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*FOR JAYSON
THANKS FOR THE MEAT SUITS.*

"THEN WE WHICH ARE ALIVE AND REMAIN SHALL BE CAUGHT UP TOGETHER WITH THEM IN THE CLOUDS, TO MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR: AND SO SHALL WE EVER BE WITH THE LORD."

(BIBLE, THESSALONIANS 4:16-17)

"WHOEVER WORKS RIGHTEOUSNESS, MAN OR WOMAN, AND HAS FAITH, VERILY, TO THEM WILL WE GIVE A NEW LIFE, A LIFE THAT IS GOOD AND PURE, AND WE WILL BESTOW ON SUCH THEIR REWARD ACCORDING TO THE BEST OF THEIR ACTIONS."

(QURAN, CHAPTER 16, VERSE 97)

1.

Every time Nyx thought she'd gotten out of the business of killing boys, she shot another one. He lay bleeding at her feet as the spectators for the weekly fights streamed past, muddying the dusty street with his blood. She had not meant to shoot him, but she was drunk, a common condition during her exile. The boy had grabbed clumsily at the knot of her dhoti where she kept her currency. Her response had been unthinking, like breathing. She had pulled the scattergun from her hip and shot him in the chest. It was the only weapon she carried, these days, because she was generally such a poor shot. After nearly seven years in exile without incident, she hadn't expected she'd ever use it. What a boy his age was doing on the street instead of at the front, she didn't know. He was likely a deserter anyway.

As he squealed in the dirt, trailing blood as he scabbled away from her, a few curious passersby raised their brows, but no one interfered. This was Sameh, a scaly, contaminated, know-nothing little Nasheenan town bordering the vassal state of Druce, populated mainly by speculators and mad magicians. People stayed out of each other's business here. It was why she'd come.

Nyx worried someone might call an order keeper, but the boy had already turned into a neighboring alley, spitting and cursing and bleeding. The pop of the organic rounds in the gun hadn't been loud enough to get much attention, so in a few minutes the incident was forgotten, one more anonymous Nasheenan shooting among a crowd of spectators hoping to see a far more dramatic show of violence inside, in the ring.

A passing woman shook her head at the blood and said, "He's one of those surplus boys just come home from the front. They're stealing us blind. Wondered who'd do him in."

Nyx hadn't heard much about any "surplus boys," but then, she preferred to avoid the belchy, misty images spouting from the local radios whenever possible. The present and the past mixed together too much. Muddled her head.

Nyx did what she always did after she shot a terrorist or garroted a deserter. She carried on. She stepped inside the fight club. She ordered a drink, and sat down to watch the fights. Among this bloodthirsty crowd, she was just another touchy, trigger-prone spectator.

Throughout Nyx's exile, she didn't think much about all the men and women she'd beheaded, or the mullahs she'd pissed off, or the mines she'd planted, or the battles she'd lost. She thought about the ring. A bad left hook. Poor footwork. Blood in her eyes. Hornets on the mat. Because everything that happens after you climb out of a boxing ring, one-half of your face ballooning into a waxy blue-black parody of death while you spit bile and blood and some fleshy bit of somebody's ear on the mat, slowly losing sight in one leaky eye, dragging your shattered, roach-bitten leg behind you... is easy. Routine. Just another day breathing.

After the fights, she sobered up a little on the three-hour drive back to her mercenary buddy Anneke's homestead, just across the Drucian border. Anneke and her family had picked up house when Nyx was exiled from Nasheen and moved across the border. They gave her a place to stay and built up a new life from scratch. They never once complained about it.

The homestead site had been Anneke's pick, a seaside compound with whitewashed walls and tangled, sandy gardens. The sound of the wailing ocean kept Nyx up at night and the contagion sensors sounded off more times a day than the muezzin in Mushtallah. They usually lost everything in the garden to giant beetles and blight. It'd been a season since she ate a green vegetable.

Nyx turned off the rutted main road and onto a logging trail half-covered over in massive evergreen branches. The trees here before the land turned to dunes were tall as a Nasheenian tenement building. They made Nyx claustrophobic. A single fallen branch had pulverized one of Anneke's kids two years before. Just like that, and Anneke's baker's dozen had been culled to an even twelve.

Nyx drove through the towering seaside grove and down the long drive to the house. Eight-foot walls squared the compound.

As she pulled around the circular drive, Nyx saw a foreign bakkie parked in the yard. It was a sleek blue-black hybrid. The whole front end pulsed purple as it sucked up the sun, feeding the bugs in the cistern that powered it. She'd seen fuzzy images of bakkies like this one playing in the background on the radio at a bathhouse in Sameh. They were some new thing out of Tirhan. Expensive, but efficient. No need for juice. The bugs had chlorophyll that fed on solar. At any rate, the tags were foreign on this one. Foreign to Druce, anyway... Familiar to Nyx.

Nasheenian tags.

Government.

Nyx slowed her bakkie to a crawl and killed the juice to the cistern. She pulled her scattergun from behind her seat.

Nobody drove a Nasheenian government bakkie over the border, not unless they were part of an armed caravan of politicians headed for the interior. That said, even caravans didn't cross the border at the coast—it was too contaminated. They would have come down the Sunskin Way E., from Mushtallah. Fifty kilometers from here.

Nyx pulled on her hat and slid out of the bakkie. She held the scattergun at waist height. The big white compound fence gave her some cover. She got close enough to the foreign bakkie to make out the footprints scuffed across the soft, sandy ground.

Three sets of prints. Two heavy folks, and somebody a lot smaller. Heavy bel dames—the Nasheenian government's preferred assassins—didn't use vehicles with government tags. So the little one had to be some government official—and young. All the old ones were soft and fat.

Most Nasheenian politicians were First Family matriarchs—snobbish, inbred, smooth-skinned folks with a taste for languages and distrust of anything that hadn't passed through an organic filter. They wouldn't be caught dead inside a shoddy seaside compound in a backward Nasheenian vassal state.

Nyx circled around to the back of the house and listened for the kids. They were always up to some shit in the garden or on the grounds. But out here, behind the fence and filter, she didn't hear a damned thing but the thrashing sea.

She crouched next to the rear gate. She didn't see any footprints around the back. No sign of anything being tampered with.

The gate was coded for her and Anneke's family. They'd invested in the filter and the codes first thing. Trouble was, you exiled yourself long enough and you started to get comfortable. You started getting drunk and going to fights. You started bringing women home. Nyx should have known somebody would find her.

She pressed her palm to the faceplate. There was a brief prickling as the plate extracted and verified her blood. Then the gate clicked.

Nyx shoved the door open with the end of her scattergun. She waited a half breath before chancing a look into the compound, gun first.

Anneke was waving her arms around like a woman on fire, caught up in some animated conversation with a Ras Tiegan woman. It took Nyx a minute to recognize the foreigner.

The Ras Tiegan was Mercia sa Aldred, a diplomat's daughter who Nyx had been charged with keeping alive six or seven years before. Mercia was a slim young woman now, with the flat face and tawny complexion of a Ras Tiegan. Her eyes were big and dark, half-lidded. As she turned to Nyx, the corners of her wide mouth moved up. Paired with her flat forehead, the broad nose, and strangely delicate frame, she was not a handsome woman. Mercia kept her hair uncovered now, but Nyx noted the scarf wrapped around her neck, stitched with the little x-shaped symbol that marked her as a follower of the Ras Tiegan messiah. No doubt she'd prayed to some minor god of diplomats before coming here. Ras Tiegans had minor gods for everything.

Behind Mercia stood two government-issued bodyguards. Nyx recognized their type. Former vets—underworked and overpaid. They wore loose, dark trousers and matching tunics. Their burnouses were less somber. Smoky gray instead of black. Both women had cropped hair and the peculiar hyperawareness about them that came from spending too much time at the front. Veterans were always the first pick for government security.

A delighted smile lit up Mercia's face. She made the leap from unremarkable to handsome when she smiled. Mercia stood in one clean movement, and even if Nyx hadn't known her, the polite, easy way she stood to greet her with that plastered-on smile would have given her away as some kind of diplomat or politician.

Nyx hated diplomats and politicians almost as much as she hated babysitting their kids.

"Mercia sa Aldred," Nyx said.

The smile broadened.

"You remember," Mercia said.

"Where is everybody?" Nyx asked Anneke.

"How the hell should I know?" Anneke said. Her dark little face was scrunched up like a cicada husk. "It's fight night. You don't think the kids are going to hang around here with a couple old women, do you?"

"Anybody follow you?" Nyx asked Mercia. "Or can I take out you and your nannies and be done with it?"

Mercia's smile vanished. "I—"

The bodyguards moved forward.

Nyx cocked the gun and leveled it at them. "Who's first?"

"Lay off," Anneke said. "She's got something worth hearing."

"There are a good many people back in Nasheen who'd pay for my head," Nyx said. "I like it just where it is, thanks."

“You’ve been taken off the lists,” Mercia said, quickly. Her hands were up now, gesturing rapidly as she spoke. “They’re even sending Chenjan terrorists home. Mhorian spies. Mercenaries, too. And bel dames. Anyone who moved against the Queen during the war has been pardoned. It’s part of the armistice.”

“Catshit,” Nyx said. “There have been ceasefires before. One of them lasted twenty years. The war’s not ending. No such thing as peace. Somebody’s paying for my head. Who?”

“There’s no bounty, Nyx. And the war *is* ending.”

Anneke grimaced. “Ease off. Eshe sent a message and vouched for her.” Anneke reached for an empty glass sitting on the sandy stone of the yard and poured a drink. Nyx hadn’t noticed the drinks before. How long had this sweet-tongued diplomat been lapping at Anneke’s ear?

“Oh, Eshe the Ras Tiegan rogue called, did he?” Nyx said. “Well, let in every wandering creeper who caught his eye, then.” Then, to Mercia: “Who sent you? Bel dames? Queen? Your slick diplomat mother?”

“My mother’s dead,” Mercia said.

“Well, sorry about your mother,” Nyx said. She wasn’t sorry at all, in fact. She had never liked Mercia’s mother, but the old cat bitch’s death likely put Mercia next in line on someone’s hit list.

“You don’t listen to the news?” Mercia asked.

“Not if I can help it,” Nyx said. She hadn’t sought out news of home in three years. All the news was the bloody same. “I’m not in Nasheenan security anymore. I don’t give a cat’s piss for politics. So tell me why you’re here or go home.”

“I’m Ambassador sa Aldred until my mother’s replacement is appointed,” Mercia said. “Things in Nasheen are very bad.”

“Things in Nasheen have always been bad.”

“And there is good money to be made when things are bad.”

Anneke thrust a glass of whiskey at Nyx. Nyx considered it. She eyed the bodyguards again. “You want to talk? Send them back outside.” She nodded to the guards.

“No way in hell,” the smaller of the two guards said.

“I could shoot you now,” Nyx said.

“Please wait in the bakkie,” Mercia said.

“I have to respectfully—” the bigger one began.

“I said wait there.”

The bodyguards mulled for a bit. Then started for the gate. Nyx kept her gun trained on them. The bigger one eyed Nyx as she passed, said, “We’ll burn this place down you do anything to her.”

“It’ll be a little late then, won’t it?”

The woman bared her teeth.

When the gate was closed behind them, Nyx lowered her gun.

“Nasheen is on the brink of revolution,” Mercia said. “There are discharged boys with nothing to do but start fights and steal bread. Women are running raids on their own into Chenja, in defiance of the ceasefire. The bel dames... I have never seen them so openly hostile to their own people. The streets are bloody. Bloodier than I’ve seen them, and I spent half my life in Nasheen. I’ve had three bodyguards murdered in as many months.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“I remember you saving my life when it was yours they wanted,” Mercia said. “I’d pay you for it again.”

“Honey pot, you came all this way to offer me a *job*?” Nyx snorted. “I think that’s enough talk. Take your women out of here and go home.” She started toward the house, said over her shoulder, “And next time you come banging on a wanted woman’s door, think up a better story.”

“Wait, please,” Mercia called after her.

Nyx trudged up the steps. She should go out front and kill the bodyguards. She wasn’t too keen on killing Mercia—she was a diplomat after all—but there were plenty of places in Druce to stash a body. Thing was, she wasn’t so certain it was only Mercia and the bodyguards who knew where she was now. How long until some other bakkie full of women came along and bombed out the house? How many more of Anneke’s children would blister and bleed to death before it was done? Seven years. She thought she might just die out here, forgotten, presumed dead. But once they found you out, there was no turning back. She would have to kill a dozen people to keep this place quiet and safe now. Kill a dozen people... or go back to Nasheen with Mercia.

“You know how long it took me to find you?” Mercia said. “Finding Eshe took many months, and I had to tell him the fate of the world was at stake before he’d even give me the name of the nearest town. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t important.”

Nyx got to the top of the steps. She heard two of Anneke’s kids—Avava and Sabah—arguing inside about which of the three squads of kids was making dinner that night. Anneke’s remaining dozen were almost thirteen years old now, and there were few things more mentally aggravating than a house full of hot-and-bothered thirteen-year-olds. Most of them were wickedly good shots and passable at putting together mines, thanks to Anneke and Nyx, respectively, but more and more these days, Nyx was asking herself what the hell they were doing teaching kids to fight a war that everybody said was supposed to be ending.

“Nyx!” Mercia pleaded.

Nyx started to push through the filter that kept the worst of the bugs and contagion from the house.

“Fatima sent me!”

Nyx stopped cold in the door. Turned back.

Mercia had followed her to the edge of the porch. Mercia’s look was less composed now, on the edge of panic. Why? Why was it so important to bring a bloody anachronism back to Nasheen? Weren’t there enough bel dames and mercenaries to keep the streets running red?

“And what does Fatima have to say?” Nyx asked.

“She has... a job for you.”

“And you couldn’t say that up front?”

“She didn’t think you would come. And if it had been her or another bel dame at your door, you would have killed them outright. But she said that if you wouldn’t come... She said she has a job for you. She wants you to be a bel dame again. She says now that the Queen’s pardoned you and she’s leading the council, she has the authority to redeem you.”

Nyx felt something flutter inside of her, something that had been dead a good long time.

“She must be very desperate to send you here with an offer like that,” Nyx said. “Or she must think I’m very stupid.”

“Things are bad, Nyx.”

“How do you profit from this?” Nyx knew enough about politicians to know that even Mercia was likely a fine one at this point, and fine politicians didn’t do anything unless they stood to profit from it.

“It’s not about me, exactly, it’s about... saving Nasheen.”

“Of course it is,” Nyx said.

She raised her gun and aimed it directly into Mercia’s face. The little diplomat had the sense to tremble. The color bled out of her face.

“Get the fuck off my porch,” Nyx said.

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“You going to fuck her or kill her?” Anneke asked when Nyx sent Mercia off with her bodyguards. “You never look that close unless it’s one or the other.”

Nyx stood with Anneke in the prayer room on the second floor, watching Mercia and the bodyguards get into the bakkie. Downstairs, the rest of the kids had come home and joined Avava and Sabah, still arguing about who was going to make dinner. Nyx supposed their choices would be fried locusts, yam noodles, or something unsavory that they had fished out of the ocean. They had pulled some globular one-eyed monster out of that seething, viscous sea the week before, and the thought of it still gave Nyx the dry heaves.

“Not sure yet,” Nyx said.

Anneke sighed. She had a stooped way of walking now, something to do with the degeneration of her spine. Genetic, the magicians had told her. Shouldn’t have hauled around forty kilos of gear for twenty-five years of mercenary work, either. But what was done was done, and though bone regeneration was possible, eliminating the root cause of her disease was not, and no matter how often Anneke went in to get it fixed, her body would just fail again. Anneke’s hair was shot through with white now, and her pinched, Chenjan-dark face was the face of an old woman, though she wasn’t much older than Nyx.

“You gotta make a decision sometime,” Anneke said.

Nyx said, “She upstairs?”

“Who? Oh. Yeah.”

“Mercia see her?”

“No.”

“You tell Mercia about her?”

“Fuck no, why’d I do that?”

“Mercia’s got a pretty story,” Nyx said. She watched Mercia’s bakkie roll off down the rutted drive. “I just don’t know that I believe it.”

“Believe her or not, they know where we are now,” Anneke said.

“I got that.”

“You going to risk it?”

And Nyx heard the real question behind that. It wasn’t fear for Anneke’s own life, no—Anneke knew she didn’t have long left—it was fear for the kids, and for everything and everyone they had come to care for here. It was a mistake to let her guard down, to let anyone close, even after all this time.

“Just got to tear it all down,” Nyx muttered.

Anneke pursed her mouth. “She’ll understand. She knew what you were before you hooked up with her.”

“Nobody really knows what I am,” Nyx said. “Not until I put a bullet in their head.”

Nyx went upstairs. Opened the bedroom door. There sat her lover, Radeyah, sketching the view of the sea from the balcony on a foolishly expensive slide that devoured each stroke. She was joyously lit up in that moment like a woman at peace with God.

Radeyah turned as Nyx entered, and the light went out of her face.

“It was one of them, wasn’t it?” Radeyah said.

“They’ve asked me to go back to Nasheen.”

Radeyah and Nyx had grown up together in Mushirah, a farming settlement on the Nasheenian interior. Friends first, lovers later. Then they fell apart when the boy Radeyah fancied came home from the front with half his body missing. Radeyah stayed on in Mushirah, and Nyx went to war.

Nyx thought that was the end of it, until a boozy night in Sameh, now thirty years later, when she saw Radeyah sitting out on the levee sketching the sea. Nyx had known her immediately. Radeyah was older, and plumper, but her face was still warm and her body, if anything, more inviting. Nyx knew it could only end badly.

It’s why she was so shocked when Radeyah came to her two weeks later at the local tea house and said, “I’ve been wondering all week why you were staring at me. But you’re Nyxnissa so Dasheem, aren’t you? Do you remember me?”

In answer, Nyx had ordered her a fruity drink, and asked if she had finally bought the seaside house she always talked about. Radeyah laughed, and it was a liquid laugh that stirred something long since dead and buried inside Nyx—some whole other life that she had to forget in order to lead this one.

Radeyah ceased her sketching. “Tell them no,” she said. Nyx admired the nimble way she held her stylus. She imagined Radeyah would have been a fine swordswoman, if she ever had a mind to pick up a sword. But Radeyah had spent her entire life on a farmstead in Mushirah. After her family died, she said she came to Druce to paint the sea, but when Nyx saw her moth-ridden flat with the leaky tub, moldy ceiling and surplus of drugs in the bathroom, she suspected Radeyah had not come to Druce to retire. She had come here to end it all.

Nyx didn’t like that idea. When she was with Radeyah, she dreamed less of the ring.

“I have to go,” Nyx said.

Radeyah’s jaw tightened. “I suppose we’ve been playing at being lovers a year now. Like children. It was bound to end soon enough.”

“You know what I am. What I’ve done—”

“That was all a long time ago—”

“The Queen has a very long memory.”

“Just tell them—”

“They know I’m here now. They’ll come for you. All of you. They’ll burn it up and scatter your corpses. That’s who I deal with. That’s the kind of person I am. If I don’t go with them now, you’re dead.”

“How long?” Radeyah said.

“Could be two or three months. Could be a year. I don’t know.”

Radeyah wasn’t good at hiding her emotions. She never had to. The pain that blossomed on her face made Nyx’s gut clench. She had to look away. Had to start cutting out that part of herself again, the one that cared about a thing because somebody else did. I’ve gotten soft, she thought. This woman made me soft.

“I waited for a man most of my life, and when he returned, he was little more than a hunk of charred meat. Is that what you’ll come back as? Or something worse? I have spent my whole life waiting to live, Nyx. I’m too old to wait.”

“I’m not asking you to wait.”

Radeyah closed her slide and stood. “I should go.”

“Stay for dinner.”

“I should have known you would go.”

Nyx walked up to her. Took her by the arms, leaned in. “If I didn’t give a shit about you I’d tell them to fuck off. I’d wrap you up and cart you off to some other house and fuck you on the porch all day until they burned it around us. But I do give a shit. And I’m too fucking old to see everything me and you and Anneke and the kids built destroyed because I couldn’t do one last job.”

Radeyah wrapped her arms around Nyx. Nyx pulled her close. They made love there on the floor as the light purred through the billowing curtains. Nyx traced Radeyah’s scars from her two births, all dozen children lost to the war. When Radeyah came, she bucked beneath Nyx’s hand, revealing the twisted collection of scars on her backside where the magicians had pulled shrapnel from her after a commuter train accident north of Mushirah. There were more scars, more blemishes, a lifetime of Nasheenan living mapped out on her body. Nyx loved her for it, a little. And feared for her—far too much.

Radeyah stroked her hair, after. “I won’t wait for you,” she said.

“I know,” Nyx said.

Even as they lay together in the cool breeze, Radeyah soft and comforting next to her, Nyx felt herself pulling away, boxing herself back up, until soon she was nearly numb, and the spidery tattoo on Radeyah’s ankle that still bore Nyx’s name no longer gave Nyx the same flutter of affection. It was easy to become everything she hated again. Remarkably, maddeningly easy.

Nyx closed her eyes, and stepped into the ring.

2.

Eshe put his shotgun down on the battered table between him and the priest. The priest was a fastidious little man, clean and neat, with long limbs and balding head that put Eshe in mind of a dung beetle. He was Ras Tiegan, flat faced and broad nosed, with a pale as piss complexion that was a little ruddy in the nose and cheeks. He was already halfway through a pint of hard ale, and Eshe guessed he'd started drinking well before Eshe showed up.

The priest's eyes bulged at the shotgun. Eshe figured the old guy had never seen a gun up close. Eshe was prepared to get him a good deal closer to it.

"You have a license for that?" the priest asked, hissing around his drink like there was anyone else in the tavern who cared about their business.

The sticky sweet smell of opium seeped in from the bunkhouses upstairs. A woman wearing a muslin habit with the back torn out slipped into the front door and scurried into the kitchen on bloody, swollen feet. Someone cried out from the gambling room in back. The distant gong of church bells called the faithful to midnight prayer. Just another dark Ras Tiegan night at the edge of the protected territories.

"You think I'd need a license here?" Eshe said.

The priest mopped his brow with a yellowed handkerchief. "There's no need for that, boy. I came here, didn't I? What kind of whore's dog are you, to throw weapons around at a holy man? I need another drink."

The priest had come wearing the long brown robe and tattered cowl of his order. His was one of the less popular sects, populated by cowardly little men instead of the more fit, robust types Eshe was used to. He had a golden cord looped about his waist and neck, fashioned into a crude X at his collar, but the garb didn't mean much out here. In the larger cities, the less contaminated ones, maybe, a priest's robe was enough to save a pious man's life. But when bugs crawled through your filters every night to lay eggs in your flesh and noxious air killed off your babies if you kept them too close to the ground, there was less reverence for a man of God who did not also wear the bloody apron of a magician. Magicians saved lives. You only called on a priest when you knew your life was over.

Eshe leaned toward the priest. "Tell me what I need to know or your next drink will be leaking out a hole in your gut."

"I only meant—"

"It's my people in this place, old man. I could skin you alive right here and they'd help me chop you up and feed you to the flesh beetles."

The priest swallowed. "They're moving her next week, before the Feast of the Blood. I don't know where they're keeping her, but I know where she's going." His gaze lingered on the gun, darted away.

“It’s Jolique so Romaud’s house. You know it? He has a... collection... of those like her. He felt that, with her mutation, she would be an excellent addition to his collection.”

Eshe should have known. Jolique was cousin to the Queen of Nasheen, and all but untouchable in Ras Tieg. No magistrate or God’s Angel would dare raid his house looking for captive shifters. Abuses committed by the rich and powerful were overlooked in Ras Tieg, just as they were in every country.

“What road?” Eshe asked.

“Rue Clery. She should arrive around fifteen in the morning.”

“Staff?”

“Four men and a wrangler.”

Eshe leaned back in the chair and lifted the gun off the table.

The priest sighed. The shadow of a smile tugged at his lips. He didn’t know that he’d been dead from the moment he sat down.

Eshe pointed the shotgun into the priest’s mealy little face and pulled the trigger.

The gun popped. The priest’s head caved in. Black, bloody brains splattered the wall behind the priest.

Eshe stood and wiped the blood from his face with his sleeve. The mostly headless torso of the dead priest slumped sideways. Eshe expected he’d feel happier about it, after all this man and his kind had done.

The bar matron, Angelique, *tsked* at him. “Did you need to do that?” she said. “That’s four priests in as many weeks.”

“That’ll keep them from coming around, then, won’t it?” Eshe pulled on his hat and pushed toward the door.

“Godless heathen,” Angelique muttered.

“I know all about God,” Eshe said. “These men don’t. Or did you forget what they did to Corinne?”

“It’s just... you Nasheenians—”

“Nasheenians don’t murder their own people for being born shifters. They don’t kill their own babies. And they sure as fuck don’t—”

“Shut it, Eshe,” a man at the end of the bar said. Eshe had seen him around, but couldn’t place him. Angelique’s hired muscle, ever since the Madame de Fourré started using the place for meetings for her rebel shape shifters. Angelique’s son was a member of the Fourré, but it didn’t mean they liked Eshe’s half-breed face. Sometimes he wondered if his heritage was more offensive to them than his ability to change into a raven.

Eshe bristled. “Sorry about the mess,” he said to Angelique. “It won’t happen here again.”

He would find a new tavern.

Outside, the Ras Tieg night was cool. It was a rare clear night in the city of Inoublié during the rainy season. He could already smell the promise of more rain on the wind, mingling with the scent of curry and dog shit. As he hustled through the narrow streets, swarms of mayflies and cockroaches choked his path. A ragged, mewling desert cat in a cage whined at him from a high balcony.

Along the edges of the horizon, just visible through the occasional break in the buildings, was the swampy jungle—a dark, ragged stain. Odd hoots and cries and drones muttered at the edge of the city, barely muffled by the spotty filter that kept out the worst of it. What Ras Tieg had managed to build out here had been hacked out of contaminated jungle—a jungle that ate cities nearly as quickly as the Ras Tiegans could put them up. He passed the hulking wreck of a former church, now a recreation

hall. Old, twisted slabs of metal protruded from the exterior—corroded, half-eaten. Metal was not known to last long on Umayma, but the Ras Tiegans had been entrenched there only twelve hundred years or so. Even their poorly put-together, non-organic ship skins took a while to break down.

He climbed up into the clotted, ramshackle district tenement he called home; swung down into the guts of his apartment. It was a tight little room: raised bed, mud-brick oven. Most of the important stuff he kept in the walls or in the pockets he'd burrowed out in the floor.

He took off his coat and stowed his gun. Then he unrolled his prayer mat, faced north, and went through the salaah for evening prayer. There was no call to prayer here, only the bells for midnight mass and the weekly call to services every ninth day. It was a lonely thing, to pray alone, to speak to God alone. Salaah always calmed his nerves, though, and when he finished the final recitation, he remained on his knees for some time, breathing deeply. If someone had asked him seven years before what he thought he would miss most about leaving Nasheen, he would not have thought about the call to prayer. Mostly, he missed the sense of being part of something larger than himself. Praying alone every day just reminded him of how different he was here.

As he settled into bed, he heard a soft whistle. He reached below the bed to where his shotgun lay, and waited. The whistle came again. Then a scrabbling on the roof. He remained still until he saw a familiar, scruffy-headed outline in the entry.

"Get in here before I shoot you on accident," Eshe said.

Adeliz climbed down into the room, slender and quiet as a shadow in her baggy trousers and coat. The first time she'd come into his room, he hadn't noticed her until she had her hands on his shotgun. Why they hadn't killed each other then, he wasn't so sure.

She crouched near the stove. "Cold in here," she murmured. She talked softly, slip of a voice, just like she moved. "I think you should come to mass tonight," she said

"I thought I wasn't invited anymore."

The last time he went to midnight mass, he'd been roughed up and escorted out by three priests. Adeliz was one of the first members of the Fourré he had met, and it was she who led him to the first sorry cell of defeated shifter rebels. She was only seven or eight back then, but could pick a pocket like the most hard-assed kid in Mushtallah. Her fierce little face and fast fingers reminded him of himself, some days. That meant he liked her—but he knew better than to trust her.

"Sometimes they forget," she said. "What about the puppets tomorrow?"

"No, I have a wake to go to."

"Another priest? Not the one you killed tonight?"

"You heard about that?"

"I hear about everything."

"Yes, it's the wake for a different priest."

"The Madame will not be pleased."

"When was the last time she was pleased with me?"

"True, true." Adeliz hopped from foot to foot. "Are you taking the girl with you? Your new partner? She was very angry you didn't take her out tonight."

"Isabet is always angry."

"It's why you get along so well," Adeliz said, and beamed.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" Eshe said.

“Language, language,” Adeliz said. “Did you find out where they took her? The Madame’s missing operative?”

“Jolique so Romaud’s house. They’ll be coming at fifteen in the morning, taking the Rue Clery. Four men and a wrangler.”

“Good news, good news,” Adeliz said. She hopped back up the ladder.

“Adeliz?”

“Yes?”

“Get her back. Don’t let them do to her what they did to Corinne.”

“The Madame will see to it.”

“That’s what she said about Corinne.”

Adeliz shrugged. “Just the messenger.”

And I’m just the pawn, Eshe thought. He thought of Corinne, and the way she laughed the first time he reached out to adjust the crumpled wimple that covered her tangle of curly black hair.

He could murder as many Ras Tiegan priests as he liked, but it was the Madame who decided what to do with the information he got from them. She decided who lived, and who died.

And he wasn’t sure how much longer he could put up with it before he took the Madame’s little rebellion into his own hands.

“Do you need anything for the wake?” Adeliz said. “Weapons? Explosives?”

“No,” Eshe said. “When the dead come back, I know exactly what to do with them.”

3.

Rhys stood on the carved stone balcony of his tenement house in Khairi, smoking a sen cigarette and watching the blue dawn touch the desert. This far north, the desert *moved* at night, like maggots writhing on the surface of some rotten beast. In the garish red light of the moons, the desert was a bloody carcass shot through with splinters of wind-worn stone towers that predated the beginning of the world. Some natural configuration, maybe, or remnant of a civilization that had come before? It had been a long time since he questioned what had come before his people descended from the moons to remake the world. What had it been before? Barren and bloody, like this?

Rhys pulled his burnous close against the bitter cold of the desert night. Out here, the difference between daytime and nighttime temperatures was extreme. Despite nearly a year in this quiet desert outpost, he still was not dressed properly for it.

Behind him, inside the two rooms he shared with his wife and children, his son squalled. He had been wailing since midnight prayer. Rhys had given up on sleep even before his wife had, and retreated to the balcony to watch the suns rise.

The boy had been unplanned, as had the two girls before him. When his wife told him she was pregnant for the second time in as many years, he had not greeted the news as a good man should have. They wouldn't have had the first one at all if Elahyah hadn't been four weeks pregnant the night the bel dames murdered their other children. When he found out about this third pregnancy, he yelled at her, questioning why the old methods they had used to prevent pregnancy were no longer working. She had wept and told him she did not know.

"I had no choice! Do you think a woman has a choice? The old ways don't always work. That is God's will. We must bear the consequences of our actions. And it is my burden and blessing more than yours."

He suspected some deception on her part until the day his son was born. It was a long, painful labor lasting nearly two days. After, she begged him to allow one of the magicians to put a hex on her—semi-permanent sterilization. He had refused. He refused because a moment before she asked he held his son for the first time. When he did, some great unknown emotion rose up in him, something he had not felt since the bel dames came and mangled his wife and killed his children. He nearly lost everything that night. He badly wanted to rebuild. As the years passed, and his eldest daughter grew without either of them talking about more children and his wife became more and more distant, he had stopped believing rebuilding was possible.

But now he had a son. It was as if anything were possible again, as if he himself had been reborn with a second chance at life.

As if to punish him for his decision, the boy squalled day and night. Elahyiah no sooner put him down than he started screaming again. Rhys once insisted they simply leave him in the house while they went to dinner—he, Elahyiah, their eldest daughter Mehry and the younger girl, Nasrin. When they came back three hours later, the infant was still screaming. Elahyiah thought there must be something wrong with him. They brought him to hedge witches and even the local Khairian midwives, but they all came back with the same answer. If you want him to sleep, give him a bit of whiskey.

This part of Khairi was a dry town—it was a Chenjan-occupied settlement called Shaesta, and had been for some time. Whiskey was nearly impossible to find, and came with a sentence of six lashes for possession. Some nights, Rhys thought the lashes might be worth it.

Rhys tried to listen for the more soothing sounds of the settlement, the susurrus of the massive sand caterpillars in the pen opposite their building as the creatures chewed their leafy breakfast, and the singing of a caravan member in Khairian, her voice high and warbling. He knew it was a Khairian because no Chenjan woman would dare sing in public. She emerged from a tent posted next to the caterpillar pen. Like most Khairians, she was tall and wiry, her hair bound up in a scarlet turban.

As he watched, her voice drew a swarm of wild insects, mostly harmless—desert fireflies and grasshoppers. They emerged from the sand, scurrying toward her like a locust to a body. Rhys saw her two husbands step outside after her and begin collecting them in jars. As the jars filled, the men took them back into the tent, presumably to throw the bugs into the cook pot for breakfast. Rhys had asked these strange singing Khairians if they were magicians—he had not gotten any sort of sense of talent from any of them, which was highly unusual. But each one he asked laughed and said it was just something their people had always done, as if conversing with insects was as natural to them all as breathing.

The call to prayer sounded from the settlement mosque just as the Khairian ended her song. He leaned over the stone rail and listened. The call to prayer was the only sound that could drown out his son's cry.

He took another pull on his cigarette. He had prayed at midnight prayer, and though joining the throng of other men headed toward the mosque was tempting, he refrained. If he wanted to keep food on the table, he needed to be at the tea house before the end of prayer.

“Rhys?”

Elahyiah's voice. Tired. Strained. She sounded the way he felt.

He quickly dropped the hand with the cigarette below the balcony rail, hoping she could not see the burning glow of its tip in the dawn light.

Elahyiah stepped onto the balcony. She cradled their son, Rahim, in her arms. At six months old, he was still a slip of a thing. Rhys worried he was underfed. Elahyiah insisted she fed him all he would eat. She herself was terribly thin for a woman so recently in child bed. Only the fullness of her chest gave any indication that she was the mother of this child. Her stomach had flattened in time with their dwindling funds. Most nights, they ate fried grasshoppers.

“I'm going out to meet Payam for a job,” Rhys said.

“Can you bring back coconut milk?”

“If they have some, certainly.” And if they allowed him to take out any more credit.

She wrinkled her nose. He suspected she could smell the cigarette smoke. But she said nothing.

The supplies at the local trade house varied considerably by the day. It depended on what caravan had come in. Many had been delayed by early spring sandstorms. Others were diverted by the mine

cleanup efforts now that the ceasefire had begun. Chenja had issued the ceasefire first. They were also the first to pardon their deserters and criminals, a full two years before Nasheen. It was why he agreed to come out here to a Chenjan-held Khairian outpost—that and the promise of fast money. He hoped it would be like coming home again. He hoped that maybe, away from Elahyiah's family and the bad memories in Tirhan, things would be easier.

He had been very wrong.

"Have you asked the mullah if he needs help during prayer days?" Elahyiah said.

"There's no money in that."

"I thought you would enjoy teaching the Kitab to children. It has been... many months since we sat and read together as we once did."

"I have been busy, Elahyiah." Trying to make sure they didn't starve.

Elahyiah averted her eyes. "I understand," she said. "I just thought it may soothe your nerves more to read the Kitab than... other things." She ducked back inside.

Rhys put out his cigarette on the rail and followed her. The girls were awake. Mehry was nearly seven now, and far too precocious for a girl growing up in a Chenjan settlement. Always full of questions. Her sister Nasrin was two, and sat up in her basinet watching Mehry pray. Rhys saw nothing of himself in either of them. Like the two girls he and Elahyiah had raised before, these resembled their mother. But now he could not help but compare them to their dead sisters as well.

Elahyiah paced back and forth with Rahim, admonishing Mehry to finish prayer, though by all counts Mehry was still too young for anyone to insist that she observe so many of them. Mehry studied at the madrassa at the end of the street, one of only six girls. They learned from the same teacher as the boys, a balding old mullah who had not, blessedly, asked that Mehry learn her lessons from behind a screen. But she did have to go to school in a uniform that was becoming less modest as she grew, tall and lanky as a mantis. The madrassa and uniform were not cheap. Nor was the two-room flat that stank perpetually of cabbage and peppercorns from the Heidian family on the floor beneath them.

Rhys washed his face and hands at the kitchen sink; just a sluice set in the wall above a chipped clay basin. They shared a privy down the hall with the rest of their floor. He avoided it as much as possible. Someone had found a dead infant there not three weeks past, cold and unmoving in a pool of blood and afterbirth. Insects had already eaten out the eyes and hollowed the placenta. The bugs were worse out here than even the Tirhani wilderness. After they heard about the baby, Elahyiah insisted that Rahim sleep beside them. There was no more talk of leaving him on his own for hours to scream out his frustrations.

Rhys pulled on his burnous. He leaned toward Elahyiah to kiss her, but she turned her head away.

"Remember the milk," she said.

"We may not have enough for milk."

"We seem to have enough for your filthy habits. I expect you can find something for milk."

"Don't presume to tell me what to spend."

"It is our money. Our family's money. We used to decide everything together, Rhys. Now you shut me out like I'm some stranger."

The anger came then, unbidden. "Isn't this enough? Selling myself into servitude? What else can I do for you and this family? Bleed all over your shoes?"

"It was your idea to come here to the edge of nothing," Elahyiah said. "I believed we would do better in Chenja itself, not this terrible outpost."

“I’ve told you why I can’t go back to Chenja.”

“Things have changed. We can do much good there. Have you heard about the women’s initiatives there?”

“What we don’t need is Chenja becoming another Nasheen.”

“It won’t be Nasheen. It can be another Tirhan. I want to help them, Rhys. They’re our people.”

“The decision has been made.”

Rahim began to squall again.

Rhys threw up his hands. “Enough. You want him to eat, let me do my work.”

He shut the door behind him without waiting for a response. He knew what Elahyiah wanted. What he could not tell her was that going home to Chenja terrified him. Being this close had given him many sleepless nights, but what she wanted was to go home to Chenja—her parents’ country more than hers—and teach women to read. He had to tell her, gently, that only the very poorest Chenjan women did not know how to read. Some of the gross generalizations he heard in Tirhan about how Chenjans treated their wives often offended him. Yet after many years abroad, he could not help but hope for a future for his daughters that looked a little more like a Tirhani one than a Chenjan one. Why couldn’t his daughters have good marriages to men who honored and protected them but retain the freedom to vote and speak in matters of governance, so long as they did so modestly?

Outside, the second dawn touched the world. A blaze of fiery red scorched the eastern sky, banded in deep purple along the horizon. He made his way to the settlement’s only tea house, a squat mud-brick building set with cracked amber tiles that spoke of better days. As he walked, an arthropod as long and thick as his leg uncurled from the nearest ditch and moved across the road in front of him. His skin crawled. Khairians called them *mauta kita*, and killed them at every opportunity. They were purported to grow large enough to swallow a wagon of goods whole, further north. Most of the wagons in this desert were pulled by native armored caterpillars instead of sand cats—both because the *mauta kita* were more likely to eat the cats and because the caterpillars lasted longer on the open sand without water.

As he walked, he paused at the window of a clothier. Displayed there were two headless mannequins wearing brilliant red and amber burquas. The burquas themselves were not strange. What made him stop was that he noticed that the mannequins had hands. In his childhood, mannequins were sexless, formless things—the less lifelike, the better. Most store windows simply put clothing on vaguely human-shaped leather hangers. The few mannequins he did see were just torsos. No legs. No hands. But these had hands, and as he got closer, he saw something like feet and legs as well.

Elahyiah had told him for many years that things in Chenja were changing. Her parents still had family there. Words were one thing, yes, but seeing these mannequins and their hands was quite another.

Rhys turned away from the window, and ducked into the tea house opposite. There were prayer wheels hung at each of the windows. He heard the sound of someone reciting from the Kitab, voice low and beautiful, almost musical. It calmed him.

Payam already waited for him at a far table. He dressed like a Tirhani businessman in a long white khameez and somber bisht, but his scarlet turban was a more local affectation. Payam was younger than Rhys by nearly a decade, with a fleshy face and soft hands that marked him as a Tirhani, not just a Chenjan in Tirhani garb. Most Chenjans bore bodies that had seen the war.

He was speaking to a swarm of red beetles at his left elbow—not something he had called but sent to him by one of his caravans. He concluded whatever his message was and waved the bugs away. The swarm buzzed past Rhys and out into the dawn.

“Punctual as ever,” Payam said.

Rhys sat opposite him and ordered green tea with honey from a woman wearing a creamy burqua.

“What do you have for me today?” Rhys asked.

“I have exciting news today,” Payam said, and he grinned so broadly Rhys thought his head might split in two. “No more one-off translations or bacterial infusions. Oh no! I have something quite fine. Something perfectly suited to your skills. You came and God brought you!”

That meant it was something that would make Payam a lot of money. It didn’t always mean it made Rhys much. He had come out here not just because of its remoteness to Chenja itself but also because he heard that magicians and translators were making obscene money working with the Khairian nomads. That, more than anything, finally persuaded Elahyiah. The ceasefire meant more traffic coming down from Khairi—safer trade routes were good for everyone’s business but the black marketers. But when he arrived, he found that most jobs were taken, or involved joining up with a caravan for a year or more, or indenturing himself to some middleman like Payam. By the time Rhys realized he was going to be spending most of his days begging for work, his family was already settled, and they did not have enough currency to get them back to Tirhan.

So Rhys waited. Payam kept grinning. Rhys began to feel uneasy. “Are you going to tell me about the job?” Rhys asked.

“The pay is remarkable. It will solve all your little... problems. All four of them.” Payam winked. He was unmarried, by all counts, and spent far too much time harassing Khairian girls who came in with the caravans. But his time among the Khairians had tempered his speech, at least. He talked more like a Khairian than a Tirhani. Rhys found he appreciated the straightforward—though often pleasantly deceptive—speech to the Tirhani practice of false politeness.

“Doing what?”

“Doing what you do best. Translation work.”

“Why does it pay so well?” Everyone in Khairi spoke four or five languages. That was the part Rhys had not counted on. There was little need for a translator if everyone spoke multiple languages.

“Well, that’s the truly *exciting* part,” Payam said. He leaned closer. “It’s just a little further north. Fewer people up there know Chenjan or Nasheenian. You’re a much more prized property. And a man who has some talent with bugs! That goes a long way, too.”

“How much further north? I have a family.”

“It’s... not far. A few weeks’ travel. But you’ll have room and board and a fine salary. A signing bonus today and another the day of the journey if you agree. Something to tide you over. A taste of what’s to come.”

“Who is this job for?”

“A man you’ve not heard of. Has some renown further north, beyond the Wall. Doing a fine job bringing order to the nomads up there. Name of Hanife. He speaks Khairian all right, and whatever his bastard native tongue is, but nothing else. When I heard he needed somebody he could trust, I thought of you. Who better than a devoted Chenjan family man who has worked for the Tirhani government?”

Rhys showed his teeth—more grimace than smile, but he had never seen a Khairian smile. Just the grimace. “How much?”

“One thousand Tirhani notes. That’s three hundred now, and the seven hundred when you get there. Another five thousand at the end of the job.”

The serving girl brought Rhys’s tea. He hardly noticed. He had never seen that much money in his life. “Is that with or without your commission?”

Payam laughed. “My friend, I am pleased to tell you that that is after my commission.”

Rhys felt the knot of anger and worry that he had been harboring all morning begin to ease. He did not trust the feeling, though, because he did not entirely trust Payam. For all he knew, it was one of Payam’s conquests that left her child to die in the privy in Rhys’s tenement. Such an immoral man could not be trusted.

“Why didn’t anyone else take this job?”

“I have four translators out on jobs. The other two don’t know Nasheenan. And he was very specific that the translator speak Nasheenan.”

Rhys wrapped his hands around the teacup. The warmth was soothing, familiar. The last time someone wanted him to translate Nasheenan, bloody bel dames hacked off his hands and murdered his children. But the money...

“Did he say why Nasheenan?”

“He does dealings with them. Not sure if you’ve kept up with Nasheenan politics, but there’s a big rift over there. The Queen, First Families, bel dames, all looking to take over if it turns out the war’s really ending. But the magic has turned against them. His man tells me Hanife does quite a lot of black market business with Nasheenan First Families.”

“First Families? Not bel dames?”

Payam shrugged. “He said nothing to me of bel dames. Why? Have some trouble with them?”

Rhys stared at his hands. The long sleeves of his burnous covered the scars at his wrists where he had lost his hands. The ones fixed to his body now were not his, but some dead laborer’s. Short, thick fingers. They had been rough and calloused when he first got them. He had not been able to touch his wife without cringing for more than a year.

“Three hundred now?”

“Yes. I know I have two-thirds of your mind. You’ll do it?”

“You knew I would.” Payam also ran the local trading post. He would have seen how long Rhys’s credit list was, and how desperately his family needed to eat.

Payam grinned. “Of course I knew you would. Have some more tea! This commission will finally send me on my haj to Chenja. Birthplace of the martyr, may she bless this transaction. A fine day for both of us!”

Rhys stumbled outside into the warm dawn. The rest of the settlement was back from prayer, and the streets were alive with the hiss of cats and the song of Khairians. He had three hundred notes in his pocket. He went immediately to the trading post and paid two hundred and eighty five of it toward his tab, and used some of the rest to buy coconut milk, lizard eggs, protein cakes, rye flour, and a packet of sen-laced tobacco. He hid the tobacco deep in the pocket of his burnous and walked home.

Inside, Nasrin played at the center of the main room with a dead grasshopper. He heard Elahyiah singing softly to Rahim in the other room. Mehry would be at school by now.

“Da!” Nasrin said, and held out her arms. He stared blankly at her for a moment, because she suddenly reminded him so strongly of his dead daughter Souri that he experienced a moment of dissonance.

His body went through the expected motions. He reached for his daughter. Picked her up. She patted his face with her little hand. But he was still numb. Disconnected.

“Rhys?”

He turned. Sometimes it surprised him how easily he answered to that name. It was not his given name, Rakhshan, the name that marked him as a Chenjan deserter. He wondered if he would ever hear his given name again.

Elahyiah came to him. Her abaya was stained with spit up. She had a rag in one hand. Her skin was sallow, lusterless, and her tangle of dark hair was knotted back from her dark, gaunt face.

“I brought groceries,” he said, setting Nasrin back down. The girl cried out in protest and waved her arms at him.

“You received a job?”

“Yes, of course.” He pulled back the curtain from the set of shelves they used as a makeshift pantry. Four cockroaches the size of his thumb dropped from the curtain to the floor.

“What is it?”

“It’s a translation job. It’s not local, though. We’ll need to pack our things and go north with the next caravan.”

He carefully put away all of the groceries. When he was finished, she still had not said anything.

He turned.

Elahyiah’s face was stricken, as if he’d just said that her father died. He watched her crumple. She leaned against the wall for support. She pressed the rag to her face and choked back a sob.

“Elahyiah?” he said. He reached for her, but she smacked his hand away.

“No,” she said. “No more. No more of this.”

“It’s just one more move. A few weeks’ travel.”

“A few weeks? Weeks? God be merciful, are you mad? Have you seen the state of your children? Have you seen me at all since we arrived here? We are in no state to go anywhere. We’re dying here, Rhys.”

“The money is good, Elahyiah. It will get us all the way back to Tirhan, once the job is done.”

“Good? For *us*? You mean for *you*. I don’t understand any of this. We were going to Chenja to do good work in this world, but I hardly have the energy to care for our children. We can afford no help. I miss my family. I miss the housekeeper. I cannot do this on my own, Rhys. Remember when we were partners? I have not felt that for some time.”

“We’ll sort this out. You need to trust me, Elahyiah.”

“Trust you? The way I trusted you to bring us out here? I have prayed long about this, Rhys. I am a good wife. A good mother. And I know my rights.”

“I know it’s been very difficult...”

“One year has turned into two, then three, now seven. And you keep turning away from me. We keep going farther and farther, and getting nowhere—”

“Think this through.”

“I have. I have asked God and prayed often. I am not a woman to forget my prayers. It’s my right to ask for a divorce, if I feel my husband is unworthy.”

Rhys stumbled. He caught himself on the shelf behind him. It was like a blow—a blow he had known was coming. “Elahyiah, please,” he said. He pressed his hand to hers. “I know I’ve been a poor husband. I won’t pretend it’s been easy for any of us. But... not yet.”

Elahyiah began to cry. “I’m sorry, but I cannot honor a man who cannot care for us. My father has agreed to help us get home. Me and the children.”

“The children are mine.”

“Rhys, please don’t—”

But his resolve was firm. He knew his rights, too. “You take your right, Elahyiah, and I will take mine. I will take the children, and you’ll have nothing.”

“Rhys, please—”

“One chance,” Rhys said. He took her hands. “I can’t lose you all. Not now. Don’t let them take you from me now.”

“It’s not the bel dames I fear anymore, Rhys,” his wife said. “It’s *you*.”

From the next room, his son began to wail.