stands of stunted pine.

He'd wager the redbear had never been in an armoured personnel carrier before. Even if he had, the vehicles in this shithole were just what you'd expect – rusted relics of the Soviet era, or else some warlord's clapped out vanity ride. Even Joint Mission was ill-equipped compared to LHP. Private security had its perks.

This was one of the three APCs Michael's squad used when on campaign. Its armoured belly had the next-gen boat-hull shape that could divert the blast from an IED harmlessly to the sides. A hardened antenna let him keep track of where each of his men was at any moment (all 16 were inside the vehicles right now, as they wound slowly east). And just to show that good ideas weren't all new, each had the tried and true .50 cal machine gun mounted on the roof.

Sulemein's eyes were travelling slowly around the interior, taking it in. Bullet-proof vests. Brand new weapons with expensive suppressors. Helmet cams with GPS. Thousands and thousands of dollars worth of firepower. Money changed everything alright.

“Your father owns all this?”

Michael's second in command watched them both. He was seated against the bulkhead that separated the rear compartment from the driver's seat. Jules. Ten years older than most of them. South African. Ex-special forces, like half of the men in LHP, but different somehow. Deeper in. Michael remembered how, when he had grown too old to be beaten by his father in person, the older Spencer would have one of his own staff do it for him. Jules reminded him of them somehow. Or even the old suits who would stay at their place from time to time – wrinkled men memorable for being the only people Michael had ever seen his father defer to. Inner circle. The Creeps, as he'd privately called them.

Jules' face was impassive, but Michael sensed his interest.

“This and more like it,” he told Sulemein. “Men. Cars. Guns. Choppers if we need them. Private security is a good business.”

“War is a good business.”

Michael dipped his head, conceding the point. The APC bumped and rattled. Jules swayed with it, listening to them talk without seeming to.

“You really still think my father started this conflict?”

“You really think he didn’t?”

“How? By faking an attack by your people? I *was* there you know.”

He fixed his captive with a stare. The thought of stopping suddenly flared in his mind – banging on the bulkhead for a halt, marching Sulemein to the pines for a quick shot to the back of the neck. It could all be done in less than a minute.

Michael knew right from wrong. The knowledge defined him. And there was nothing wrong in ending the lives of violent men. But Sulemein’s flat insistence about his father complicated that. Muddied it in troubling ways.

He pushed the thought back. Sulemein continued, oblivious.

“You were children. Foreigners. The simplest deception would have fooled your eyes.”

“So who do you think did it then? Was it Jules in a fake red beard?”

Neither man seemed to appreciate the levity.

Sulmein looked angrily around the vehicle.

“It’s obvious, no? Who pays for this? Who profits? Who captures land that pays for your weapons? And who will be in power when you foreigners finally leave?”

“The Q’Shanites? You think the Q’Shanites attacked our convoy in disguise. Kidnapped me. Kidnapped a British diplomat and his daughter, and all with the blessing of the owner of LHP Security, my father – also a member of the Joint Mission diplomatic corp – all in the name of private profit?”

Sulemein’s eyes darkened as he controlled his anger.

“All I know is I am an Edomite. And it was not us.”

“You seem sure of that.”

“There are no secrets in our tribe.”

The man sat up straight against the wall of the vehicle. His proud face was hollow, cheekbones raw from wind and sun, deep-set eyes glinting in the dim daylight.

“Our code forbids us from letting prisoners live – and the rest of this country hates us for it. Yet for us there is honour in being true to our culture. Can you say the same of your father? What code does he hold true to? To what culture does he cleave?”

Michael sighed; slid out of the seat he was on. He shoved a space clear on the floor of the bouncing vehicle and tried to make himself comfortable with a pack beneath his head. He had a flash of memory of that night, years ago, when he’d bounced, bound, on the tray of a pickup – perhaps on this very road. Every hour was taking him closer to that place.

His father had such contempt for soldiers. To him they were tools. Bound by codes that were interesting only as far as it made them useful. Sulemein had held true to himself in the face of his own death, yet his father, he knew, would hold him in nothing but contempt. Perhaps the tribesman was right. The truth was he'd never known what his father believed in. Never been *allowed* to know. And as a boy, in that moral vacuum, he'd made his own ethics: right and wrong. Black and white

Michael sighed and closed his eyes – then cocked a lid open.

“Jules? Will you kill him if he does anything stupid?”

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For a moment after he woke Michael was back in the pick-up, unmanned. He was sliding on the metal tray, grit in his eyes, drowning in a fear so vast and endless it was like drifting in space. Then a jolt through the wheels woke him properly and he came back to himself. He was not there, he was here. He was not a boy – he was a man. And he was on his way to punish those who had wronged him.

Who had done wrong.

There was a difference. This wasn't a revenge mission, it was about justice, he told himself. Whoever had ordered the attack on their convoy had violated the ceasefire terms – smashed any chance at lasting peace, and sabotaged the Shura by kidnapping its architect, Beth's father. His capture and presumed execution spat in the eye of the message he'd brought: that the treaty was a return to the old ways, when things were better.

That was the politics of it. But under that grand political betrayal was something smaller, yet to Michael just as potent. A betrayal of duty; one captive abandoning the other.

They were on the same side. You might even have called them friends – though that was hardly the point. The point was she'd looked him in the eye and chosen to let him die so that she could run.

At first the fact that she'd escaped to perish while he'd been rescued seemed to set the scales right. He'd grown up. Joined the forces. Joined his father's firm and taken grim pleasure in bringing justice to the tribes who'd done him... and Isfastan... so much wrong. Yet it always gnawed at him not knowing what had really happened to Beth. And when he'd heard the rumours of something strange happening on that night – it had set the old fire burning.

So here they were – officially on contract to Joint Mission, suppressing the western tribes in support of the Q'Shanites, following the new thinking laid down by his father: back the Q'shanite conquest. Hope that a single dominant tribe would eventually bring stability through strength.



And Michael was his unit's field commander, responsible for keeping them on mission. Yet every call he made, every decision, seemed to draw them closer to the mountains. Every prisoner he interrogated deepened his obsession with that night. Jules saw it. The others had no idea. And now Sulemein had given voice to the nagging doubt that had sat at the edge of his mind for years. That his father was somehow involved...

It struck him suddenly that if Sulemein *was* right then Jules would need to be managed. The others would be loyal to him, to the death even. But Jules was his father's man.

But that was too big to take in. Not least for all the blood that Michael had spilled in the name of right and wrong, so he turned his mind to something he could be sure of: Beth's betrayal. Many times he'd imagined confronting her with what she'd done. Making her see the wrong of it. And then what? It was a pointless question really. It was possible she was alive – but most likely she was a lonely pile of bones in the forest now. What Michael was sure of though was that *someone* knew.

And he was going to find them.

The APC was slowing. He opened his eyes.

"You still alive?"

Jules and Sulemein were as he'd left them, swaying and silent. He couldn't imagine Jules had been great company in the last few hours. Michael stood, cranked open the gunner's hatch of the still-moving vehicle and pulled himself up through the roof.

Cold air flooded in. It sent fingers down his shirt front, and made his heart beat faster. This was the place. Maybe not the same spot, but they were in the mountains proper. Close by. He banged on the driver's roof.

"How far?!"

"Half an hour," the man yelled back, and hearing it made his heart thump hard. So close!

He pulled the hatch shut and began putting his vest on.

"Tell the boys to suit up," he told Jules. "I'll watch this one."

Jules looked at him mistrustfully, but he moved forward into the radio station all the same.

Sulemein watched him go.

"That one doesn't like you," he observed.

"So long as he obeys me, he can dislike all he wants. Anyway, he's South African. They don't like anyone. You going to be warm enough? Cause we're going for a walk."

The disdain in the tribesman's eyes told him all he needed to say. Michael smiled.

"You're hard work, you know that Sulemein?"

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The soldiers piled out of the APCs, a little stiffly for men of action. They could be forgiven for being casual, Michael thought – they were hardly in a war zone here. The worst they were likely to have thrown at them up in the mountains was curdled goats milk. Men stood about adjusting radio headsets and looking up at the icy faces that were suddenly *right there*; he saw one of his boys reach out his fingertips as if to touch the towering tops. Michael looked about, getting his bearings.

He'd only ever been in this place at night but he recognised it all the same. They were at the bottom of a river valley that cut deep into the mountains on either side. Pines crowded the road, the forest rising in ridge upon ridge in both directions until the trees thinned into high mountain grassland, and then shale, and then the eternal snows and ice cliffs above. The clarity of the air did something strange to distance so that the looming peaks were huge and tiny at the same time.

To the left another valley intersected theirs, like a highway deeper into the mountains. A path to places more remote and wild and windswept. The moment that he saw it Michael knew.

“Boss. What are we doing here?”

Michael pointed upwards to the cleft.

“Get the men ready, Jules. That’s where we’re going.”

“Want to tell us why?”

Michael stuck out a thoughtful lip.

“Ummm. No. You got a problem with that?”

Jules turned away. His accent always thickened when he was angry; it was pure Afrikaner now.

“Gear up boys! And pack the fockin marshmallows, we’re going camping.”

It was insubordination, but Michael let it pass. Two minutes later the full squad were battle-ready and mobile with all eyes on him. He signalled them into the tree line and they spread out, melting into the forest in satisfying silence. They were his men still.

Now only Sulemein remained with him. He stood looking up at the valley opening, wrists bound, face unreadable – the wind whipping his robes around his tall frame. Against the brutish backdrop of the APC he looked like a photo from a magazine. Something about the clash of east and west probably. Or of old and new. Michael reached forward and cut the plastic ties that bound his hands.

“Come on. Let’s go find your ghosts.”

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The distance *was* deceptive. Lactic acid burned in his thighs. His men had given up stealth to focus on the sheer uphill slog, panting and red-faced in the thin air. Only Sulemein seemed unaffected, his long legs carrying him ever upward. Michael glanced at his face. It was upturned, open. The face of a man walking into the dreamlands of his childhood.

Deep layers of pine needles muffled every sound and slid beneath their boots, sapping their strength. An eerie sense crept over Michael that they were walking where no human had been before.

Finally the pines thinned and they broke out into scraggly rhododendron trees and then open tussock. Sulemein stopped and gaped.

There was nothing much to look at really. A collection of low stone buildings were spread out on terraces above them. Far above were what looked like clay huts, while stone walling closer to them circled what seemed like gardens. It looked empty; abandoned rather than ancient. The only truly old structure was a wooden building, more bridge than house, that spanned a stream just before it went tumbling over a bluff above them, turning into a plume of wind-whipped spray before it could reach the ground. Michael could feel the moisture on his upturned cheeks.

They all felt there was something strange about the place, but to Michael it was as if the strangeness had moved on somewhere, and these houses were what was left behind. Only Sulemein looked really awed.

“Come on then. Let’s have a look.”

They picked their way upwards, the men maintaining discipline – taking turns to keep weapons trained on doorways and windows while others made their way up the treacherous spray-slicked rocks.

In five minutes they were clearing buildings, moving from one to the other to check for danger. Another group moved up to clear the huts.

“Not what you were looking for?”

At least the contempt was gone from Jules’ voice. He even looked faintly curious.

Michael looked around. It was a pleasant enough place, but clearly empty. Whoever had been here was not long gone though. The gardens were too neat. He took a slug of water and fished a meal ration from a belt pocket. He opened it and let the wind pluck the plastic wrapper from his fingers. He chewed to give himself time to think.

“I remember there was a village on the road. We’ll eat here, then go down and find it. Perhaps whoever left here has gone visiting.”

Jules gave the hand signal for the men to break for mess and up and down the slope soldiers dropped to the grass to relax. A couple of men around the perimeter stayed up and alert. The sound of chatter filled the emptiness.

Something about their casualness rubbed Michael the wrong way, so he followed his feet, heading away from their voices until he found himself in a sheltered space between buildings. The stream had wandered in with him, looping itself into a little pool on the grass. The buildings cut the wind, leaving the quiet to make itself at home. Sulemein was there, sat against a stone wall with his legs pulled up.

“Christ. I thought you were supposed to be guarded.”

Sulemein looked at him glumly. Escape was hardly an option. The ground beyond their little grassy patch dropped away, coverless and exposed to the watchers with their guns. You could see all the way out to the mountain wall on the far side of the main valley; the sheer volume of empty air before them was dizzying.

“We shouldn’t be here Michael.”

“You think your Q’shan has his holiday home nearby?”

“It’s not a joke. You feel it. Those men are like mules, but I see you. I know you feel it too. This is a private place. We should go.”

Michael nodded, reluctantly.

“Soon. They need to eat. You do too.”

He threw a ration bar at Sulemein. It hit him in the midriff. He picked it up and stowed it in a pocket.

“You know what the GPS says?”

Sulemein cocked his head.

“The map. It says we’re on a ridge. This whole side valley isn’t even plotted – it’s as if the edges were zipped together when the map was made, and now we’ve arrived it’s zipped itself open.”

He fidgeted.

“You’re right. Let’s get out of here.”

They strode out together. Suddenly it was hard not to break into a run. Michael spun his hand about his head as they reached the men.

“Gear up! Let’s move! It’s time to go...”

Jules stepped into his path, grabbing his shirt-front with a hiss. He bent his head down so as not to be overheard, accent thick; his neck red with anger.

“What the hell are you doing?”

They both looked up at the men. All soldiers are superstitious – and whatever had come over Sulemein and Michael had infected his men already. His tone, their urgent stride – whatever it was; everywhere men were packing with unseemly speed. Michael’s voice was even.

“Jules? You touch me again, and I’ll gut you.”

Jules let his shirt go, smoothed the lapel almost tenderly. He smiled.

“You might want to remember who you’re talking to, boy.”

Michael looked the big man up and down.

“You think my father can protect you? Out here it’s only me.”

Jules stepped aside, still smiling. One by one the soldiers hurried past him, leaving their half-eaten meals, following their leader down the hill. The tall red beard joined them, his white tunic standing out in the sea of green.

The big South African took a last look around – taking note of the strange houses, the lonely stream; of the not-on-the-map-valley that wasn’t. Then he shouldered his pack and followed the others down.

## EIGHT

The monastery was in chaos when they arrived. Iaqub took the lead and the two of them strode bewildered through buildings and courtyards, ignored by scurrying monks and nuns and lay workers ferrying bundles, or running in twos and threes. He looked left and right as they hurried by, scanning for familiar faces and seeing none.

Their path ended at a top courtyard fringed by woods. Here the turmoil was more orderly, centred around a huge woman with a shaved head and dark red robes loading books on to rudimentary packs – contraptions of rope and wood – that a succession of wiry men were carrying into the woods and up the slope. She turned as they came in. Recognition flashed and she gasped.

“Iaqub!”

“Abbotess!”

He ran to embrace her, tiny against her bulk. She pushed him back to arm’s length and studied his face, unsettled.

“Where have you been?”

Her gaze shifted to Beth, pale and tired and grim. Her khaki jacket was stained and spattered an unwholesome brown up both sleeves and across the front. The kalashnikov hung at her back from a strap that crossed her shoulders. The woman’s voice went gentle.

“That gun looks heavy. You can put it down if you want to?”

“I might need it,” Beth said in a small voice.

“Yes,” the big woman replied, nodding reluctantly. “You might at that.”

Iaqub butted in impatiently.

“What’s happening here?”

“Here? Don’t you know? The Q’Shanites are coming. To settle their old score for good and all. We’re leaving. The men will climb the mountain, and hide in the caves with our treasures.” She gestured to the piles of prayer books and wood-bound tomes that monks were stacking in the courtyard to be loaded on to packs. “But the children cannot stay. We must start the crossing of the desert tonight and make for Rabaz, or else be killed when the Q’Shanites arrive. So if you want to talk, good, but load packs while you do it. I won’t have a thousand years of knowledge used for soldiers’ cooking fires.”

She pointed to the pile and Iaqub set to, Beth following his lead a moment later. The books were heavy, and when the packs were fully laden they helped strap the tomes in place and lift them on to a porter’s back. The

weight was incredible but as soon as the load was settled the man strode into the trees and disappeared. Beth look up to the heights above and thought ruefully of the hours of toil he had ahead. Iaqub started stacking another load.

“What happened to my parents Abbotess?”

Again the wary look from the woman.

“When you were taken, they came here for a time, knowing that you’d come to us if you were freed. But when... when the years passed with no sign, they understood you were likely dead and grieved you, like any parent would. I believe they left for the capital, hoping for refuge from the war.”

She stopped and straightened.

“Iaqub. Where *have* you been all this time?”

He looked flustered.

“I escaped. I found some people who kept me safe – us safe. Beth was with me. Her father was the diplomat who was kidnapped in the attack.”

“Killed, I am afraid,” the woman said gently. “The Edomites keep no prisoners.”

“Beth doesn’t think the redbards took her father. She thinks he might still be alive.”

The Abbotess took in her grimy face, her spattered clothes, the muscles tight along her jaw.

“How old are you child?”

“Fourteen... I think.”

“I knew Raymond Singer. He came here many years ago looking for something that I think he found. It was his death that set this war in motion, the Q’Shanites blaming the Edomites, and their fight spreading across the provinces, while the Joint Mission foreigners sat in Rabaz behind their walls and let it happen. What makes you think he’s alive still?”

“Why would the Edomites kill him? What did they stand to gain?”

The Abbotess huffed.

“Nothing. They would have benefited greatly from their place on the Shura and their share of power. But instead they’ve been butchered and the Q’Shanites have taken their lands – and the lands of others.”

“And who has benefited most?”

“That is easy child. The leader of the Q’shanite clans. A man called –”

“– R’shad atan al-Q’shani.”

Iaqub shot Beth a look.

“How did you know that name?”

Beth scooped a stack of prayer books from the floor. The text was block-printed, their covers thin painted planks tied with string. She shoved them roughly on to a waiting pack.

“Because the Kushan told me I had to kill him.”

From far in the distance came the popping sound of gunfire. The three of them stopped, listening. In the quiet after Beth noticed that the downy hair on the Abbottess’s meaty forearms was standing on end.

“I think you two had better come with me.”

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The Abbottess led them at a surprising clip around a maze of buildings and down stairways to a long, low wooden building. She ducked inside the hanging blanket that did for a door and Iaquad and Beth followed.

In the dim light Beth sensed rather than saw that it was packed with people. Soft shuffling sounds came to her ears; a quiet cough, like horses stirring in a barn at night. As her eyes adjusted Beth saw that they were children, standing quietly in the dark. Boys and girls alike in red robes, heads shaved, round faces turned expectantly to the Abbottess, her bulk unmistakable in the gloom.

“Children,” she said softly, and instantly the silence was perfect as they all strained to hear. “You all know what is happening. But we have less time than we thought. We must go now. Go quickly with your adult on the paths you’ve been shown. Trust your leader, do as you’ve been taught, and don’t be afraid – we must get as far into the desert today as we can. Go now, and if the world wills it we will all be reunited in Rabaz in just a few days.”

Immediately the children began to file out the door in lines, orderly and silent. Beth saw three adults – nuns and monks, dressed the same as the children – each take the head of a line and lead them down paths out of the monastery complex and into the forest. Every group went a different way. Within a few minutes, all the children had filed out of sight, barring the handful that were clearly to be led out by the Abbottess herself. Gunfire crackled again in the distance, sounding as harmless as firework strings. The big woman looked to Beth and Iaquad.

“Do you have anyone with you? Will you come with us?”

Beth shook her head.

“There’s no one else. We’ll come with you.”

Suddenly Iaquad slumped against the door.

“I... I...”

He looked pale, his lips struggling to form words.

“I don’t know...”



Beth could see what he was thinking. The desert. More danger. More men with guns. Just when his long, long nightmare seemed at an end this safe place was being taken from him.

He sat down against the barn wall, his face distraught.

“I don’t think I can do it. I’m sorry Beth.”

The Abbottess looked anxiously to the waiting children.

“What’s the matter Iaqub. Are you hurt?”

It was hard to feel sympathy for people who needed protection, Beth thought, when you were someone people needed protecting *from*. Losing Jarrett had hit him hard. He’d wept when she told him, but Beth had only scolded him, made him get up; bullied him into walking here. It had hit her hard too, but she’d reacted differently. She felt grim and distant. She thought now that she understood why the soldier Jarrett had spent so much time alone in the tops of the valley. It changed you when you’d killed a man.

The Abbottess was talking.

“If you can’t do it, you can stay here. Go back to the courtyard where we stacked the books. Take a pack, take as many books as you can and follow the old men to the caves. One more mouth to feed won’t hurt. You’ll be safe there with them, looking after our treasures; soldiers are lazy, they’ll not climb that high. Stay safe, and I will send word to your parents if I can.”

She looked at Beth.

“Will you come with me?”

She nodded. She could tell that Iaqub was relieved to stay, though he was looking at her, torn.

“I’m sorry Beth,” he said again. And she wanted to say something, but the grim feeling, the wall, it was in there still. So she nodded by way of farewell, and turned to follow the Abbottess and the children, knowing that she might never see Iaqub again.

## NINE

They were on the herder before Michael knew it. One moment he was aware of a flat clonking sound, the next it was all around him and they were in the middle of a mob of long-eared goats with rough-made bells around their necks. A boy stood among the trees, face filled with awe and terror. With a shock Michael recognised the same superstitious fear that had gripped him and Sulemein on the mountain. He was ashamed enough to feel angry.

The boy dropped to his knees, prostrating himself before these people who'd come down the mountain – and seconds later was jerked up again by Michael's hand in his hair. Holy wonderment turned into garden-variety fright as he struggled against the pain in his scalp. Michael threw him backwards on the ground. He walked over carefully and squatted next to him.

"I'm going to guess that your English is somewhat slim."

The confusion in the kid's face was all the answer he needed.

"I knew there was a reason I brought you Sulemein..."

The tribesman strode over, looming above the boy.

"Tell him where you live."

The boy pointed backwards down the slope, looking frantically from the red beard to the men with guns. Michael looked up at Sulemein. The tribesman seemed imperious; frightening.

"The foreigners want to see your home, boy. Take them there."

It was only ten minutes away. They poured into the village, guns up, pushing men and women to the ground, checking for weapons and finding none. Michael led the boy, still gripping him by the hair. They made their way between the houses, goats following stupidly in a bleating cloud, oblivious to the drama.

"Which way to yours?"

Sulemein translated and the boy pointed to a path that led to the outskirts where a single hut stood beneath an ancient twisted tree. A man ran out of the doorway and was knocked to the ground by one of Michael's men – another dragged women and children out by the hair. Michael stood amongst them and made his pick.

"This one."

He pulled his knife from its sheath and stepped into the hut. Jules watched the performance from the rear.

One of the soldiers pulled the chosen villager to his feet and shoved him back inside. Sulemein followed him over the lintel.

It was dim inside. Almost too dark to see. There was none of the bright austerity of an Edomite home. The moment you stepped through the door you were in the kitchen – a narrow room shaped around an iron stove and a cauldron suspended over a fire. The only light beside chinks of bright day was the red glow from the coals. There was no chimney; smoke bit Sulemein’s eyes. He was tall enough to be in the thick of it. It seemed to simply ooze its way outside through the gaps in the roof. He ducked so as to be able to see again and spotted Michael seated on a low bench along the wall. The man of the house was kneeling, hands open and imploring, looking to Sulemein so that he could plead his case.

“Brother – you are welcome in my home. Please, tell these men they are friends here. Let my wife prepare food and tea for them so that they may rest.”

“Your wife can stay outside in the dirt. Answer his questions and they may leave quickly.”

“Of course brother. I don’t want to make them angry.”

Michael looked up at Sulemein.

“You know what to ask.”

Sulemein pulled a stool over and sat.

“We have been up the mountain. Into a valley with stone houses that was not on the map.”

The man grew still. The beseeching look faded from his face.

“You should never –”

“This is Michael Spencer. He has killed and tortured many of my people. You must tell him what he wants to know. Tell him the meaning of the night of ghosts.”

“Oh and Sulemein?” Michael butted in.

“Ask him about a girl.”

## TEN

Day by day they walked, or rather night by night. After the first gruelling march to get as far from the monastery as possible they settled into a routine; walking in the cool of the night when the darkness kept them safe, and finding shade to sleep in during the day. There were three other groups out there, Beth knew, each taking a different route across the desert. She thought they might see them, but no matter how she strained her eyes from the top of this hillock or that, they were invisible, as if the desert had swallowed them. They were so alone they could have been walking across the moon.

The Abbotess was tireless, making a game of the dangerous crossing. Sharing out the food, keeping the children entertained with games or quiet songs, the older kids in on it too, all of them focused on keeping the younger ones safe, and oblivious to the danger.

Beth kept mostly to herself, and the Abbotess gave her space. She slept little, preferring to keep watch from a low mound when the children rested by day – and when she did sleep she dreamed she could hear someone out there in the desert, right at the edge of hearing, crying *asha, asha*. One night, when it was too dark to walk, Jarrett joined her while she sat up keeping watch. He said nothing, but the company was welcome, and when she woke in the morning she felt better than before.

Soon enough there came a night when Beth noticed a yellow light on the horizon that was neither moonlight nor the rising sun, and when they found themselves a dry river bed to hide in at dawn the Abbotess told them they'd make the city outskirts the following night. She looked to where Beth was sitting in her usual place above the camp, wrapped in a blanket and cradling the hateful gun.

“Why don't you come down and join me?”

The children were all lying on the shingly ground, red robes hidden beneath blankets of their own, most already asleep after a night of walking. They would wake and stretch and eat a few hours later, then doze again out of the heat. Beth stood and walked down to join the woman.

“I think they'll miss the desert,” the Abbotess said lightly, looking over her charges. “They've found quite the routine.”

“You've done well,” Beth offered.

“I've rested better knowing you were up there, keeping us safe while we slept.”

They sat, and when they were comfortable the Abbotess passed her dried fruit and bread. They both chewed unselfconsciously. The end of their journey was close and they were each feeling the pressure lessening.

“Were you born in the monastery?” Beth asked.

The Abbotess shook her head.

“That’s not how it works. Usually children come to us when they’re eight or nine. We’re their best option for getting educated, so their parents send them to us. But I came later – when I was around 15.”

“What made you want to be a nun?”

“You want to know? I can show you.”

She lifted the hem of her robe and rolled up the trousers beneath to reveal a pale leg. Beth recoiled a little, but the Abbotess simply pointed to a long scar above her knee.

“I was an adventurous girl. Always roaming. And one day my friend and I roamed into a place where they were growing, what do you call it? Hashish plants. There were two men. They chased us and one of them shot at me, to frighten us really, with a gun not much different to yours.”

Beth looked at the Kalashnikov she’d kept with her since the day that Jarrett died. She barely noticed any more that she carried it. She set it away from her now atop the blanket.

“But of course bullets have a way of finding people, and I was wounded – grazed in the leg. Nothing serious, but I still remember how hot it felt, and all the blood – little rivers of it all up my leg.

“We ran to my grandfather. He was the headman in my village; a big deal kind of grandfather. You can imagine the fuss! And then in the middle of it all the two men who had shot at us arrived to turn themselves in. They’d worked out who we were – or rather, who my grandfather was. They wanted to say sorry and to make things right.”

“Did you call the police?”

The big lady smiled as if Beth had said something charmingly dumb.

“What would police know? No, all these things are dealt with on a tribal level here. And usually when something like this happens someone has to pay. The money is part of making things right. But that day my grandfather did something that made me think – and started me on a path that led to this life.”

“What happened?”

The Abbotess rolled her robe back down.

“The men confessed, and my grandfather set a price. Ten thousand pounds to make good the shooting of his granddaughter’s leg, and the growing of hashish on village land without permission. The family of the men had a day to gather the money – they had no means to pay themselves, which is part of how it usually goes. Your family bail you out, and your family’s family bail them, and all of your people until you’re wrapped in a whole network of debt and duty that keeps you back in line.

“So anyway, my grandfather called them to his home. All the people who had given money, and loaned money – and also everyone else who had been affected. Me and my friend. Our parents. Even the farmer whose field it was. There were so many of us we had to go out into the courtyard to all sit down. Then my grandfather

took the money, the ten thousand pounds, and he made a fire of it. And when it was burning well he set a kettle over the fire, all the time feeding in notes, keeping the flames going, and when the water boiled and all the money was gone we made tea. Then everyone who was there – all the people affected, everyone who was out of pocket, or angry, or bleeding or ashamed – we all drank the tea together. And when it was finished the thing was done.

The Abbotess laughed.

“You never had such good tea!”

And Beth surprised herself by laughing too.

“That’s what made you want to be a nun?”

“Yes!” She was laughing still at the memory. “Getting shot – it’s very holy. Excuse the joke.”

“Jeepers. That was awful.”

The Abbotess smiled at the rebuke and shrugged.

“I saw that day what my grandfather did – the way he washed away all that shame and anger and resentment – and I realised there is always a different way to do things. A way of dealing with matters of the flesh that are, at the end of the day, really matters of the spirit. I began thinking more deeply. And soon enough I decided I wanted to learn more about that, to study the spirit, so here I came. Or rather there I went.”

They chewed in silence for a while, enjoying the quiet of the morning. One of the children stirred.

“Beth. You said you had spoken with someone called the Kushan?”

Beth nodded carefully. She’d had a feeling this would come.

“Had you heard that name before you met him?”

She shook her head.

“Shall I tell you?”

“Okay.”

“The people who attacked our monastery, the Q’Shanites, in the old days they were called the *Kushanites*.

“They were always a bad people. Followers of the left hand path. Arrogant and cruel. But the story goes that a man called the Kushan brought them under his yoke.

“Perhaps a thousand years ago he appeared in this land – a holy man or a great sorcerer, depending on the story – who despaired at the cruelty of the people here. So he set his rule on them, killing the clan leaders who disobeyed, until the tribes here took his name, and obeyed his commands. They obeyed even if he disappeared for many years, for the Kushan made them believe that no matter where or when, he would come for them in bloody judgement in their twilight years. And with that notion firmly planted in their minds, their warring stopped and a peace came over the country that held for centuries.”

“So what happened to him?”

“The Kushan?”

The Abbottess looked up at the sky. Morning proper had come, but it was still cold down amongst the stones.

“Isfastan is not a well educated country. Ask your average goat herd and they will tell you, without truly believing it, that the Kushan lives on in a hidden valley where the centuries cannot touch him – only venturing out to strike the heads from Q’shanites who neglect his code.

“Meanwhile anyone who can read and write would say that the original Kushan began a dynasty of rulers. That they were clever enough to use fear and superstition, and the Kushan name, to keep an entire country under control. For a time at least.”

Beth felt the Abbottess’ scrutiny renewed. Her eyes flicked over Beth’s face as though looking for something there.

“That’s what I told Raymond Singer when he came asking.”

Beth said nothing. The bread seemed suddenly dry.

“He was a nice man. He told me he had a daughter. An only child who was 14, like you. *Ten years ago* when he came here.”

Suddenly the bread was stuck in her gullet. Beth coughed, eyes streaming and she spat the lump on to the stones. She stood angrily and turned on the Abbottess.

“I swear it’s not been that long for me.”

The Abbottess shook her head sadly.

“Child, how could you be Singer’s girl?”

Beth bowed her head. Then she remembered the letter. It was still in her jacket pocket. She unbuttoned it and slipped out the soft wad of paper. One corner was brown with old blood that had soaked through the fabric. She handed it to the Abbottess.

“You read English?”

The woman took the folded paper wordlessly. While she read, Beth walked a small circle, looking at the yellowing sky above the low walls of the dried watercourse they were in. They called them *wadi* in these parts, Beth remembered. The seasonal rivers that left gouged-out dry paths across the land.

When she returned to the woman the Abbottess had the letter in her lap. As she handed it back Beth saw her shiver minutely, like a horse that has a fly on its back.

Beth sat, all the anger replaced by exhaustion.

“The world is stranger than we know, Beth Singer.”

They each wrapped themselves in their blankets while they sat. Not knowing what to say, but not ready to sleep. Eventually the Abbottess broke the quiet.

“Raymond Singer came to us asking for stories. Looking for a way to bring back the peace that had been before. He left for a time, and when he returned he claimed to carry a message for the Q’shanites, sent to him from their ancient rulers: join the shura, or be judged.

“If R’shad truly disobeyed the message, and took your father as you say, then by the old codes the judgement of the Kushan would be due to him.”

She looked at her, and Beth saw in the broad face something of the struggle going on inside: a rational, educated woman confronted with things that belonged in campfire stories. Her gaze took in the stiff brown bloodstains up Beth’s jacket arms; the grim light in the young girl’s eyes; the impossibly young features.

“Beth, are *you* the judgement of the Kushan?”

Beth fingered the letter slowly, folded in its familiar square.

“All I want is to find my father, if he’s still alive.”

The Abbottess sighed deeply.

“It truly pains me to say this. I am a student of the right hand path. Sworn to reject violence in all its forms. But Beth, if there was anything – *anything* that could bring peace to this blighted country, it would be the death of R’shad atan al-Q’shani, done in the Kushan’s name.”

“I want to find my dad.”

The Abbottess nodded.

“I shouldn’t have said that. When we get to the city I will help you find this Farzin’s family.”

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They rested all day in the wadi, and on into the night, Beth spending her time in the darkness lying on her back, watching the stars prickling the roof of the night. The stones pressed into her shoulder blades. Her limbs felt so light sometimes she thought she might float away. She thought of the Kushan.

She thought of the days she had spent in his shelter, watching Oesha tend him, while outside the others preserved the deer she’d killed. He’d been so old. Sick. She understood that his death might be only minutes away from him, as it was measured in normal time. That it was only his perpetual trance that kept his mortality at bay. She wondered how much the rest of the valley dwellers knew.

Certainly Oesha understood. The shock on her face showed it when, the morning before they had all departed, he woke and spoke. Spoke to Beth.



“Q’Shani,” he’d croaked in his parched voice, beady eyes seeking her out. “*Q’Shani.*” And the gleam in them had frightened her with its dark intent. “*Dies.*”

Oesha had explained the rest. The gleam had faded; the old man resettling as Oesha fussed frantically to make him comfortable again. Then she had drawn Beth aside to tell her who Q’Shani was. How he’d defied the Kushan’s command – and what the old man was now asking Beth to do. *Your mission, should you choose to accept it....*

She thought of the Kushan now, as she lay beneath the stars on desert stones. Holding the valley in his mind; holding death and time at bay, his last thoughts bent on revenge. Yet so, so old..

As she drifted into sleep it seemed she could feel him with her mind. Feel the feeble heart beating beneath hollow ribs; the shallow breath rise and fall. And she felt sure that out there, somewhere far away, his thoughts were turned to her too.

## ELEVEN

Michael stumbled out of the doorway, blinded by the daylight. He made his way to the base of the gnarled old tree, put his hands on his knees, and vomited. His men, sitting in patches of shade here and there, watched silently.

The effort pricked his eyes with tears. He straightened, pressing the moisture away with his fingers. He blew the spew out of his nostrils and blinked. Amongst the leaves above he saw speckled red fruit here and there amongst the branches. Pomegranates – the original fruit of knowledge. How ironic.

Michael took in the men looking at him and breathed, thinking.

Sulemein had been right. Goddamn him he was right.

The villager had told them everything. They hadn't hurt him – but he'd spilled every ridiculous secret that he had. About the people who lived in the valley. About their walk every 20 years down a path that passed the village. How they never seemed to grow old, and how one night, ten years ago they'd been joined by a runaway girl with dark tangled hair.

Beth was alive. It was unmistakably her. The man even said that he'd spoken with her, less than a week ago when the whole procession had left the valley again unexpectedly; out of schedule as it were. The whole village was still in a stir from it, and the girl had told him – somehow this family had always stopped to greet the walkers, these living ghosts, while the rest of the village cowered – the girl had told him that she was leaving to find her father. A man who the world believed had been killed by Sulemein's clan, but who had been taken by someone else.

If Beth was right about her father then the redbearers could never have taken him.

Michael looked at the vomit pooling in the dust. He thought of every Edomite man and woman that he'd taken vengeance on in his father's name and felt his legs give out. Right and wrong. Black and white. The code that defined him... that he'd enforced so zealously... it was all flipped on its head. He slumped on to all fours like a dog and coughed the rest of his stomach over the base of the tree.

When it was over he rolled on to his backside and sat. Sulemein was standing in the doorway, watching, tall and impassive.

Michael spat.

“Tell me why your people kill their captives, Sulemein. There must be a reason.”

“Being taken in war time is the greatest dishonour. We cannot make them live with that shame.”

“But you're *my* captive.”

Sulemein's face gave away nothing, but he could see that he was stung.

"You believe that my father arranged the kidnapping. To frame your people and start a war."

"I've said so many times."

"If you found my father – if you could ask him if that's true and clear your people's name. Would that bring back your honour?"

Sulemein's dark eyes gleamed.

"Perhaps yours too."

Jules was striding across the dust.

"This has gone on long enough. Get to your feet boy! Get that sick off your face."

Michael stood, wobbling. His men moved closer, eyes on Jules.

"This bloody picnic is over. Our job is to knock back the Western tribes, and you men are getting back to work. Except for you." He rounded on Michael, bull neck straining. "You I'm taking to your old man, who can decide what happens next."

His men were wavering. Would they stay true? He saw uncertainty on faces. Love for him and fear of Jules; the moment hung in the balance. Hung until Sulemein sprang forward, snatched the knife from Michael's belt and rammed it up into Jules' heart.

He skipped back nimbly as the big man dropped, gaping in surprise.

For a full minute they all stared as Michael's second-in-command writhed and kicked and bled his life out into the dust beneath the pomegranate tree – and then was still.

Michael straighted. There was shock on every man's face – except for Sulemein's. He cleaned and handed Michael the knife. All eyes went to their leader.

If he wanted these men, he had to take them for his own. He spat the last chunk of spew on to the ground.

"Boys," he told them. "You heard what the red beard told us. I think maybe we've been lied to – about all of this. And that doesn't sit right with me. So here is what I think.

"I think you used to be LHP Security, but now you're not. None of us are any more. Your contract ends here. Stick with me and I'll see that you're paid, one way or another. But the short story is you're not my father's men now – you're mine."

The look on their faces was so fierce it made his heart burst. Every man was with him. None of them needed to say it. He looked each of them in the eye. Sulemein and soldiers all.

"Let's go find the truth."

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Instead of pine needles sliding under their feet, it was rock and sand. The desert couldn't be more different than the mountains. Two days out from the valley and they seemed almost in a different world.

The heat was inescapable. Michael and Sulemein slid and scrambled up the slope. The tan-coloured APCs parked below them seemed to shimmer in the haze, the distance turning them into toy trucks left in a sandpit.

They were near the top of one of the hundreds of low hills deep in the trackless desert. All around was a brown landscape of stones covered in a blush of gritty black pebbles. Finally the two of them reached the hillock's round top and paused there, panting. The rest of the men were barely visible below, sitting in the shade of the vehicles.

Sulemein straightened the assault rifle from where it had slid around on its strap. Michael looked at him askance.

"It suits you, that thing."

He pulled binos from a case that was strapped to his chest and lifted them to his eyes, scanning the horizon.

"Good grief, was that a smile?"

"Smiling is for women."

"Of course it is. I shouldn't have mentioned it."

Michael played with the focus, pulling the distant horizon into a sharp circle. He scanned, looking for something.

"You know, your English is really very good. I never asked you where you learned it."

"At school."

"Ask a silly question..."

There was a confused pause from behind him.

"Okay, what are we doing on this hilltop?"

Now it was Michael's turn to grin.

They were half a day's slow drive from the monastery. Michael had found it still smoking, watched over by a handful of too-casual Q'shanites. Normally he would have happily greeted their supposed allies in this conflict, but he couldn't help but feel differently around them now – as if they were in on some kind of joke at his expense, so he'd left them to whatever old score they were settling, burning a pile of books that they'd found, and had pushed on towards Rabaz and a run-in with his father. Though the angry face of Colonel Spencer vied for space in his mind with an altogether different image, so that it was hard to be sure what drove him on so urgently towards the capital. A splash of colour jumped into the bino's view. He focused again.

"There. What do you see?"

He handed the binoculars to Sulemein. The strap was still around his neck so that he had to lean in almost intimately to let him use them. Sulemein adjusted the lenses to fit his face and looked for himself.

“Where? Ah. I see. Red clothing. Monks? They’re small like children.”

“Not in the red. Near the front, in dark clothes...”

“I see it.”

“Tell me.”

Michael felt his stomach twist slightly. It was absurd, but he wanted to have what he’d spotted the other day from another lookout confirmed. To know that his obsession wasn’t having him see things.

“It’s a girl. Dark hair. Green jacket.”

He handed the binos back to Michael.

“Your friend?”

Michael looked thoughtful. With the naked eye you could almost convince yourself that you could make out the red pinpricks of the robes through the heat haze.

“What would you redbeards call it when someone’s *not* your friend?”

“An enemy?”

Michael squinted. He was sure he could see them now. Tiny red ants, with the dark figure leading them as they crawled towards Rabaz, where his father waited unaware.

“It’s going to be a hell of a reunion in the city.”

## TWELVE

They entered the city the next morning, no longer concerned with staying hidden – just another group of refugees fleeing the violence beyond the safety of Joint Mission control. As they approached the first concrete houses on the rural fringes of Rabaz Beth asked the Abbottess to pause, and hid her weapon beneath a pile of rubbish next to a distinctive yellow-painted house. In case she ever needed it again. The knife she'd taken from the valley stayed up her sleeve.

A half hour later a scooter with a red-robed passenger pulled up alongside the line of children. Who were they? Where had they come from? The Abbottess rapidly explained and the monk sped off with his friend to carry the news of their arrival. Within an hour a flatbed truck arrived and Beth recognised the beaming driver as one of the adults who'd led another troupe. It seemed they were the last group of those who'd crossed the desert to arrive – the others were all safe and waiting anxiously for the Abbottess to join them, he said. The children piled excitedly on to the back and rode bouncing, with the wind whipping their robes behind, as the truck took them towards the city's congested heart.

The return to Rabaz set Beth ill at ease. She rode at the front of the flatbed, standing so she could look over the top of the cab, where the Abbottess sat with one of the smallest children on her lap. Here and there she saw a landmark that she remembered from the last time that she'd come this way, and just as she wondered if she might see the place itself, she recognised a distinctive junction and realised with a shock that she was passing the spot where they'd been attacked. Nothing seemed out of sorts. Green trees lined the roadside, and people walked by unhurried, picking their way around the litter that lay in piles on the roadside. Time had done its work well. A few chipped stones in a building's wall might have been remnants of the blast, or bullet holes, or simply wear and tear – and before she could make up her mind they'd driven by. Beth remembered her father as she'd last seen him, bundled into the back of a pickup on this very road, and wondered for the hundredth time at all that might have passed since that fateful day.

Soon the truck was crawling along narrow alleys in the ancient centre of the city, where the streets were packed earth and old men with trays of flat bread on their shoulders grumbled at being honked out of the way. At a gate lined with a vine of bright pink flowers the truck turned into a courtyard, passing so close under the archway that Beth had to duck to keep her head, and pulled up amid a sudden sea of red robes, children shouting their excitement, pulling their friends down from the truck, laughing at their dusty faces and weary limbs and promising them baths.

Beth stayed on the back of the truck, watching, expecting to be forgotten. But when a knot of adult monks approached the cab, beaming relieved smiles, the Abbotess embraced them affectionately, then quickly turned to introduce them to her.

“This is Beth Singer. She arrived with Iaqub, one of our long lost students, just as we were leaving. She has been a guide and a protector, helping me bring the children safely here.”

There were approving nods from those who spoke English, then the Abbotess surprised Beth again.

“I sent word ahead with our friend on the motorbike. Passang here has already found Farzin’s family. The Golshiris live in the Parsee district, not far from here. Passang can take you as soon as you wish”

Gratitude welled up so suddenly that Beth began to cry. A tear made a little clean track down her dusty face, until she smeared it away and breathed through the shock. She hadn’t had the faintest idea how she might go about finding Farzin’s family going just off his last name, and now it was all done for her. The relief had unlocked her exhaustion and made her emotional. She sniffed and gave the Abbotess her most gracious thank you.

“But you’re tired,” the Abbotess told her. “You need to eat and wash. And maybe clean your clothes.”

For the first time Beth realised what a horrorshow her jacket really was – and how unsettling it must look. She peeled it off, jumped lightly from the truck and took Passang’s outstretched hand with both of hers, beaming confidently into his face.

“I’m truly thankful Passang, Abbotess. I’m ready as soon as you are.”

“Please!” bowed the little man. “Wash and rest. We can depart whenever you are ready. It is a short walk only.”

Beth nodded her thanks, relieved all over again to have a break, and walked with them to the collection of houses where the monastery’s exiles had made their home.

In the end the hot bath was something of a letdown. A dozen dusty children had been through the copper tub before Beth braved the murky water, and it was so lukewarm that she found herself wishing for the bite of her pristine mountain stream. But at least she’d had a chance to clean her clothing. A woman had taken her jacket – looking at the bloodstained sleeves in alarm, and checking Beth to see if her arms had been the source – then when she was satisfied that Beth had not, in fact, spilled several pints of her own blood into the fabric and wouldn’t collapse right then and there, she set about soaking and scrubbing in another tub next to the bath. She had the jacket hung up and drying, now a fresh grime-free green, by the time Beth was out and ready.

Then it was food – blessed food – more and richer than she’d eaten in weeks, she realised. And then just as she decided she really must find Passang and meet Farzin’s family before she grew too tired to move, lead poured into her limbs. Sleep struck her down where she sat slouched in a corner, surrounded by newly cleaned and fed red-robed children.

She dreamed of Jarrett, and Farzin, and Iaqub lost somewhere in the wilderness needing her – and woke to Passang’s gentle shaking.

It was morning and she was curled absurdly in a corner where they’d left her sleeping, legs somehow halfway up the wall, with a couple of snoring children on either side. She smiled at Passang, surprised to find herself there but feeling rested and ready. A wave of affection for these kids she’d helped bring to safety came over her. She rubbed the shaved head of the sleeping girl next to her as she stood. It felt clean and bristly. Passang beamed at her.

“For luck,” she told him, winking, and they picked their way quietly between the sleeping figures and out into the pale light of the courtyard.

It was chilly out this early, but her jacket was still damp, hanging by the copper pots, so she left it, rubbed her arms against the cold and strode briskly with Passang as he led them down the empty dirt lanes, his own arms wrapped in his robe like a butterfly’s pupae.

It was early, and Beth was thoughtful and half asleep, so they didn’t speak as they zig zagged through the maze. Passang seemed to know where they were headed and in a few minutes they reached a wooden door set in a clay wall, with a bell hanging prettily from a hook next to the frame. Passang looked at her and nodded, and Beth reached out and jangled its little chain. They waited.

“The Abbottess didn’t want to come?”

Passang shook his head. He was still sleepy too.

“She was up and out before you were you awake. She wanted to tell Joint Mission of our arrival in the city. To let them know what happened at the monastery. To ask for their help feeding the children, and tell them that the daughter of Raymond Singer is alive.”

A sudden misgiving gripped Beth for no reason she could fathom, but before she could question the feeling the door creaked open a crack and a face that could have been the twin of her father’s old companion peered through.

“Hello?”

“Mr Golshiri? I knew Farzin. My name is Bethany Singer.”

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Another day, another room, eating cross-legged on the floor. Though this time comfortably on a cushion. Bowls and platters held breakfast things, the family sitting around their guest, topping up her plate repeatedly, though



she could barely eat from nerves. The atmosphere was gracious and warm yet somehow formal too. Children went in and out. A girl in a blue headscarf, maybe 16 years old, stood watching from outside the circle.

When the adults had finished and Passang had declined another tea a woman approached, passing something to one of the men – the one who had opened the door, looking so much like the slender driver who'd picked her up from Rabaz airport that day so long ago. They waited while the woman began clearing away the plates. When she'd finished, the man – Omid he'd said his name was – cleared his throat and passed Beth the object that the woman had brought.

It was a picture of her. At home in England, maybe eight years old.

“Farzin spoke of your family often. This picture has sat in our living room for many years, next to one of your father. They were gifts from Raymond, who was a guest here many times. My brother thought of him as family, and your photos shared space with all our other family members – many of whom owe their existence in this country to your father's bravery in bringing them here.”

Beth turned the silver picture frame around in her hands, trying not to cry.

“Now Farzin's photograph sits with them, in the middle so that we may see him every day, though it is ten years since he was killed.”

Passang's fingers moved along a string of beads in his lap. The girl watched from outside the circle.

“It is very strange to see you – and so young; the Beth from our living room table. Very strange. But we are your family here, and we will help you however we can.”

“Thank you Omid.”

Her voice felt small. Beth looked up from her lap at the five adults gathered around her. Two were close to Omid's age – in their thirties and forties – brothers or cousins maybe. Then there was an elderly man and woman. Beth guessed they were Farzin's aunt and uncle – the household parents.

It had taken weeks of walking, and cost Jarrett his life, for her to get here. And now with their hospitality laid out at her feet she didn't know what to say to these people. How would Jarrett have put it? ‘Cut to the chase, girl’, he'd have told her...

“I'm here because my father might be alive. I know that it's been a long time for you. But I think that he could still be a captive. And I want to tell you about someone called the Kushan.”

The people in the circle shuffled uncertainly, swapping glances. The oldest lady looked almost distressed. Beth plugged on.

“It was your brother who told me about the redbeards. The Edomites. He'd pointed them out on that same day they attacked us. Farzin and Papa told me they always killed their hostages. So when they killed your brother and put Papa in one truck and me in the other ... even though I managed to get away, I was sure that my dad was dead.

“But Papa had left me a letter. When I finally read it I ... I understood how much was at stake in what he was doing here. And something that I remembered about the attack made me realise that the redbearers could never have taken him. That it was some kind of trick. I think now that it was the Q’Shanites all along – last week they attacked Passang’s monastery and killed a friend of mine. So I want to find out for certain what happened to my Papa. He wrote in his letter that if anything happened to him, I should come find you – that you knew everything about what he did. That’s why I’m here.”

The old lady began speaking at Omid sharply, but not in a language Beth could understand. There followed a back and forth conversation amongst all the people seated that even Passang could clearly not follow. Eventually Omid addressed Beth again.

“Beth, this weekend, three days from now, the Q’Shanite clan leadership passes on. My mother thinks – we think – that if your father really is alive, then he might be there when it happens.”

“How do you mean?”

Omid looked uncomfortable.

“One of the things your father found out about the Q’Shanites – one of the grisly things. Is how they pass on their rule.

“When a leader’s son has children of his own, then the title of ruler moves on. The boy has to be eight, I believe, for his father to take the rule. Everyone in Isfastan knows that’s how it works. But the part the Q’Shanites *don’t* talk about is what happens on that night.

“By tradition the old leader’s rule must be weighed in the balance. A condemned man is brought into the room. The two bow down before an executioner, and if the leader’s rule is deemed to have been worthy, then the criminal loses his head. But if the leader has ruled poorly, well... then the condemned man lives. Either way only one of them leaves the room. And the leader’s little grandson, watching with his father, learns a hard, important lesson that every Q’Shanite ruler grows up to know: that one day he will have ultimate power over his tribe – but how he wields that power will set his fate.

“Your father thought it was brilliant. He thought that the knowledge of future judgement had woven a thread of moderation into Isfastani politics for centuries. But he also knew that the moderation had worn away – as if the judgment has somehow lost its teeth.

“And *that*... that got him thinking. Who was the executioner? Who was the one who got to make the final call? In the end, Farzin told me, your father discovered something truly useful: that the executioner was some kind of outsider. Someone that they feared. The person who had the power to make the final judgement.”

Beth nodded. The rest she knew. Between his letter and what the Abbess had told her she had the story of how her father had found those executioners – the mysterious stranger kings. And she thought she could guess

too, who many years ago, that king had been. She thought of the Kushan the way that she'd seen him that night, when Oesha had bathed him. They were not the scars of a holy man.

“But Omid, I still don't get why my father would be there now.”

Omid winced.

“The man who will be tested in three days' time – the leader who passes on his title – is the same man who broke your father's peace. If your father was really taken by the Q'Shanites, then it was R'shad atan al-Q'shani who ordered it done. So what better way to cement his family's rule of fire and war than to offer for judgement a choice between his own head – and Raymond Singer's.”

Beth gasped. A shock shot through her guts as the picture finally fell in to place. The man that the Kushan wanted dead – R'shad atan al-Q'shani – validating his bloody conquest through the slaughter of her dear Papa. The thought made her limbs go weak.

“Can we stop him?”

Omid spoke softly with the old woman. His cousins nodded. He turned back to Beth.

“We must tell Joint Mission everything we know.”

Beth nodded.

“Then we have to go now.”

## THIRTEEN

The first thing he did when they arrived was send a man to the bank. Michael knew he had to give a clear message to his men. Now they were back in Rabaz their wages came from him, not his father. In that crucial moment in the village, with Jules' blood pooling in the dust by his boots, they'd rallied behind him. But now they'd all had a chance to cool down he had to show them he was serious in the only way that really mattered. For the short term that meant funding them from his personal savings. Later he'd need to reach out to his network, find them contracts of their own – wherever that might take them – but that was a tomorrow problem. Today was about US dollars in envelopes – and somewhere for them to stay.

That was the second thing he did: sent another man out with a fresh wad of paper money to find them their own HQ.

Within an hour he returned. He'd secured them both floors of a two storey garment factory in an old part of town; cleared out especially for them. Rents were high in wartime. People flocked to the cities for safety, and competition for somewhere to live could be intense – Michael knew that their taking the factory would likely have meant a dozen or so paying 'tenants' would no longer have the right to doss amongst the fabric bales. But that was their look-out. Dollars beat local currency. And for now he had dollars and needed a place to call their own. He could hardly tell the men they worked for him now, then drive straight to Joint Mission to claim their old digs. And when the time came for the confrontation with his father, he wanted it to be on his turf at least. He'd need any advantage he could find.

Anyway, Charles Spencer would know where to find them. The moment their little convoy had rolled within the city limits he would have been told. Michael figured a visit was inevitable. And his father didn't disappoint.

Day one they rested, settling in. Michael claimed the whole upstairs level, letting his men spread out below, and spent most of the time working on his laptop; Sulemin skulked, still mistrusted by the men. Tension began to settle on them like low cloud.

Day two the feeling grew. The business with Jules was on their minds; along with a new sense of uncertainty, plus the presence of this red-bearded stranger in their midst. Eventually a couple of them addressed it in the way that they knew best. They set out into the old town and returned an hour later with a crate of whiskey, carried on a porter's back. A tip was produced in grubby local notes, and the men set in for a session. Michael retreated upstairs. Sulemein, surprisingly, joined the group below.

Michael worked on a upturned crate, sitting on a leftover bale. The light was dim – a respite from the intense brightness of the street outside. Occasional muted breaking noises came up through the cool concrete floor.

Tomorrow he would send his men to find where the refugees in red robes were staying. But for now... soldiers had their own codes and rituals. It was good for them to work through whatever needed working through.

The next day only Sulemein was up before ten. He sported a black eye – and a new unquestioned status as one of their squad. Michael accepted the change without prying. Then at midday his father arrived, security detail in tow.

The SUVs pulled up outside the window. Michael could hear his men scrambling into readiness below.

He'd briefed them on what he expected – including his insistence that no armed men from outside be allowed up to this second floor. That would be the tensest point for them – two groups of private soldiers, ostensibly from the same company, each with conflicting orders... so he was gratified when his father stepped through the door alone.

Michael stayed sitting at his makeshift desk. The only other person in the room was Sulemein, stood upright against the opposite wall, watching, mysterious in his pale robes. Spencer ignored him.

“Dad.”

He kept it cheery. Neutral. He thought suddenly of the three APCs parked around the back. About whether he would keep them, or have to buy his own.

The older Spencer surveyed the room – still effortlessly ignoring the standing tribesman. He spotted a bale of old carpet, dragged it over, and sat.

“Where’s Jules? He hasn’t contacted me.”

Michael closed his laptop. Its glow cut out, leaving both men half hidden in the gloom.

“He’s dead.”

“What happened?”

Here it was. How to put it? Michael looked his father in the eye.

“He disrespected me.”

His father’s extreme displeasure showed only in the brief silence as he took this in.

“Jules worked for me for a long time. He was a good man.”

“Really? I heard that he’d killed his wife and daughter. Was that true?”

Another pause. Displeasure was the wrong word. Fury was more like it.

“Left Hand Path Security was more than a job for Jules. It saved him. I wish you could have seen that.”

“To be honest, I have other things on my mind than your man Jules.” Michael got up despite himself, needing to walk off the feeling and stay in control. “Things like, did you have me kidnapped to start a war?”

From the corner of his eye he saw Sulemein shift his footing. His father exhaled slowly; stayed sitting.

“So. That’s what this is about.”

“That’s what this is about.”

Michael made himself stop walking while his father paused, thoughtful eyes on the dusty floor.

“Son. If you had not been on that chopper – found and coming back to me – I would have skinned R’Shad Q’Shani alive with my own hands.”

Sulemein looked electrified. His face wide and bright. Spencer turned to him for the first time.

“Yes. Q’Shani. It was his idea, the attack. As was blaming it on your people.” He shrugged. “What was I to say? I needed Raymond Singer gone, and time to have him questioned without risk of rescue. Faking an attack by the redbeards gave me both those things – as well as a convenient pretext for the war that Q’Shani so desired. And which LHP – at the right price – would back. I found myself rather wishing that I’d thought of it myself, until that weasel Q’Shani tried to hold my son into the bargain, as if you were a cash deposit on our deal.”

Michael realised he was shaking his head in disbelief. He could see Sulemein was barely controlling himself.

“Why, Dad? Why?” His disbelief was giving way to anger. “The Shura had a chance. Isfastan had a chance! All those people who died. All those people that *I killed*. Did you really start a war for profit?”

His father stood slowly, pivoting to face him on his heels, his arms reaching to Michael as if to embrace – or else ensnare.

“The Left Hand Path is far beyond simple profit, son. Good and evil, right and wrong; you’re still trying so hard to work out who’s the hero, and who’s the villain. But it’s a *path* Michael. LHP is a path to places truly moral, yet truly beyond those primitive ideas. I wish I could show you son – I’ve wished that for a long time. But it’s a place that you can only reach alone.”

He turned to face Sulemein, addressing them both, his voice suddenly loud and powerful.

“You came here for revenge, yes?! For the people that were killed – for the wrong that was done to you all those years ago?”

Yes, Michael breathed – yes. He was almost crying. He had come here knowing he might kill his father. The relief at knowing that he wouldn’t was overwhelming.

“Then take it on the man who truly wronged you. In two days R’Shad atan al-Q’Shani will ritually kill the wretched Raymond Singer, and the leadership of the Q’Shanites will pass on down to his son. But Q’Shani has learned a secret thing. He knows of a valley –” his voice was irresistible now, eyes wide with serpent’s fascination. “A place *I know* you’ve been. He wishes to go there, to take it for his own. Hurry there before him! Wait in hiding, then kill Q’Shani – and everyone else you find. Claim the valley for me. For whoever rules the valley, rules the Q’Shanites. And whoever rules the Q’Shanites controls all Isfastan.”

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The crate cracked as Michael put his boot through the wood. Sulemein watched from the other side of the room as he methodically reduced it to a pile of splinters with a series of savage little kicks. When there was nothing but kindling left he pressed his head on the cool concrete wall and breathed.

“You know, when I was a kid, I just assumed my Dad was CIA. Now? I have no idea what he is.”

“Overpowering.”

Michael shot him a glance. Sulemein shrugged.

“He is a hard man to look in the eye. When he walked in here I was ready to kill him. Ten minutes later he leaves, and I seem to be working for him.”

“Yeah. Kind of amazing right. What do you think of that?”

“I think if I don’t eat soon I’m going to throw up last night’s whiskey.”

Michael exhaled, ran his fingers through his hair and looked at his watch.

“I should probably eat too. Join you? We should walk and talk.”

The two of them took the stairs down. His men on the ground floor looked at him questioning. Their gear was all in green packs, lined up against one wall. Sulemein admired their readiness, despite the lingering tang of spirits.

“You have good men you know. Bad at cards though: it’s my shout.”

Michael grinned. They stepped into the light and heat and Michael steered them towards a place he knew, where they could get something good. Sulemein looked jumpy – a country boy ill at ease in the big smoke.

“You know, Michael, I don’t want to disrespect you. But your father. He is a snake.”

They were strolling side-by-side on the hard-packed dirt road.

“He admits he brought a false war against my people, then tells me, that’s okay! It wasn’t his idea to start with...”

He shook his head.

“Maybe it’s different for you. Now you believe he did not have you kidnapped?”

“What difference would it make?” Michael looked at him as they walked. “Now I know he lied to start a war. I killed people for that lie. That’s worse than anything he could have done to me.”

Sulemein pulled at his wiry beard, musing.

“And yet he lays out a gift that is hard to refuse. The leader of the Q’shanites – delivered into our hands if we just return to the valley.”

The road opened into a square. Rubble and rubbish were heaped in piles in the centre, but the stores around the edge were doing a brisk trade even in this heat. A smell of searing fat and charcoal reached them, reminding

them both of their hunger, and Michael steered them towards the restaurant he'd had in mind. They both paused outside to finish talking.

"It just sits wrong. We kill Q'Shani for my father and he'll take control of the whole Q'Shanite Federation. You think he'll stop his war against your people then? More likely he'll have you killed for knowing the whole redbear provocation was a fake. Maybe even me too."

Sulemein smiled suddenly.

"But it's not Q'Shani's death that gives the rule. It's holding the valley." His eyes had that superstitious shine Michael had seen as they'd trekked uphill towards those empty stone houses.

"I think the *valley* is the heart of the mystery. To speak from that place is to speak from the throne. What if we go there – kill Q'Shani and take the valley for ourselves. Then the throne is not your father's. It's yours and mine."

Michael thought a while, turning it over in his head. Revenge against the man who'd had him kidnapped – and who'd started this war. And all achieved without aiding his father; the one who until now had quietly backed Q'Shani, making the last ten years of human misery possible. Of all the possible courses of action it seemed the cleanest. He nodded slowly.

"Let's get some chicken then."

But as they turned into the restaurant Michael stopped. A shock passed through his chest. His mouth dropped open.

*"I don't believe it."*



## FOURTEEN

In the end Omid convinced her not to come to Joint Mission headquarters with them – and she was relieved. Michael’s father had been high up there. It was still possible that he worked on base, and she still had no idea what had happened to Michael – whether he was alive or dead. The idea of finding herself in a room with his father, explaining how her escape might have cost Michael his life was not something she relished.

Instead Omid suggested that she stay with his daughter, the girl in blue who’d stood aside watching at breakfast. They could go to town together to get some lunch. And that would keep things simple for Joint Mission, he said. He’d tell them that Raymond Singer had been seen alive in Q’Shanite hands, which would avoid any confusion over his daughter arriving out of nowhere. Though Beth thought she knew what kind of confusion he really meant, seeing his eyes go uneasy as he glanced at her too-young face.

So Omid fished a handful of tan-coloured notes from a jar on the table and counted them out for his daughter. Would that be enough? Girls who crossed deserts and escaped kidnappings could probably find their way home from the Rabaz old souk, he told them with a warmth that reminded Beth of Farzin – but if they needed to there was enough to take a taxi home as well as get something to eat. Though maybe Chamani should take them on her scooter, he added. And Beth decided that something normal for once was a wonderful idea.

One of the cousins went next door to start his beat-up taxi, and pulled up outside to take the adults in to Joint Mission. They were all going, to do their best to see Raymond Singer saved if he was still alive. Beth saw them off at the front door, and Passang asked quietly if she would be alright if he left her with the girl. Of course she told him, with Chamani promising him she’d drop her back to see the Abbotess when they returned. So the stocky monk wrapped himself in his red cocoon and wished them well, setting off on foot as the Golshiri family pulled away with a hopeful beep and a cloud of blue smoke.

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It was quiet with all the adults gone.

“They’ll find him,” Chamani said to the empty street. “If he’s really out there they’ll rescue him in time.”  
The girl looked back at Beth. “It’s just the waiting part that’s hard.”

She nodded, feeling fidgety.

“Have you ever ridden on a scooter?”

“Would you believe that I hadn’t?”

Chamani’s eyes went comically big.

“What have you been doing all this time here? Come on, let’s turn you into a proper Isfastani.”

“Hold up. Let me see.”

Beth took one of the notes Omid had given them from her hand.

“You know I’ve never seen the money here?”

She held it up to the light. Mountain. Man in a hat. A flower and some kind of long-horned goat all on a pretty mosaic pattern.

“Cool,” said Beth, and handed it back. Chamani was looking at her oddly.

“What?”

Chamani shrugged.

“You look really strong. I wish I looked like that.”

“Pshh,” Beth said, taken aback. “Come on – let’s see this stupid scooter.”

They flew through the narrow alleyways far too fast, the metallic racket from the tortured engine bouncing off the walls. Stray dogs scrambled, men swore; Beth laughed like a lunatic. It was the opposite of everything she’d done for the last however many months: brash and loud and brilliant. And when they finally pulled up on the edge of a market square and leaned the scooter on a dusty yellow wall Beth had to lean on her knees to get the last of the laughter out. The wind had made her eyes water and blown grit into her lashes.

“Oh, so good! Am I an Isfastani now?”

“Citizenship approved. Hey I’m actually starving. Some of us haven’t had a three course royal breakfast, you know. Can we get something to eat?”

“Go on,” said Beth, who’d been too nervous to have much that morning anyway. She looked around.

“Hey I think I know this place.”

It was strange. Things were different. Bigger trees. Some of the buildings had lost their fronts – maybe from bombs – though it all looked orderly now. But there was no mistaking. It was the place she’d come with Michael on her first night out in Isfastan.

“That’s a weird feeling. Did there use to be a place over there that only sold chicken?”

“Used to?” laughed Chamani. “Still is. It’s the best charcoal chicken in all Rabaz. You want to eat there?”

“Yeah, why not?” she told her, feeling displaced in time, and followed Chamani into a shack with plastic chairs and tables that was disturbingly the-same-yet-different to where she’d eaten all those years or months ago. She looked over to the table where Farzin had sat, daintily picking at his meal, and for the first time felt properly sad for him and no one else.

Chamani was ordering bossily for them both, not bothering to ask what Beth would like. The greasy man at the counter turned to bellow their order back down to the chef. “Asha!” he called to someone else behind him. “Asha!”. And the word made Beth’s stomach drop.

“Hey!” She reached across the counter and grabbed his sleeve before he could turn away. She felt dizzy, fighting the sensation of being suddenly in the desert beneath the stars, listening to a man weeping on the other side of a ridge. “What does that mean?” He looked at her surprised; not understanding.

“That word. Does it mean mother? Hey! I’m talking to you. Is it *mother?*”

“Water,” said a quiet voice behind her. “Asha is water, Beth.”

She turned. Knowing somehow, yet still needing to see.

Michael’s eyes went wide.

*“I don’t believe it.”*

## FIFTEEN

From the corner of her eye Beth could see Chamani backing towards the door. A tall pale-robed tribesman stood close by. But it was Michael that commanded her attention.

His eyes were scanning her. Her clothes. Her boots. Her thin and muscled arms. So different, yet so clearly still the same age – the same age she'd been ten years ago when he'd looked her in the eye on the forest floor. She had the urge to run again and forced it down.

"It's really true. They told me in the village, but I couldn't quite believe it. You can't until you've seen it for yourself..."

He was a full foot taller than the boy she'd left that night. Not big, but thicker through the shoulders and the chest. A man. Though it was the eyes that were most shocking. There was something bitter in those brown eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Michael." Her face creased with pity for him as she struggled to find the right words. "I'm glad that you're alive."

"Wow," he managed, still scanning her face in wonder. "It really is weird. You know, I used to tell myself off for imagining us talking like this – because I'd always picture you how you were then. But you'd be older now, I'd say to myself. Or dead. Yet here you are – the same Beth Singer that left me there to die."

The disdain in his voice stung.

She dropped her eyes – though only for a moment. The tension in the air was putting her on high alert. She noticed faintly the way her heightened awareness had begun to slow things down. She began weighing the gap between Michael and the restaurant's wall.

"I... I've been somewhere..."

"Oh I know. I know *exactly* where you've been." She could feel the crackle in his nerves now, the readiness building. He moved a step forward. "I've been there too. In fact, Sulemein and I" – he gestured back to the raw-boned redbear behind him without taking his eyes off Beth – "have just decided to go back. Apparently we missed you and your friends last time by a whisker. But this time we'll make sure we catch them."

She took in the military fatigues he was wearing – the worn boots and sunburned look. "What are you going to do there Michael?"

He clenched his teeth.

"Nothing good."

She was backing towards the counter now, shocked at the anger coming off him.

“And you could probably stop me, you know. Get there first and warn your friends. But I know that you won’t do that.” He took another step closer, his voice conspiratorial. “Because in two days time the Q’Shanites will take your father to the head of the Yuezhi river and execute him. And you’ll do anything you can to stop that happening – even if it means leaving your friends to die. *Again.*”

“We’re already stopping it,” she told him. “We’re asking Joint Mission to rescue him now.”

Michael barked – head thrown right back in mirthless laughter that made the diners look up alarmed.

“Oh that’s good! You’re asking the man who had Raymond Singer kidnapped to save his life. Well that’s one thing I’ve worked out this last ten years that you seemed to miss: You should never trust my dad.”

Beth’s head was whirling. Michael’s *father?* The thought filled her with horror – the Abbotess might be in Spencer’s presence right at this moment. Yet that danger seemed abstract next to the threat she felt here and now. She could see Michael reading her unease; weighing the moment, and knew she had to get away. She breathed; felt the world slowing – and as her awareness spread she picked up something that Michael had not yet caught: a tinny buzz at the edge of hearing.

His face was dark. Behind her she heard the chef say something to them – saw Michael’s eyes flick for a moment over her shoulder – and in that fraction of inattention she bolted for the gap.

Michael never had a chance. He was fast and strong and sharp with anger, but she flashed past his lunge with ease, reaching Chamani just as the girl curved past the restaurant’s front on her braying scooter. There was a moment of risk as Beth hooked a strong arm round the girl’s waist, then she gunned the motor and they were away, leaving behind a cloud of blue fumes and startled shoppers.

Michael stopped after his first few angry strides. Why had he chased them, anyway? He’d let himself get carried away.

Sulemein came to stand next to him, and they paused a moment watching the scooter exit the other side of the square into the city’s maze of alleys.

“Off you go then,” Michael said under his breath as a cloud of smoke settled over the diners. “Make your choice. And you can live with the consequences.”

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Chamani pulled the scooter to the side of an alleyway, but left the engine idling.

“Who was that?” She twisted to see her passenger’s face. Beth was smearing tears from her cheeks angrily – and rubbing the grit out of her eyes.

“I’ll tell you later. We need to get back to your place to check on your parents. But go carefully – I don’t know how safe it was for them to see Joint Mission.”

Chamani looked worried, but she did as Beth asked without saying more, and soon they were pulling into the street they had come from. Beth tugged on her clothing urgently.

“Stop here.”

They both put a foot down as Chamani eased to a stop. The alley curved away beyond them, Chamani’s home still just out of sight. There was a man walking towards them around the bend. He was harmless, a local – yet Beth had seen him glance repeatedly back the way he came. Looking at something else that was out of place.

“What is it?”

She heard an engine start. Not a taxi, not a rickshaw – a well-tuned, expensive engine.

“Go, go, go!”

They revved the scooter and yanked it round. The alley was narrow but they made it in one turn just as a white Joint Mission SUV came accelerating towards them.

Chamani didn’t need to be told. She took a hard turn into a narrower side alley, then another, and another until they were sure they were safely away.

“Passang!” Beth yelled into her ear above the noise of wind and engine. “The refugees. We have to warn them!”

She could feel the chill of fear in her, but Chamani nodded, and they turned towards the refugee quarter that Beth had left that morning.

Soon they were slowing to a cautious walking pace. When the entrance to the yard was in sight the two of them stopped at a safe distance.

White lorries were parked along the street. Men and women in Joint Mission uniforms were herding red-robed children to the trucks and helping them up into the back. Not roughly, but firmly. The Abbottotess and Passang were nowhere to be seen.

“Wait here,” Beth told Chamani as she got off the bike.

Her mood was grim. She could hear Chamani saying something behind her that she ignored. So long as she kept the motor running was all.

A door on to the street from a courtyard stood open. Beth walked calmly in. The old lady who had done her washing last night while she soaked in a bath was there, scolding a soldier who was doing her best to herd her towards the lorries. It seemed the woman wasn’t abandoning her duties without an argument. Beth spotted what she was after, walked over to the line and yanked her green jacket down. It was felt weirdly clean and stiff; still warm from the sun. She turned, shrugged the jacket on, and made back for the door.

“Hey!”

She kept walking.

“What are you doing here?”

She could hear the soldier striding towards her. She was almost at the door though, so she kept her cool, and kept walking right up until she was through and out of sight – and then she bolted. She was on the back of the scooter by the time the woman reached the street. Chamani had even turned the bike around. They made a noisy exit as the soldiers looked after them, confused.

“You’re crazy, you know?”

Beth ignored her. But her arms were tight around Chamani’s waist.

“One more favour? Can you take me to the south road out of town?”

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“Just here.”

They pulled over by a distinctive yellow wall and left the scooter on its kickstand. Beth found the pile of rubbish and began lifting brittle sheets of plastic to one side. The gun was still there. Chamani watched over Beth’s shoulder as she sat on her heels and yanked it from its hiding place. She pulled out the magazine and thumbed the golden rounds into her palm.

Eight bullets, looking like little golden fish. She rolled them over each other in her hand, round and round as she thought – then she cleaned them one by one on her jacket before feeding them back into the clip.

She pressed the magazine against her forehead and closed her eyes.

Chamani’s family would be locked up somewhere in the Joint Mission base. The Abbots too, most likely. And Passang. And all the children.

She thought of Oesha, back in the valley, silk trousers fluttering in the mountain air. Of the Kushan, holding the valley in his mind as his life slipped away; keeping the world out for who knew how much longer? Michael claimed to have been in the valley while they were away. Could he force his way in while the Kushan was there? It was impossible to know.

She thought of Jarret’s body burning in the desert. And finally she thought of her father. Alive, said Michael. But not much longer.

Her hands shook from pressing the clip against her head, the pain helping her clear her thoughts.

Would Michael really kill her friends? The boy she’d known would never do it. But the man? All that bitterness, for all those years. Suddenly she knew what he was doing. He wanted her right back in that moment

on the forest floor where she'd made that awful choice: Her own life or his. Except now Michael was forcing another decision on her: Her father or her friends.

A bead of blood appeared on her forehead. She'd felt so much sorrow for him – for what she'd done – and the thought of him gnawing on her decision for all those years was awful. But what he was threatening was just grotesque. Killing them, to hurt her. Trying to make their death *her* choice. She clenched her teeth until she thought that they might crack.

So be it. If he wanted her back there on the forest floor, choosing all over again, then so be it. Beth opened her eyes, stood, and snapped the magazine back into the gun.

“Chamani? I'm sorry – I'm going to leave you. I'm going to try and find my Dad.”

The girl's grey eyes looked fearful, framed by her floral blue headscarf, but she met Beth's hardened look. For a moment she looked like Oesha, so serious and composed.

“Where will you go?”

Beth looked awkward suddenly.

“The head of the... Yuezhi River?”

“And where is that?”

Beth shrugged, a little helplessly. A gaggle of scooters buzzed by on the road. Heads turned at the two girls talking, with a gun between them...

“Oh for God's sakes.”

Chamani pulled off her headscarf, took the rifle from Beth's hands and wrapped the material tightly around its length before passing it back. Beth slung it over her shoulder and suddenly it was just a colourful package being carried by a girl.

Chamani sighed. “You're ridiculous, you know that? I can take you to the headwaters. We'll be there by tomorrow morning.”

Back on the bike the blue fabric fluttered behind them like a flag of war, and nobody looked at them twice. Within an hour they were out of Rabaz. Chamani pulled over at a roadside shanty and while Beth mooched discreetly she bought two red plastic containers of fuel and a half dozen little deep-fried meat pastries that smelled like cloves. They were good, though no substitute for the chicken meal they'd missed, they both felt. Then they got back on the bike and rode until the light was almost gone.

Now they were in a landscape of baked clay, irrigation ditches and rows of green poplars sheltering the occasional village. To their right the desert's frozen waves marched along the horizon, picking up the last grey light on their crests. Despite being in the middle of what felt like nowhere – and on an appalling rutted road – the traffic had steadily picked up over the last hour, turning the way ahead into a confusing blur of headlights in a haze of fine dust. Just as it was becoming really too dark to see Chamani spotted a stand of head-high scrub and



pulled over. Woozy with tiredness, they wheeled the bike off the road and out of sight. She laid it carefully on its side then they cast about until they each had a spot that wasn't completely uncomfortable, and settled on the hard-packed earth. Beth was glad to have her jacket.

They lay quietly for a while. Chamani propped her head up and pointed to a glow visible behind one of the hills silhouetted on the horizon.

“That’s where all these cars are going. The Yuezhi headwaters are the meeting place of the biggest Q’Shanite tribe. Tomorrow’s the night they take a new leader, so all the Federation tribes are sending people to mark the change. Like a fair and a council meeting and a family reunion all rolled into one. We’ll be there in the morning.”

But if Beth was still awake, she said nothing.

## SIXTEEN

Chamani woke to an awful stiffness in her limbs. The cold had oozed up through the ground and into her bones, cramping every muscle. She groaned. That was the worst night's sleep she'd ever had. She rolled on to her hands and knees, head hanging for a moment, then struggled to her feet. The bike and Beth were gone.

She ran, hobbling and horrified through the stand of cane where they'd hidden and up to the road edge, where Beth was carefully pouring petrol into the scooter's tank, slopping a little on the side.

"It's trickier than it looks," she said without looking up. "I saved you some of the pastries. They're in the plastic bag."

Once again Chamani was struck by the girl's aura of self-assurance – maybe in contrast to how she felt herself. Beth looked alert and ready, as if she'd spent ten hours in clean sheets and woken to black coffee and a familiar landscape – instead of sleeping on an unknown stony roadside. Her jacket was draped over the scooter's handlebars, and her arms were dark and muscled as she held the container steady while she poured. Chamani's fearfulness faded a little and she fished a pastry out and forced it down.

"You ready to go?" Beth asked. With her mouth full Chamani nodded, wiped the grease from her hands on to her dress, and mounted the bike. It started first time. Beth hopped lightly on the back and flipped up the kickstand as Chamani gunned the throttle.

In an hour they were weaving around a crawling queue of vehicles that stretched at least a kilometre. A ring of low hills ahead made a natural basin where the road – and the queue, plus a line of greenery marking a small swift river – all met at a gap that formed a sort of gate, like the opening in a croissant. Sandbags marked the point where men with guns were checking each car and lorry.

"What do we do?" Chamani shouted back to Beth.

"Just keep going!" she shouted back. "But slowly. It'll all be fine."

They swerved awkwardly as Chamani turned to point back at the machine gun slung over Beth's back.

"But that thing!"

"It'll be fine!" Beth said again, and Chamani saw that she had re-wrapped the gun within a bundle of canes from their sleeping place. The canes poked out each end, masking the gun's shape and giving it a harmless look. "Just flags, okay?"

"Okay" Chamani echoed, but she felt her stomach tighten until she thought that she might be sick. The checkpoint was fast approaching.

"Slow down," Beth insisted. She squeezed the brake with a shaking hand.

Tribesmen of all descriptions were gesticulating as the guards rummaged through their vehicles. Goats were being shoved aside and their feed bags probed. Men in woolen caps and ancient no-colour puffer jackets were made to step out and be patted down.

Chamani slowed to a crawl, waiting for instructions – then a guard with pants and sandals, a gun and grubby feet took one look at the girls on the scooter and waved them through. Chamani eased the throttle on, trying not to overdo it. Up the slope two bored foreigners in LHP uniforms were manning a mounted weapon in a nest of sandbags, ammunition looped neatly along the top in belts. They barely spared them a glance.

“Only girls, huh?” Beth shouted into her ear when they’d ridden calmly through. Chamani could feel herself grinning with relief. The edge of the gun’s magazine in Beth’s top jacket pocket was poking her in the back.

“Alright, let’s pull over.”

The girls parked the scooter amongst at least two dozen other similar bikes, looking like a flock of fat and dusty parrots. They gazed around.

It was still early enough to be cool, and clearly the crowds were not all here yet – the queue beyond the guard station promised at least a thousand more – so that the feeling of the place was like a fairground still waiting for its people. There were lots of square canvas tents, as well as open-sided cooking shelters where chefs were stirring enormous wok-like dishes in which piles of rice and meat and spices sizzled. Children were busy setting out plastic folding chairs for the diners that would come, and lorries farting diesel smoke carried water by the tanker-full. Everywhere people walked and spoke and preached and argued.

Beth turned and surveyed the landscape.

“We’d see better if we were up there.”

She pointed to the ring of gentle hills that surrounded the natural basin they were in. On the slopes small groups had settled where they could see the crowds below them. Here and there lone men stood as if entranced, arms wide in some private mystical rapture. And above, dotted around the skyline, were more guard stations with what looked like private security manning them. Michael’s father’s men maybe? Beth felt the skin on her back shiver.

It would do them no good to be up above, she realised. Even from below you noticed the absence of children and women on the near hillsides, and they needed to be as inconspicuous as they could. Beth stood on her tiptoes and tried to look around their nearer surroundings.

“What’s there?” she asked Chamani.

Beyond a row of what looked (and already smelled) like latrine pits, a line of green vegetation made its way through the otherwise dusty ground. Beth peered along its path to where it crossed a high chain-link fence that seemed to cut across the whole flat area. Beyond it lay a cluster of larger, newer looking tents separate from the crowds, surrounding a handful of ancient clay-built structures. The girls looked at each other.

“It think that’s where we need to be.”

They sauntered towards the fence and quickly saw that there was little point trying to get through. A small gate was guarded by private security – unrushed and professional-looking. Beyond them men with vests and guns strolled in the empty spaces between tents. The girls backed away before they drew attention.

Chamani was looking pale.

“I don’t know, Beth...”

Beth nodded sympathetically. *I do*, she thought to herself – but to Chamani she just said “it’s scary huh?”

Chamani blew out her cheeks, shaking her hands to clear her nerves, and nodded.

“Those guys with guns look serious,” Beth told her. “And I think we’ve used up all our bluffing luck. But it’s not you who needs to be there Chamani. I do.”

“I just don’t think you can! Did you see those guys? How would you even get in?”

Beth smiled a little then, and stuck out her bottom lip.

“I think I have an idea. But this is where I leave you. I need you to promise me you’ll hop on your bike and head home.”

Chamani took both her hands then. There was no arguing it, really. But her face was creased with worry.

“Come on,” Beth said. “Not here. You can be my lookout one last time.”

They walked together a while, Beth steering them closer to the line of greenery. It was the path of the little creek, wiggling across the flat and letting life blush for a few feet before the heat and dust took its toll on the vegetation. There must be a spring somewhere beyond the fence, Beth thought. The head of the Yuezhi River. They walked slowly, Beth eyeing the banks.

If she’d had her way in creating this encampment she’d have done it differently. Turned the tents around so that they faced the life-giving little waterway, rather than showing their backs to it. Though the current set-up helped her now – it was quiet back here behind the canvas. They stopped at an area that seemed reserved for bathing. A few tracks led down through the greenery to the water.

“Here,” Beth said quietly.

Chamani turned and Beth surprised her by hugging the girl fiercely. “Thank you,” Chamani heard her whisper into the tangle of hair where her face was buried. Then without looking back Beth slipped quickly into the greenery and was gone.

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The goodbye was too rushed for tears – which was what Beth had wanted; she couldn't afford to indulge now in the emotion. So while Chamani was drying the corners of her eyes and walking quickly away, Beth was trying to centre herself – out of sight, for now, in vegetation – and moving into her senses. She wriggled down a slope as quietly as she could manage, until her feet felt a cold, wet shock as they found the stream. She eased herself down further until she was in up to her waist – free now of the stream-side bushes and able to see a little up and down-river. She stood still for a moment and cast her attention out beyond her.

It was barely enough cover. Certainly anyone walking to the water's edge would spot her. But she felt sure she'd not been seen slipping down here, and could hear nobody else nearby. If she kept as low and quiet as possible, she should reach the point where the fence crossed the water without being noticed.

That part was was torture really. Water-torture, she thought grimly as she inched silently upstream. Sure the cold was painful – but Beth had long ago learned to live with physical discomfort. What made it hard was the need to go slowly, when she had no idea how soon her father might meet an end. If only he was here to tell her, she thought, when this so-called ceremony might begin. That would be typical of her dad – he would know every detail of these Q'Shanite rites; whether they took place in the daytime, or at night. He'd know if she should be racing now, or giving herself the best chance by staying stealthy.

And then she really had a shock. He *was* here. At least, he probably was. Her father – a captive for God-knows how long now – was being held just a few metres away on the other side of that fence.

That made her so distressed she had to stop a moment, race or not, and forcibly calm herself. She went so far as to lower her head fully under the water and hold it there, letting the brutal cold shock her into the present moment while the water flooded her hearing, surrounding her in a kind of bloated silence. She surfaced and let the water run out of her eyes, then checked that she'd kept the gun clear of the water. She had no idea if it would still work if the insides got wet.

Time to get moving again.

It took almost an hour to reach the place where the fence crossed the little river, though they'd only taken five minutes to walk the same distance before. There had come a point where people passed back and forth more often, while the banks had become shallower with much less cover. She'd crawled on her belly then, holding her breath for minutes at a time beneath the water, between painfully slow periods of movement, until she finally reached the chain-link fence.

Someone had made an effort to wire it to the bottom, and it took time to find the point where it could be loosened – and even longer to get her numb fingers to pry apart the loops of wire. But soon enough she was able to pass her gun through, then half drag, half swim her way under the gap she'd created, feeling like a bedraggled and shivering otter. She was in.

But now what? It took another half hour before she was far enough from the guard station to exit the stream, which was now much narrower, and slip between two close-pitched tents that hid her from two directions. Though it still felt awfully exposed. What would happen if a guard happened to walk past an opening?

She'd be killed, is what. The reality of how stupid this really was came crashing in then, until she bit her lip and made herself think of poor Jarrett in the desert. And of what she had done afterwards on that hilltop under the stars...

That got her grim again. Her arms were shaking hard with the cold, but she stripped off her sodden jacket, sluiced as much water as she could from her hair and stuffed it down the back of her T-shirt, before turning her attention to the gun.

It seemed fine. A bit wet, but the rounds looked okay when she opened the mag again, then snapped it back into place. She pushed the safety off and drew back the lever to cock it, easing a bullet into its chamber. Then, as Beth looked around at the relative safety of this little hiding place as if to say goodbye – noticing how it felt like the grassy spot back home in her valley, where she'd bathed on her very first morning there – the drumming began.

It was low. Private almost, not music meant to carry. Coming from somewhere amongst these tents. She began loping towards the sound.

The guards were no trouble now. The drumbeats had set her nerves tingling into her fingertips, so that she could hear the guards as she approached, skirting around, reassured by the nonchalant cadence of their footsteps – her own footfalls noiseless. And though leaving the occasional dribbly track could not be helped, she knew she was not being followed. She drew nearer to the source drumbeats, reaching the crumbling clay-built structures at the heart of this little tent kingdom. A dark doorway in a yellow wall beckoned. Could this be it?

She paused in the lee of a wall to listen – heard inside noises from within the building; rustling, drumming, murmurs. Smelled charcoal, incense, face-paint, liquor.

She straightened, breathed normally, and walked calmly into the dark.

It took a moment for the people inside to register her. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust. When she could see, it was as if she'd walked into a circus-troupe caravan and caught them practicing some ritual she was not meant to witness.

Four elderly men and women with drums and sticks of bone circled a younger man sitting in a lotus pose, his back to Beth. His head was shaved; a crimson robe draped over one shoulder. A crouching girl was dabbing face-paint on him while he sipped whiskey from a chipped glass. The drummers' eyes turned to Beth where she stood silhouetted against the bright outdoor light. Their rhythm continued. The younger man in the middle swivelled to see. She raised the gun; the rhythm faltered out.

Beth stepped slowly forward, and the girl with the face-paint backed away. She kept the gun trained on the shaved man's pate. Across his knees lay a ceremonial sabre with a broken end. She suddenly knew who he was meant to be. The faux-Kushan dropped his whiskey and bum-scuttled backwards as Beth advanced, but he had nowhere to go. Ignoring the shocked drummers she pressed the gun into the frightened man's cheek, her eyes locked to his. With a finger she mimed for silence.

"One runs," she whispered, looking around at all of them now. "*All die.*"

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None of them could understand English – but they sure knew when to keep quiet. Beth made them tie each other up in turn, then when the last of them was trussed made it absolutely clear through miming what would happen if they made a sound. The man from the middle she left naked, and ghosted from the room wrapped in his crimson robe, sword in hand, tucking the gun beneath a tent as soon as she was out of sight outside – head swimming with who she had become.

She knew now she had a real chance of coming before her father – right in front of R'shad atan al-Q'shani and whatever family members he was handing power to – with a sliver of time in which to act before she was discovered. It was more than she could have hoped or planned for. Yet she felt intoxicated with the role she was playing. The sense of the real Kushan's presence was tangible, as if the old man was somewhere just beyond her vision – spending all that he had left to be here with her, witnessing these moments. She remembered the days they'd spent meditating together just before her departure, while they'd waited for the deer to be salted; the delicate, timeless states he'd shown her how to find within herself. The way she'd felt his heart beating from halfway across the room. And now as she tightened her grip upon the heavy sabre Beth was sure she sensed his approval.

But where was her father?

She circled the clay compound, the sun beating on her red-wrapped head, and soon enough came across another entrance.

It was dark. Much the same as the first doorway, with a hide curtain half drawn across. No sound came from inside. Beth paused, uncertain, then approached just as a figure stepped out from within.

She froze. Right in plain sight. He was a Westerner. Private security. Dark eyes with a vest and gun. Her heart hammered, but his demeanour was relaxed. He eyed her crimson robe and sword.

"Come on," he gestured. "It's time." So Beth followed the man inside.

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They were in a room, simple and dimly lit. Patterned rugs on the floor and walls. Opposite her was another doorway over which was drawn a cover of the same rich crimson as her robe. The man stood aside for her, took one last look, then stepped back out the entrance, drawing the hide across so that it cut the light. Beth was left alone in the gloom.

Quiet shuffling sounds came from the next room, as if many people were in there, waiting. She smelled incense and warm bodies, and nervous sweat. Fear even. Beth approached the curtain silently and peered through.

Her father was in the room.

For a moment she thought it must be some relative of his, so thin and wretched was the figure tied to the floor – then she saw his face clearly and the visceral shock of it hit her. Her father, that dear, kind man was stretched out – kneeling, backside in the air with his head pulled low to the ground – with eyes that saw without comprehension. He seemed 20 years older than the Raymond she remembered, ruined and thin, all resemblance to the round little man she'd greeted in Rabaz that day gone. As she stared, horrified, a girl stepped to the curtain where Beth stood concealed, drew it back, and bowed.

All eyes lifted to her.

With a lurch Beth saw that Charles Spencer was there too. He was seated on the floor a few paces back, on a low wooden dais. His eyes gleamed hungrily, looking to her sword.

Next to him knelt a heavy Q'Shanite man, elegantly dressed in robes – the one who would inherit the rule today? And beside him a boy, maybe eight, also in his finery, naked awe showing on his face. The witness, Beth remembered. Here to see what would happen the day his own father gave the rule to him, so he might wield his future power knowing the horror that might come. The smell of fear-sweat came from him.

And there was Q'Shani himself, bald and cunning, kneeling next to her father with his bare neck exposed. Who else could it be but the engineer of this whole bloody masquerade.

But was she the figure they expected? A mock Kushan come to make a spectacle of sparing their leader, while she brutalised her dad? Beth felt her heartbeat slow. For a moment she saw the Kushan in the centre of her mind, a vibrant flaming image – then Q'Shani raised his head from the floor and his eyes met hers.

The faint smile at the corner of his mouth vanished. His hand began moving to his waistband – but far too slow. Beth watched, detached, as beyond him on the dais Charles took in the rolled up trousers beneath her



robes, a look of concern beginning to bloom upon his face. And still she stood there, the Kushan burning in her mind.

R'shad was drawing out a pistol. A heavy thing, square and black. Beth watched as he raised it, aiming, while time slowed – like wind that flows down a mountainside, caressing each blade of grass as it goes.

A wind you could step out of.

She left the world that she was watching then. Left it to its glacial slowness and stepped ahead of the wind, all of them blind to her, her sword stroke chopping deep into R'shad at an al-Q'Shani's neck.

There was no blood – just instant limpness as she severed the spine. She shoved the mass of him to the floor with her foot, yanking the blade out, and turned to look at al-Q'Shani's son and grandchild. She looked them in the eye – pure theatre now – staring at each in turn, before she swung the heavy blade again to finish the job, hacking through what was left of the dead man's neck.

The body slumped. The room went bright and clear with shock – then something heavy clonked into Beth's skull, and the moment snapped back into reality. Her legs buckled beneath her; the Kushan vanishing from her mind.

Charles stepped on to the hand that held the sabre, crushing it: Beth's scream was cut short by his meaty hand around her throat. He lifted her from the ground, holstering the pistol that he'd hit her with so he could rip away the crimson robes that were wrapped around her face. His eyes gleamed madly into her own.

*“Bethany.”*

She was clear of the floor, legs kicking. From the corner of her vision she saw her Dad's eyes lift at the sound of her name and some semblance of recognition spark amidst the confusion.

*“You Singers!”*

His strength was appalling – his left arm holding her entire weight; hand clamped around her neck, cutting off air and blood. She tore at the fingers helplessly.

*“You Singers. Not a one of you, not a single one, ever truly understood evil.”*

Charles Spencer drew her in close to his face and squeezed. Her eyes felt like they would burst. Darkness swarmed in from the edges of her sight as she heard her father pleading, begging for her life. Then Spencer whispered something in her ear that turned the fear and fury into panic.

*“I strangled your mother with this hand...”*

Lights popped and flared as she kicked and kicked and kicked. Distantly she felt a heartbeat slowing, beginning to falter – was it the Kushan's heart she felt now, or just her own? Then a flash seared across her vision and roaring silence filled her ears. Spencer dropped her to the floor.

## SEVENTEEN

Michael and Sulemein sat on the hills above the encampment, enjoying a brief moment of quiet. Beside Michael a body lay, smoke still curling from its head. Other figures lay dead behind them, being checked by Michael's men.

The gaunt redbear looked down upon the ring of tents and buildings that neatly circled a green-ringed pool – the spring of the Yuezhi River. He'd not fired his unsilenced weapon as they'd crept up on this guardpost from a gully. He'd left the quiet work of killing to the others and their fancy gear.

"What made you change your mind?" he asked.

Michael looked at him.

"I'm not complaining," the redbear added.

Michael smiled.

"It seems more logical. Why choose between getting even with my father, or getting even with Q'Shani when he reaches the valley, when we can catch them both here together?"

"And the girl too?"

Michael shrugged.

"I guess so."

It was true. After ten years of chewing on his resentment, their last meeting hadn't felt too satisfying. Michael sat listening to a quiet that was only emphasised by the distant hubbub from down below. The midday light printed hard shadows around every tent.

He'd always believed in light and dark. Still did. But it occurred to Michael that he could hold on to his principles and still make peace with what Beth had done. After all, how would he want to be judged, if he was her? That was hard for him to imagine. His own father had never treated him with any kindness, so that it was difficult for him to know what that might feel like. But he figured a kind version might go something like this: They were only kids. They were scared. What they went through was worse than anything they'd experienced before. And she'd wanted to live. It was okay that she'd left him because she'd wanted to live.

He cried a little then, and didn't care who saw it. Not for Beth, or for his teenaged self in that truck, but for the kid he'd been before he ever came to Isfastan. The boy so bereft of compassion from his own father than he didn't know how to give it out himself.

He smeared the moisture off his face.

"Sulemein, pal. You know my laptop?"

Sulemein grunted but didn't look, suddenly awkward at the emotion.

“If anything happens to me today, there's a recording on it of what my father said to us down in Rabaz. Get one of the lads to find it for you – and make sure you give it to the high-ups at Joint Mission. I think there are some things they need to hear.”

The redbear nodded. Then Michael picked up his rifle and made his way down towards the tents. After a while his friends rose, and followed him down the hill.

## EIGHTEEN

Beth came to to a popping sound and a sharp firework stink in her nose. A whole side wall had been blasted open and hard white light was streaming in, turning the clay dust into blinding mist. Men in uniforms were moving through the room, knocking people to the ground and shooting the few who tried to resist. Within moments the scene was still.

She blinked dumbly from where she lay on the floor.

The shock of what Charles had said had left Beth numb, so that everything before her felt surreal – like it had been laid out on a stage. There was her Papa, lying terrified on the floor. Here was Michael, walking to the centre of the room to address his father. And there was Colonel Spencer, kneeling on the floor at gunpoint, all naked pride and violence.

*I strangled your mother.* The shock of seeing him unveiled like this made Beth nauseous. It seemed to make so little sense.

*Illusions*, she thought, in the ringing vagueness inside her head. *Illusions of binaries*. Michael, with all his morality, yet greyer than them all. The Colonel and her father, like two sides of the same coin. All these opposites and their tensions: perhaps it really was just an illusion? For a moment then she seemed to see it all at once; everything just as it was, unjudged and on its own – free of all ideas. She saw the sunlight on the surrounding hilltops, and the bodies lying there. She saw the clanspeople on the plain with the little river flowing by. She saw the tents and the clay-made houses; felt the people in this room, and the shapes that the air made around them.

Maybe *that* was the Kushan's secret – seeing a world beyond the binary; beyond the black and white. What was it someone had said? Don't think of him as some holy man. For he'd brought his peace at the end of a sword.

Gently she reached out and felt his heartbeat once again, but so far away now and faltering; beating fainter and fainter as he held his beloved valley in his mind. And then he was gone.

A sound like a silent gong rang through her every cell. The white vagueness in her head spun away. With absolute clarity Beth knew that the Kushan was finally gone.

And that she was here.

Sulemein's eyes blazed with wonderment as Beth sent her strength out beyond her. Michael felt it too, shock registering on his face as he felt the current pouring past him, swirling around them – slowing the world but

leaving the three of them unaffected – and in that moment, as Michael’s eyes turned to hers, Colonel Spencer drew his gun.

But not fast enough.

The three of them watched, detached, as the weapon came up, rising neatly between Beth and Michael, as if he couldn’t decide between the two, until Sulemein stepped forward casually, knocked the pistol aside and laid his knife along Spencer’s throat. He grabbed a handful of shirt at the big man’s neck and looked to Michael – but Michael was staring at her.

“Beth?”

The rest of the room seemed frozen, time crawling while they stayed alert and present.

*“Get them out.”*

Speaking was a struggle. Her mind began to spread beyond the room and she settled herself on the floor as her attention took in more and more detail.

“Beth? What are you doing?”

“You need to get them out Michael,” she managed thickly. “While you still can.”

Sulemein was rousing their men now, herding them towards the gap in the wall as he dragged the elder Spencer, the big man barely registering where he was. A panic was growing amongst the soldiers, as if they were children floundering at the edge of quicksand, desperate to reach the bank before it pulled them down. Only Michael stood unmoved among the chaos.

With a tremendous effort she lifted her eyes to his. He seemed so fierce and lean then, it was as if Jarrett had never gone.

“Michael?”

She could barely croak his name, but he understood the question. He stuck out his bottom lip.

“I dunno. I figure someone will need to look after you.”

Sulemein looked back at the two of them, silhouetted by the light coming through the blast hole in the wall. Distance was becoming strange. A groaning came from the nearby hilltops as Beth’s mind found the gully’s edges and began pinching them together.

“Hey redbear!” Michael called after Sulemein as the tribesman finally turned and ran. “Tell them to start behaving. Or the Kushan will get them all.”

Beth dropped her eyes then and settled her hands cup-wise in her lap. There was so much in this little place to love, she realised. Every rock and stone. Each leaf and grass stalk nodding in the air, perfectly itself.

She held it all in her mind and closed her eyes.

## EPILOGUE

He found him slumped comfortably in the tree stump seat next to the stream. Michael had carved it a few years ago, wanting to make a place where the old man could sit and watch the dragonflies land on the reeds, and now it was the first place you looked when you needed him.

It was easy to see why. The sense of peacefulness was palpable. There was a syrupiness to the way the stream curled and chuckled; an intensity to the quiet. Michael still didn't fully understand how these little moments of perfection came about, or why you encountered them in here so often, but he had the sense now to simply stop and listen when they did. For a full minute he paused, marvelling at the papery clatter of damselfly wings; the light on the water's surface. Then shaking himself into a more practical kind of awareness he walked into the man's peripheral vision, coming around from the side to avoid startling him. Raymond looked up and smiled.

"How are you doing there Mr Singer?"

The older man shifted in his seat. It looked a little like he'd been dozing – something he did a lot these days.

"I'm, um, good, I think Michael. Yes, yes. I'm good."

"I just wanted to see how you were – and remind you that our visitors are expected today. Did you want to see them come in?"

"Oh, yes – the, um, visit."

Singer's forehead creased.

"I don't know. Am I needed, do you think?"

Michael's face assumed a thoughtful look, as if he were considering the diplomatic pros and cons of Raymond's attendance, when in truth the old man's comfort was the only thing at stake. It was clear he'd clean forgotten what was happening.

"I think," he said after a moment's pause, "that if you were happy to wait it out here, it might make it an easier meet-and-greet for our guests. After all they've travelled a long way. They might appreciate it being brief."

"I like your thinking," Raymond nodded. He shifted again, noticing the cooler air.

"Shall I get you a blanket sir?"

The old man's face became a picture of gratitude.

"I'll have someone bring it, though, if that's okay. I need to see if Beth's awake."

"Of course. Of course. Oh, but Michael?" he called as the younger man made to go. "When you say guests... This business today. Are some of them, er, *staying*?"

Michael nodded earnestly. He and Beth had spoken about this the last time she'd surfaced for any length of time. It was sad, her father's forgetfulness – this lessening of him since the ordeal. Yet it was a blessing too, that they could take away so much that might distress him, after all that he'd been through.

“I think so, sir. Some old friends of your daughter's I believe. And maybe mine. Good people – nothing to worry about.” And it was a little tough to see the confusion on the old man's face. Michael gripped his shoulder reassuringly and headed for the houses by the spring.

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They would need heating soon. The clay houses kept the warmth in beautifully during winter, so long as you had a fire on inside – though finding the fuel for that was hardly simple. Beth wouldn't let them mill the few remaining full-grown trees in the gully for firewood, so they had started drying and burning animal dung, which worked a treat if only you had the livestock to support it. Anyway their diminishing cow herd was a tomorrow problem – though certainly Michael's problem to solve. For now he needed to rouse the lady herself.

Though he needn't have worried about that. As he ducked through the goatskin curtain into the largest of the huts he saw the figure in the centre of the room breathe deeply, stirring. He took a folded square of cloth from a shelf while Beth stretched, catlike, with her palms on the floor, and opened her eyes.

She smiled sleepily at Michael.

“Morning you. Are you ready to wear formal dress?” He hoisted the crimson fabric so that she could see it. Beth murmured as if she'd just woken from deep sleep to a sunlit bedroom.

“If I must?”

She shrugged off the green jacket she'd been sitting in while she meditated. It wasn't such a baggy fit these days – and it was a stretch to still call it green. It dropped to the floor in a shapeless mass. Michael shook out the robe and held it for her.

“Jeepers.” Beth wobbled as she rose and had to grab Michael's arm. “It's been a while.” She took the fabric, wrapping it around her shoulders, and held on to Michael's elbow as they walked outside, her muscles slowly coming to life.

They walked together across the flat grassy basin, away from the buildings to the base of the hills. By the time they started upwards her legs were steady again but she held his arm a little longer, just for the comfort. Soon they were climbing high above the little cluster of houses into the cooling air of the late afternoon, and in twenty minutes they reached the top.

They stood and looked outward to the plains beyond, squinting into the lowering light. Michael produced binoculars and lifted them to his face. Beth contented herself with leaning on his shoulder.

“Just haze,” he said, and gave her a suspicious look. She smiled.

“For a while yet. We have some time.”

She pulled him down and they eased themselves into the yellowing grass, laying back so that stalks made a little wall all round them.

It had been Michael who insisted on keeping their relationship private. Everyone in their little community knew they were a couple, but it was only when they were alone that they really relaxed. Familiarity bred contempt, he'd said. Beth was the undisputed leader here, and her authority came from an aura of mystique around her that he didn't want undermined.

Not that there was much that could do that. They were all in awe of what she did; holding the valley closed – slowing time itself somehow, so that they were safe and hidden. Michael lay back in the grass and looked at her, the evening light setting her coppery skin aglow.

“Are you doing it now?”

She turned to him, and the look of calm in her hooded eyes made something inside him tighten against his ribcage. Beth nodded.

“The valley's closed.”

He scowled.

“I think I could try for a hundred years and not understand how you do that.”

She shrugged.

“I don't know. It's not so much.” She took a breath, trying to find the right words – and thinking back to the days she'd spent shut away with the Kushan and Oesha, just before she and Iaqub left.

“You know the expression ‘a watched pot never boils?’ It's basically a bit like that. It's like ... if I *watch* everything, intently, all at once, it somehow slows it down. But more than just watching. It's more like...”

Beth picked a flower that was between her knees. It was a scrawny thing – until you held it right up to your face and saw the extraordinary beauty, all spiky sculptural perfection. She stared intently at it, losing herself in awe.

“It's more like love.”

“You slow time by looking hard?”

She rolled her eyes, the moment gone.

“Basically yeah. Looking at everything. All at once. And in my mind.”

“And you can do that all right now?”

She shrugged.



“I notice things.”

Michael fiddled with the binos’ strap, mulling it over.

“Didn’t you say the Kushan – the *old* Kushan I mean. That he had to sit and meditate, virtually all the time. So how come you can do it while we’re up here talking?”

Beth nodded, thoughtful.

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about that one too. I remember asking Oesha about him – she was the one from the old valley, the one I told you about before. And from what she told me, I think he just got old.”

“*Really* slowly...”

She shot Michael a look.

“Yeah, really slow. But back at the start he could walk around too. And more than walk. Fight. Enforce the law. I got the impression from her there was quite the story in there. But after a while he had to spend more and more time in meditation to hold it all together. And eventually, over a really long time in outside years, he starts to age.”

Michael huffed, blowing a fleck of chaff from off his face.

“I guess it makes sense. In a ridiculous way. I mean, you kind of seem more my age?”

“Piss off. I was always your age.” Beth sat up, adjusting the crimson robes around her shoulders as if it were a blanket and they were at some music festival. “You just decided to spend ten years running around playing soldier, while I was finding fresh air in the mountains.”

Michael frowned. She ruffled his hair, unconcerned.

“Don’t worry about it Mister. You know what I decided the other day? It’s just not worth overthinking it all, or it’ll bake your noodle.”

He was about to shoot back a retort when he noticed Beth stiffen slightly and close her eyes. Around him something seemed to shift. Perhaps he was getting the hang of all of this?

She opened her eyes.

“You know what else will bake your noodle? Take a look through your binoculars now.”

He stood, brushing dried grass from his trousers and lifted the binoculars to his face. Beth hauled herself up by his arm, wobbling his view, and when he could see again he noticed that the haze had lifted. In the late, reddish light he could make out yellowing plains and a road that ran straight for the horizon.

“There,” she pointed. He turned to where Beth was indicating and focused.

And there they were – the visitors. Camped right outside the entrance to the encircling hills, waiting. Through the lenses Michael could see someone pointing at the hill tops excitedly as if they’d just come shimmering out of some mirage – and perhaps they had. The whole camp was beginning to move now, packing, hoisting, carrying.

“Let me look,” said Beth and took the binoculars.

Maybe forty people were beginning to file towards the opening in the hills; the croissant gap, as she liked to call it. Among them she could see groups of tribal leaders – come to pay their various respects; perhaps ask their Kushan for rulings on disputes. And was that a tall and rawboned redbear? But beyond the lowland delegates was another group altogether. They walked in twos and threes, looking as if they’d been on their feet forever, carrying their belongings on their backs. Short and squat for the most part – mountain people – though she saw a few red-robed monks as well.

And there!

She spotted them at last. Two figures, standing aside from the others to peer up at the hills. A young man, taller now, but unmistakable even from here, his round face breaking into a grin. And next to him a woman, slight and delicate; impossible to tell her age. They must have seen the movement against the skyline then, for as Beth fiddled with the focus and attempted a wave she saw them point back at her, waving madly, Oesha’s silk sleeves fluttering in the wind.

END