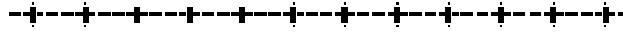


Bedtime Story



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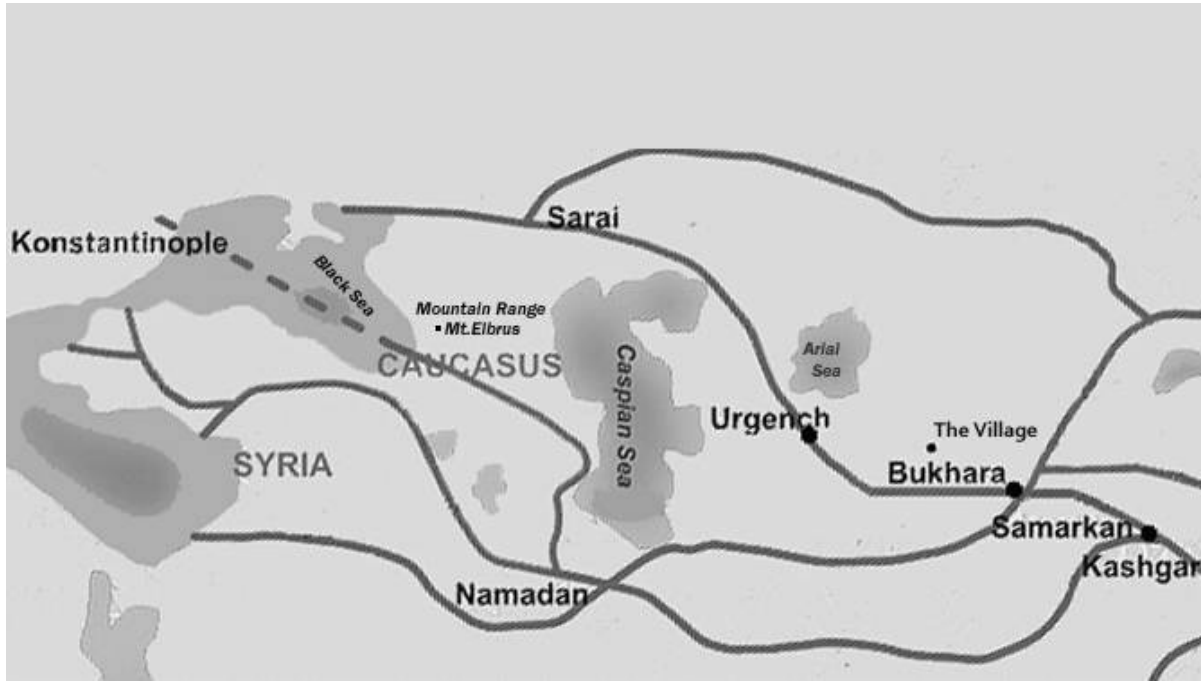
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Prologue

The stillness of the night was interrupted by the shape of a running man. Moving towards the forest, away from the main road that led to the lights of the city, the man was running in a way that could best be described as unnerving, although even that wouldn't be saying enough. The terrible state of panic, in which he appeared to be, was the most obvious part of the whole picture, but hardly the most disturbing. Much more unsettling was the fact that he never even glanced back, to make sure whether he was still being followed.

Usually there are two reasons for people to run like that. The first - one is eager to get to what it is there ahead of him and of course has no need to look back. The second - whoever makes such a run from someone or something, is seriously scared and on a subconscious level knows, that if he turns and sees what it is behind, that had scared him so much, he wouldn't be able to move.

It was for the second reason the running man never looked back. But not even that, made what was happening so terrifying, it was the way the man was running. It seemed that he had no proper sense of direction, or resemblance of a strategy. Once stumbled, he would start running to the right, then for no particular reason he would turn to run to the left. If he happened to bump into a tree, he would take a few steps back and run into it again. He would do so several times, before finally finding his way around the tree. He was like a fly stuck behind the glass, aimlessly moving around, striking the glass with its head trying to find the way out. It was clear that the man was insane.

At last he could run no further, as the number of trees increased and number of hits increased with it. With the last struck he sat heavily on the ground and couldn't get up anymore. All that was once human, had left his face. Every facial muscle was tightened, revealing bare teeth, like a mad dog. Eyes wide open and blood pouring down onto them, completed the mask of horror. He was sitting straight and staring ahead, when what seemed like involuntarily, by some force, he started to turn his head around. And then all what was left of this man was a scream, unending horrible scream, a scream that would give even the strongest of men nightmares.

Leaving this screaming thing sitting on the ground The Faceless Man turned to walk away.

Part One:

The beginning

1.

Tale of the captured

The First thing Omar Nubbiri felt when he woke up was the sense of rough material against the skin of his face. He couldn't tell straight away, whether his eyes were closed or opened. It took him a moment to remember, that he was not under the blanket in his hotel room, but kidnapped, or something of that sort. He remembered walking out of a business meeting, when he was hit hard on the head. After that - darkness. And now he woke up with a bag over his head, tied to a chair.

"Is someone there?" Omar tried "Please answer me".

Silence.

"Please talk to me. If you went through the trouble of taking me, there must be something you want". Maybe it was a horrible mistake. He has been in Saudi Arabia a number of times and always felt safe. Besides, he was not rich enough to draw attention and not important enough to draw interest. Omar Nubbiri was a successful businessman, one of the young executives for the big trading company in Emirates. He certainly had money, but not enough to be the target for kidnappers. As for the religious or political extremists, why would they be interested in him, he has never been much into politics and was never considered the fanatical type. A good salesman - that's all he was. Nothing more.

He tried again "That must be some kind of mistake. I'm sure we can work things out if you only talk to me".

'What if someone just robbed me' he thought 'robbed me and left'.

He tried to free himself but without any luck. Finally, when he was sure he was alone, a very unpleasant voice spoke to him: "Should I congratulate you or kill you? Are you a puppet or a warrior of God?"

Omar felt fear rush to his head making him dizzy. This was a mistake, a horrible mistake "I don't know what you are talking about. My name is...."

The voice cut him off "I know your name, Mr. Nubbiri. In fact, I know a lot about you. Where you live... and your family. Two daughters - Adiva and Ameera. And your beautiful wife Hessa. You have a good life Mr. Nubbiri, a lot to be thankful to Allah for"

Omar felt another wave of fear, much stronger this time, mixed with rage. "You have no business with them, if you are man enough, you'll talk only to me. Ask your questions and I'll answer truthfully".

The Voice chuckled in approval "You are a smart man Mr. Nubbiri. Do not worry, I have no intention of visiting your home, there are other methods of persuasion. I was just making a conversation."

"So what do you want of me?"

"To be sure"

"Sure of what?"

"Of who you are"

"You know who I am. You just told me"

"There is no way to tell before you looked into a man's eyes"

The bag was pulled off Omar's head and a sudden bright light blinded him. He heard footsteps closing in and then some figure sat in front of him. Omar squinted, trying to make out the face and could not bring his sight to focus. The man sitting in front of him kept quiet. It took some time before Omar could see him. He did not like what he saw. Not one bit.

The skin on the man's face was grey - the colour of the ashes, his eyes cold and emotionless. There was no remorse or anger in them, just cold curiosity of the scientist looking at the lab rat. 'It's the man you can't reason with or bargain for that matter' was the first thought that popped into Omar's mind. Still, he had to try; they might not want to kill him after all. He looked around and saw three men standing behind him motionless, statue-like.

"You are making a big mistake. I am just a businessman. That's all".

The man did not respond.

"What do I have to do to prove it to you?"

Silence.

"Are you a religious man?" Omar tried a different approach. "I am. And I swear by the name of Allah, I am telling the truth."

"You are not a warrior. You are obviously a puppet." It was the owner of the voice that had been speaking to him earlier "The question is: Are you aware your strings are being pulled? Do you know the puppeteer?"

He took a long look into Omar's eyes piercing him through. Finally he broke the stare. "I don't think so". The tone of his voice did not make Omar feel easier. 'It doesn't sound like he is going to let me go'.

"Do you know why you are here Mr. Nubbiri?"

"I told you I don't. Why is it so hard to believe?"

"It is not. In fact, I do believe you. But you are no fool, Mr. Nubbiri. You must have some idea."

"All I know is that you made a mistake and it seems that I am the one who is going to pay for it."

"Unfortunately, you are going to pay for it. But it was not me who made a mistake..... So you can't think of anything that might be the reason for your present misfortune?"

A sudden flash of memory hit Omar. He remembered that a few days ago one of his business associates introduced him to a factory owner, whose name he could not remember. This owner wanted to hire Omar for a short time, to make a business deal with an American company. Something about resin production. He didn't think much of it back then, because he hadn't consider it as a serious proposition. You don't just come up and propose a business deal to a complete stranger. On top of that, he offered Omar ridiculous amount of money, almost five times more than his annual salary. Thinking back he realized someone was playing him. In any case, telling it to these terrorists, or whoever they were, was hardly a smart thing to do.

"No. I can't think of anything."

"Now, see" the man shook his finger "your eyes tell me different. They tell me that you remembered something." This was a hard man to fool, even for someone like Omar, who was used to hiding the truth and manipulating people (it was one of his job's descriptions). You can not be a good business man

without mastering it. But this man saw right through him. 'I guess that comes with experience in interrogations' this was an unsettling thought.

"Ok. All I remember is that I was introduced to some factory owner. I do not remember his name. I've never seen him before."

"And how do you think it is relevant Mr. Nubbiri?"

"I don't know if it's relevant, but it seems strange to me, that someone I've never heard of came up to me with a very attractive proposition. I am not sure if you're aware of this, but it is not how things are done in the business world. It is almost rude. That is why I found it strange..."

He waited intensely for the man to respond. The man was silent, just looked at him with his cold, snake-like stare. "You asked me what I remembered. I told you. Now why don't you let me go? I am sure you are not the kind who worries about the police. Besides I don't know who you are. Your description can fit almost 90 percent of Saudi male population over 50. I am not even Saudi. I don't think anyone would listen to me".

The man was silent, just kept looking into Omar's eyes.

"You are not going to let me go, are you?" it was a rhetorical question "And you don't really care what I am going to say. You've already decided. Your only interest in me is of a sadistic nature. You've been doing it for far too long, my friend. You've defeated the whole purpose of interrogation. For you it is not about retrieving the necessary information any more, is it? You just like to see people's reaction to different methods of your 'persuasion' technique."

The man smiled and his smile reminded Omar a cartoon character he once saw- 'Grinch'. Almost comically evil. Only there was nothing comical about this man.

"You are way too smart for your own good Mr. Nubbiri". He walked to a table, removed a rug and revealed a lot of different instruments prepared for the torture "I am a conventionalist, Mr. Nubbiri, and always follow the routine, even when it seems unnecessary."

He picked up a tool, which happened to be a hammer. Omar was not a hero, or a soldier trained to bear pain and to face danger. The most dangerous thing he had ever seen was the robbery he witnessed just for a split second from the window of a taxi. The driver refused to stop when he wanted to help, but even if he did stop, Omar could hardly do anything. The fact was he had never experienced anything that tests a man's worth. But he was no coward and now facing the death he did not tremble. Instead, a sudden calmness swept over him as he realized that it was just his time. He only wished he could see his family one last time.

The man with a grey face sat in front of him again, with a hammer in his hands. "Do you wish to tell me more Mr. Nubbiri?"

Omar looked at him with pity "You know, when I was a child my father used to tell me this bedtime story about The Faceless Man. My mother always disapproved of this, as it's kind of a scary story. But I loved it. It was an adventure for me. I didn't see any scary stuff in it. Not back then.

My father told me, that no one knows when or how exactly it started. But he said it was a long time ago. When The Faceless Man was nothing but a boy something terrible happened to him, so terrible, my father used to say, that people chose to forget about it. But the boy to whom this had happened did not forget. When he got older, something just as horrible happened to him again and this time he chose a path that led him to become The Faceless Man.

My father told me that if someone is truly bad – rotten - The Faceless Man would know... and he would come... and then this someone would scream the endless scream of horror. I didn't understand the story. I was just a child, dreaming of righteous vengeance, of strength and justice. I was innocent, you see. But as I grew older and had my share of sins, it came to me - it is a scary story. After that, I tried to forget it and never spoke of it until today. It is until today I've never met a truly rotten man. One that is worthy of The Faceless Man's attention"

The man in front of him smiled "Are you trying to scare me with children's story Mr. Nubbiri?"

Omar smiled back "You did not listen. This story is not for children, but for grownups. It is a scary story for grownups. You see, I believe it was men like you that created The Faceless Man. And he knows where you are and he comes for you. I don't know whether this story is true or not, but I am almost relieved that you're going to kill me. Because it means that whether he is real or not isn't for me to find out. As for you, my friend.....well, you will most certainly be the one to know." Omar smiled again and with great satisfaction he saw the man's face grow paler and his cold emotionless eyes fill with concern. Omar looked deeper and saw unmistakable fear.

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To his dismay the man with a grey face realized that Omar read him like an open book. He quickly got up. Omar caught a glimpse of movement behind his back. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

The Man with a grey face made a sign to his man.

2

Fate of the lost soul

Al Hassani woke up screaming, covered in cold sweat. For the last free days he has been dreaming of the dark shape approaching, closer and closer, and he always woke up with a scream, sweating and shivering. This night was no different than any other. He became so afraid, that he slept only when he couldn't stay awake any longer.

The first incident occurred on that cursed day when this businessman from Emirates told him a bedtime story about some Faceless Man. He couldn't think of anything else that day. He cursed this Omar again and again. He should've tortured him like he intended to, to see how he would squeal, how he would squirm like a worm on a hook.

How much he hated those smug bastards: neatly dressed, with good manners and smiles, so civilized. All masks. They are not so different from him. At least he didn't lie to himself. These fools were so sure they're safe inside their bubble of security, when all you need is a little touch to destroy it. To show that, was one of the many reasons why he became who he was. There was no greater feeling of satisfaction than to see how an animal fear takes over those two-faced liars when they sense the danger and their masks of civilized men are thrown away. To see, how they would do anything to get back to their quiet little lives, to know that it was in his hands to give it to them and of course, not to.

But this Omar to his surprise appeared to be of a different breed. And as much as he hated to admit it, he has always been afraid of men like him. Men, who could suddenly reveal a surprising strength. It wouldn't be fun to torture him. In fact he probably wouldn't be able to, because he couldn't understand him. And what were the odds, that he would hear such an unpleasant story not from anyone, but Omar Nubbiri: "it was a bad day" he told himself. Now he had this superstitious fears "this is ridiculous" he said for a thousandth time.

On the day Omar was killed, Al Hassani lost his nerve for the first time in his life. He has always witnessed the execution. With Omar, he ran out of the room the second he gave the order, but not before he saw a peaceful look on Omar's face and that scared him even more. The first night he had the dream, he was able to shut his fears out and convince himself, that it was his subconscious playing tricks on him. After the second night, he was still able to stay positive; after all, he had to face the fact, that the time he spent with Omar Nubbiri was a traumatic experience for him. There was no other way to look at it. And it was only normal, that his mind still had emotional outbursts in the form of this dream. That wasn't such a convincing argument after free nights of the same dream. He couldn't see a psychiatrist. That was out of the question. So he had to find some other way to deal with it. The problem was that he could not rationalize his fear. None of the logical explanations gave him any relief.

Despite his occupation, Al Hassani was not a religious man. He never believed in God. All the stories about good and evil, about heaven and hell, about angels, ghosts or a boogey man, hardly ever impressed him. Even as a child he was too practical to be superstitious. In fact the word 'superstitious' was not in Al Hassani's vocabulary. Some might think that it was strange, since he was a son of the Imam¹, whereas his father was the main reason for his disbelief. Very early in his childhood, he realized that religion was more of the tool to keep people at bay, than sending God's word. Watching his father, he learned to use that tool before he finished school. He was always the leader in any play. Whatever he said, his mates were listening and obeying.

He became an Imam at the age of 21. Taking over his father's place, he soon gained more respect than his father ever could wish for. But after a while, he started to notice that there was not enough room for him to grow in this small town. His ambitions were much higher than having a power over a small community. He wanted bigger things. He wanted for people all over the world to say his name with respect or even better, with fear. He had a clear plan of how to achieve it.

So at age of 26 he joined a terrorist group known as BROTHERHOOD OF JIHAD. With his exceptional leadership skills he quickly moved up in the hierarchy. Those in charge realized that he was too big for them to handle and that he would soon eat them up, but it was too late. Before they had any chance to react, Al Hassani attacked wiping out the entire chain of command. He knew that his name would not be recognized on its own if he continued to operate within the same organization, so he gathered those loyal to him and created his own organization called THE WARRIORS OF ALLAH. With brilliant setups, his terror acts shook the whole world and by the age of 45 he has become known as one of the most dangerous terrorists of the century.

During all these years he never had any doubts about nonexistence of the God who could punish him for his sins. He never felt guilty, and any sign of remorse he considered as a sign of stupidity. Being a true atheist he lived by the law of the jungle: 'strong takes what he needs and the strongest takes all'. This philosophy served him well throughout his life. And since he never saw or heard of anyone being struck by lightning for doing bad things, he assumed that God was just a fabrication, maybe the greatest one, but fabrication nonetheless, by those exceptional few who ruled this earth.

Omar's bedtime story was about retribution, something that he has always laughed at, only now it was not so funny. Somehow it was all real. He could feel it in his bones. His last hope to get rid of this dream lied in one explanation, that his instincts (something that despite his atheism he believed in) were warning him of the danger coming. Hence, to get rid of the dream he needed to get rid of the danger. Someone out there was getting closer to him and that he could comprehend very well. He was not perfect after all, he made a mistake and left a trail somewhere, that was inevitable, but the good news was, he could fix it: 'and I will' the second he thought that he heard a knock. His heart dropped. A sudden fear hit him. He almost screamed, but forced himself to hold it in, knowing that if he did he wouldn't be able to stop.

¹ Muslim priest

He heard his nephew called his name.

'Idiot' he cursed himself 'you almost had a heart attack. Stop this childishness and pull yourself together'.

He called to his nephew "Come in Sayeed".

Sayeed came in. "I have good news Uncle"

"Finally, I could use some good news. Sit, and tell me everything"

Sayeed knew better than to argue with his uncle and although time was of an essence, he said nothing. He was his uncle's shadow, his second in command, hardly ever leaving his side and in ten years he spent close to Al Hassani he learned one unchanging truth about him: He never liked to rush into things. No matter how urgent matters were, his uncle always took a second to analyze the situation. He used to tell him all the time: "Before you do anything Sayeed, take a breath and think what you're going to do and what effect your action will have. Do that, even when you think that your delay can cost you dearly, because if you don't, a mistake that could've been easily avoided, can be fatal". That is why urging his uncle to hurry never crossed Sayeed's mind.

"Tell me what you've brought me" Al Hassani leaned forward eagerly, like a kid waiting for a present.

That made Sayeed nervous; he was not used to seeing his uncle like that. Al Hassani was the last person he could call emotional or edgy, but since the day he interrogated Omar Nubbiri he's changed somehow. Became unsure of things.

His uncle never let him be present during his interrogations. It was one of those 'hardly ever' times when Sayeed was not at his uncle's side. And since Al Hassani didn't share with him the results of the interrogation, Sayeed remained in the dark, which made him more confused and nervous. The strangest thing was that his uncle, before he went into the room where Omar Nubbiri was held, told him that it was an easy case and it wouldn't be a problem to retrieve the information. In fact he already knew the answer and was just going in to confirm it. When he came out, he had a look of the man who has just found out the day he would die.

But Sayeed kept his worries to himself for now, taking his uncle's advice not to rush. So, calmly he reported

"I think we've got our man"

"Are you sure of this? How did you find him and what makes you think it is him?"

"He was sold to us by a freelancer"

Al Hassani frowned in disappointment "Sayeed, Sayeed, am I such a bad teacher or is it you who is such a bad student? How could you let yourself to be caught in such an easy trap? The man we are looking for is too big for any freelancer to handle. So you're either got coned or worse, caught. If this is a trap then they are probably on their way here". While saying this he felt strange calmness 'worse comes to worst, this dream would stop'. Thinking that made him realize that he was afraid of this dream more than any jail.

"Neither, uncle, you are a good teacher and I'd like to think that I am a good student. We took precautions. We found a freelancer and interrogated him. There is nothing suspicious. I believe he just got lucky. He certainly did not strike me as someone the Agency would hire. I think CIA got sloppy. In

any case we took captive to a safe house that has no connections to you. If you want I will send trustworthy men to do the interrogation. It would be safer”

Al Hassani knew Sayeed was right, they shouldn't be directly involved and not so long ago he would've agreed. But that Al Hassani was left in the room with Omar Nubbiri and what remained was a broken man, who could no longer make a rational decision. So instead, he made a grave mistake by saying,

“No. I want to see him. I want to hear to what he has to say” to himself he thought ‘and be rid of these fears once and for all’

Sayeed said nothing, but again, was troubled to see how emotional his uncle was about this.

It took them two hours to get to the place. Al Hassani was used to such long rides, it always took him a long time to get anywhere, even to a place close by. It was

precaution routine that involved changing cars or identically looking cars with same number plates mix in dark alleys and spreading in different directions. He was a master of diversion tricks, which is why he still hasn't been caught. So even now, with his present impatient state, he knew better than to disregard the rules. Besides, it gave him time to look at the file of the captive.

His name was Michael Gordon. A single man of forty, he was a CIA active field agent and the head of the special anti-terrorist division in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He formerly worked as a deep undercover agent for ten years. Three years in Afghanistan, two years in Pakistan, four years in Jordan and two years in Iraq. ‘That is a dangerous man’ was the first thought that came into Al Hassani's mind. The second was ‘men like that don't get caught’. He was almost sure now, that this was a trap, and yet the option of going back and stay awake as long as he could, knowing that he has to go to sleep sometime, scared him more. On arrival, he took a long time to look around the place and his intuition told him that there was nothing suspicious. That made him relax a little ‘so far so good’ he thought and got out of the car.

On the outside, the house was very ordinary, no different than other hundreds of houses surrounding it, but Al Hassani was sure it had a basement which went deep underground, so any sound wouldn't reach the street. While they made their way down, he counted, it was ten meters deep. When he walked into the door, straight away he saw a man in the back, sitting behind the table. Ropes were used to fix his hands to the table

in a manner that would prevent the prisoner to move them during the process of torture. Daylight could not reach all the way down the basement and one bulb could not provide enough light to make out the face of the man. But for some reason Al Hassani was not interested to see his face just yet.

He forced himself not to seem too eager, as it would ruin the effect of his appearance. He sat on the chair prepared for him, which stood several feet away from the table and the tied man and still could not make out his face. He ignored that annoyance for now and said,

“Finally, in a presence of greatness. It is not often that fate gives you a present like that. CIA agent? I'll tell you the truth, I only once had a chance to interrogate a CIA operative and he didn't have as nearly as impressive resume as yours.”

He waited for a response. There was none. ‘That's new’ he thought. Usually the person being interrogated is eager to talk, to say anything to get his captor's mind away from the thoughts of torture. Although, he had to admit that he had never interrogated anyone of such a stature. “So, Mr. Gordon, my first question is how is it possible, that you let yourself get caught by some Freelancer? Or is that a trap for me? Al Hassani's voice was full of mockery.

Still no answer.

Al Hassani frowned. 'I am starting to look silly'. He gestured to switch on additional light that was used when the procedure was being taped. While his people were attending to it he came up to the camera that was centred and pointed towards the tied man.

"I often tape the interrogations. You see, Mr. Gordon, it is useful to watch it a few times because often you can miss something important the first time around" Lamps finally were turned on and when Al Hassani looked up he had to grind his teeth not to yell in irritation. The face of the man still remained a mystery. Al Hassani was so angry that he overlooked one oddity about this. The man was fully lit up to his shoulders, the rest was covered by a shadow.

That fact dismayed Sayeed greatly. He could not put his finger on it, but something was very wrong about this man. Something that made his stomach twist. Fear crawled inside of him and he stood unable to move or say anything.

Meanwhile Al Hassani walked to the smaller table that was standing next to the wall and picked up a hammer, which was lying among other tools. "You will talk Mister Gordon, I can promise you that". When he turned to walk to the captive he noticed, or better yet felt, utter silence. He looked around his men and saw horror on their faces with eyes set on the tied man behind him. He turned around and only then realized what was wrong with him. The man's face was covered by a shadow but not because lamps were in the wrong angle but because it seemed that light could not go through its darkness. Al Hassani shrieked with fear and turned to order his men to kill this thing or to do something, anything. But what he saw made his intestines loose, making him defecate himself. All his men were hacked to small pieces. With an inhuman effort he made himself turn back to look at the tied man only to see his late dream. He saw The Faceless Man walking toward him, closer and closer. And then, Al Hassani started to scream the endless scream of horror.

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Like in the dream Sayeed watched as his uncle took a hammer from the table and then looked at everyone who stood around him. He saw his uncle turning to face that creature out of nightmares and all of his movements were like a movie playing in a very slow motion. While Al Hassani was turning to the creature, it got up and with a speed Sayeed never knew existed started to chop men to shreds, with blades that appeared in its hands out of nowhere. It cut every one in the room except for him and his uncle and none of them did anything; they just stood there and waited to be hacked by this thing. Seemed like forever, his uncle was turning his head back at his direction again and when he finally made his turn Sayeed sensed the smell of blood, fear and excrements. In the end he heard a scream, a horrible scream, but it was too far away now. Sayeed ceased to exist and in his place stood what looked like a body of a man, but really was just a lump of meat.

3

Failed plan

Michael Gordon was literally buried under paper work. Two days ago he asked to bring every file they had on Al Hassani, which was quite a few. Although he had seen these files hundred times before he still felt it was important to look through them again.

The reason for that was the death of Omar Nubbiri. He still couldn't understand how Al Hassani could find out about his trap so quickly. The plan was still in development and was not yet in progress, it was an inside information. So the only explanation coming to mind was that they had a leak inside the

agency and that was something no one wanted to hear. The conversation with his superior was still fresh in Michael's mind.

Two hours after he found out about Omar's death he received a call to his office. Without any introduction, a brisk harsh voice spoke on the other end of the line

"What happened?"

Michael sighed "I'm still not sure "

"That is not the answer I was looking for"

"This is the only one I've got at the moment"

"Stop this bullshit Michael, I'm not interested in details, I want to know what you think"

"It would be only speculations. Besides you won't like what I think."

"I don't care what you think I will or won't like. This operation was under your supervision and it blew into our faces, now I have to explain, how we let a successful businessman get killed under our noses, so you better tell me what I've asked you."

"We don't have to explain anything to anyone. The operation was not in progress. People get killed every day, why does he have to be any different"

"There is always someone to answer to, for anything we do. That is something you as a field agent don't understand, but I have to face every day. Do you think we were the only ones monitoring the situation? There are others and I have to tell them what happened and they won't like the answer: "We're still not sure yet", so please stop stalling Michael and tell me what you think"

Michael frowned "First of all let me ask you, why wasn't I told that someone else was aware of the operation?"

"It was not your place to know"

"How do you expect me to work like that?"

"I expect you to follow the orders"

"Why wasn't I told, Harry? It's not like you, to keep me in the dark."

The voice on the other end sighed heavily "Do you think I had any choice in the matter? Sometimes even I have to be an asshole"

Michael had no response to that.

"Please Michael. There is no time."

"Like I said you won't like it, but anyhow here it goes: there is a leak"

The voice on the other end stopped breathing. There was silence for long time when finally the voice spoke up,

"You are right, I don't like that. That is not the answer I could go Upstairs with"

Michael shook his head. It was always the same story.

“Why don’t you come up with something better? I can give you a few days”

“You know something Harry, as a ‘field agent’ I learned one thing always to be true. The more people know about the operation the more chances it’d go sideways.”

“It was not an option Michael, I had to report. Just do me a favor, find some other explanation.”

“What if there is none?”

“Then our problem is much worse than we thought.

You have until next Friday.”

Michael heard a click and the call ended.

That was a four days ago and Michael slept only five hours. He expected a call anytime now. Michael knew that Harry was right. He needed to come up with a better explanation than ‘leak inside the agency’. That is why he was looking through files, to find a name. It was not too hard to think of a lie, the real challenge was to make it true.

First of all, he needed someone outside of the agency that they’ve employed during preparation of the operation. This part was easy, since ones involved mostly were contractors hired to play small parts. It was necessary to have as few people as possible who’d know about the operation. That is why he used contractors, they do not ask questions.

More difficult part was to select someone from this group of contractors who died recently. Ideally, it would be something he wouldn’t need to arrange. That would be much quicker and easier. Arrangement of someone’s death was always messy, too many complications along the way. For one, falsification of time of death would be a problem. So arranging a death was the last resort. And up until yesterday Michael thought he’d have to go through with it, but he got lucky. The contractor named Karim he employed to play a factory owner who wanted to do business with Omar, was found dead. And what was even better, it looked like he was tortured. It was perfect. The last piece of the puzzle was to find a link between Karim and Al Hassani.

‘There’ Michael thought ‘that’s what I’ve been looking for’

The name he found was Rashid. He was one of the members of Al Hassani’s organization. He and Karim used to spend time in the same brothel. So, it would look like careless Karim said something to one of the girls during a pillow talk and.... The rest was aftermath. On that note, he got up and walked away from the table.

‘Time to sleep’ the second he thought that, silence was broken by the phone ring.

“Shit” Michael cursed and picked up the phone.

“Michael?” it was Harry’s voice.

“Who else”

“Please tell me you have something”

“I have something”

Michael heard a sigh of relief.

“Good. When will I have it in writing?”

“Just give me a day”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I need it right away”

“So it really was a rhetorical question?” Michael’s voice was sarcastic.

“I don’t think you understand, what I had to go through to buy you these much time”

“You didn’t do it for me Harry. I just as well could tell them, what I really think happened”

“And what good would that do? Don’t pretend like you don’t care. Because I know you do. We are both too deep in this shit”

“I haven’t slept properly for four days Harry. Give me a break.”

There was short silence.

“Ok, you’ve got ten hours. That’s all I can give you and I hope you can appreciate what I’ll need to go through, to give you that much. You only have to talk to me, you know, nice as I am. I, on the other hand, have to eat all the crap coming from Upstairs.”

Michael hanged up the phone, walked to the couch, laid down, closed his eyes and started to think. It was an old habit of his to think during his sleep. Right from the beginning of his career as a CIA field agent he realized that the only time he had to really think, was during his sleep. One might assume nothing productive can come up from half dozing mind and it is not a real rest for that matter, but that would be a wrong impression. All it takes is practice. In fact Michael came up with most productive solutions during his half sleep - half thinking process.

His thoughts were at least worrisome if not more: ‘The only ones who knew about this operation were me, Harry and some unknown third party’. He couldn’t imagine the leak coming from Harry; the man was a true believer in the cause, although anything was possible. If one thing was unquestionably true, it was the fact that no one could be trusted. Government, like any other organization, had its flaws. Those flaws were people. Michael wasn’t one of those cynics, who lost the faith in human kind, but he knew realistic nature of things.

He believed that people were inherently good, but when it came down to trivial things of life, they were careless. Only a small percent would involve themselves in something really bad, but if it is a minor thing, maybe to slip a little piece of information here and there and you get considerable sum of money, so you can put your kid through college, then many people would go along. Many, not most.

Michael could understand that, but he also knew that it was a flaw in the system. Because any organization consists of people and therefore takes all the good that comes with them along with the bad. And despite all the good that the government represented, it was not an exception; it was an organization like any other. Trust no one - that was his motto. So Harry could do it, that was not a ridiculous possibility, however, it was more likely that the leak came from that mysterious third party, the party from ‘Upstairs’. And that is what made

Michael worry. Because it meant that this third party did not want for Al Hassanni to be caught, at least not by him. Whether that mean that agency had different plans for Al Hassanni, or just wanted to take

care of him under different circumstances, was unclear for Michael, he was never good at politics. Probably that is why he was stuck as a field agent.

To say that Michael was irritated was to say nothing. His plan was perfect in its simplicity and what was more important, it could be quickly executed. The idea was to create a competition for Al Hassanni, serious enough for him to notice and to draw him out of his hole. Based on his profile Michael was sure that Al Hassanni would react. He was too ambitious to let any competition dangle around. He would show himself, it was inevitable. But it was interrupted before Michael had a chance to realize it. Someone gave a word to Al Hassanni while operation was still in development stage.

The question was what was he going to do now? He needed to decide whether to pursue Al Hassanni further or to just drop the matter and roll over on account of some bureaucrats. No, he couldn't do that, this kind of subtleness was not in him. Besides, he saw what that monster could do. He needed to be stopped and that was exactly what Michael was planning to do. Only this time he would do it himself, without involving anyone, not even contractors. It has to be unofficial, completely off the books.

Of course, it would be really hard to catch one of the most fearsome terrorists, who was supported by a large

organization or possibly by several organizations, all by himself. But hard was not impossible. And one way, the most obvious way to do that, was to make Al Hassanni find him.

That was extremely dangerous, because it meant that Michael had to let himself be caught. In such cases there was always a high probability of death. But he played a captive before and knew how to handle the situation, when it came to that. He'd done that even being inexperienced agent escaping seemingly inevitable fate. It was in Afghanistan, he was captured by Russians. He remembered how listening his captors discussing different ways to torture him, raised his anger, helping him to shut his fears out. He was sitting in the far corner of the L-shaped room and could only see two of the captors in front of him; he heard the other four voices coming from around the corner.

Two of his enemies were still arguing, when Michael managed to untie himself. Grubbing one of them by the throat he simultaneously stubbed the other one (also in the throat) with the sharp stick he picked up from the near by table. Twisting the man's neck took Michael only a second. He could hear by the laughing voices that the rest of his captors remained ignorant of his release 'Bad for them' he remembered smiling at the thought.

There wasn't much struggle. Michael emerged into the main room like a ghostly vision and in a shimmering light his movements appeared instantaneous. He cut down three of his captors still in their seats, the fourth one managed to jump up trying to un-holster his gun with a shaking hand. He was still trying to do that, looking down, when Michael appeared behind him cutting his throat.

He killed twenty men that day and walked out of his prison like he did numerous times afterwards, like he would do again. He would bring Al Hassanni down, even if it would be the last thing he would do.

Michael suddenly became aware of the knocking on his door. He opened his eyes and looked at his watch. Quarter to twelve. He's been resting for only 30 minutes: 'For pity sake, is there any rest?' He tried to ignore the knock, but the intruder was persistent.

"Sir?" came from other side of the door.

Michael closed his eyes again and called "Come in Sam"

A young man barely out of his twenties walked into the room, looking really nervous.

“You need to come downstairs, sir”

“I’m sure it can wait a couple of hours Sam, I need rest”

“I think it’s urgent sir. The search team came back. They sent for you”

“God damn it Sam, spit it out” Michael started to get irritated and that made the young man even more nervous.

“They found Al Hassani”

Michael opened his eyes “What do you mean they found him?”

“I mean his body, sir. Al Hassani is dead”

4

Between bad and the worse

Altai was looking back along the road they came from: his father, his mother and two of his sisters. He hated the whole thing. He didn’t understand why they had to leave, even after his father explained to him that this was the only way to stay safe, even then, he couldn’t see his father’s point. And although he trusted his father always, it still didn’t make him feel easier about it. All his friends and the only home he ever knew were left behind, without as much as a second thought.

Feeling this never made him complain though, because he could see how hard it was for his father to make such a decision and he also saw how scared his mother was. He didn’t want to add any more worries to that. However, his older sister was not as understanding:

“Why did we have to leave in such a rush Pa? I didn’t have any chance to say goodbye to my friends or to collect all of my things”

“If we took all of your things we’d have to buy two more mules”

“But Pa”

“Enough Aisha, I’m not going to explain it again”

Aisha was about to say something, but her mother looked at her with warning eyes and she thought better of it. Leila looked at her husband and saw how greatly worried he was and her fears grew deeper.

Ahmed was a good man and now his conscience and his fear were tearing him apart. His fear for his family and his conscience for what he’s done. ‘I had no choice’ he repeated to himself over and over. It was not helping. The fact was, a peace of his soul died that night and he knew he would never be the same again.

Ahmed was not a coward. He’s done his fare share of fighting and turning his back to run leaving his friends behind, never crossed his mind before. But it was different this time. He had a family now and before he had no one. No one to be afraid for. No one to lose.

Since his parents were killed in front of him Ahmed had lost his faith in God and his justice. Left as an orphan on the streets of Bukhara², he grew up to be mistrustful, bitter and quite a dangerous young man. Joining a Khwarezmian³ fighting troops of the Shah Muhammad⁴ he managed to have the resemblance of friendship with his fellow troopers.

During his years of fighting, he never learned to be attached to anything, there was nothing important in his life worth keeping. That made him fearless in a way that earned him a high respect among soldiers.

Troops were always moving around, never stayed long in one place, so he didn't get accustomed to any of the cities. He was disconnected from life and fighting was all he knew. Ahmed honestly believed that it was the only life for him and he could not have another. That was until he met Leila.

He left the army and settled down in a small village 20 miles off Bukhara. And so he was pretty happy to lead a life of the farmer and everything was perfect until two days ago.

The event of that night kept circling in his head. It was a night like any other. He came back from work, tired as usual, but happy. Happy, because his youngest daughter ran out to him screaming "Papa, papa's home", because he saw his son standing in the doorway, waiting for his father and he knew that he and his son were as one, and finally because he saw his oldest daughter and his wife were busy preparing dinner for him.

Ahmed remembered how later on that night, when house fell asleep, its quietness was disrupted by the heavy knock on the door.

Leila startled in fright "Who is it Ahmed?"

"It's probably Nurad captured a thief on a field. Don't worry. Go back to sleep"

He got up and went to open the door. As he did so, he saw a man lying on his porch covered in blood. He quickly checked if the man was breathing and felt that he was still alive. As carefully as possible he picked the wounded man up and got him inside the house. Leila was already standing in the room waiting. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He was lying on the porch when I found him. He is still alive"

He walked across the room and put the wounded man on the couch. "bring some hot water Leila"

Leila hurried to the kitchen. Meanwhile, Ahmed gently removed the man's shirt to see where the wound was. He could see straight away that it was bad, most likely fatal. The man was stabbed in abdominal area and it looked like it happened a while ago. Leila came back with the water "He needs a doctor Ahmed. Maybe you better get Samir"

"I don't think it'll do any good. Samir's house is about a mile away, it'll be half an hour before we'll get back, he'd probably be dead by then. Besides, I will not leave you alone with some stranger."

"But he's unconscious"

² Bukhara was one of the major trade centers along the Silk Road, invaded by Mongol, led by Genghis Khan in year 1219.

³Khwarezmian empire initially was a part of Achaemenian Persian empire. In the late 11th century it was founded in Central Asia as an independent dynasty and existed until the early 13th century.

⁴Shah Muhammad II was the ruler of Khwarezmian empire at the time of Mongol invasion.

Ahmed didn't bother to explain that a dying man can do much harm before his time. He saw plenty of examples. "Let's clean him up. He has as much of a chance to survive with us as with Samir. Give me the water"

As he turned to take a bowl of water from Leila, the wounded stranger suddenly grabbed him by the arm.

"They are coming" he said with in a hoarse voice.

Ahmed took the man's hand in his and tried to calm him down. "You are safe. Try to relax. You shouldn't move right now. You've been wounded in your stomach."

The stranger opened his eyes and when Ahmed looked into them his heart fell. He always knew that the day would come when he'd have to pay for this good life. And today was that day. He tried to get a hold of himself and asked "Who is coming?"

Stranger did not answer.

He tried again "What is your name?"

No answer still.

"We are your friends. My name is Ahmed and this is my wife Leila. You are welcome in our house. We will take care of you"

"Don't bother, I am a dead man" the stranger responded "But I thank you for your kindness and I will repay you for it. Maybe it will wash away some of my sins" The last part was said for his own benefit, rather than theirs.

"My name is Kasim and I'm a captain of Shah's personal guard. Two days ago Bukhara was attacked by Mongols. All our defences were swiped away. We

did all we could but in the end everyone got killed, all of my men." He started coughing, Ahmed could see that he was getting weaker by the minute.

"Take it easy my friend, you don't need to tell your story right now. It can wait."

Kasim ignored his suggestion. It was as if he felt compelled to continue, as if more than just his life was at stake.

"I survived by a miracle, they presumed I was dead and left me lying on the floor of the palace. I managed to take clothes off a dead Mongol, so I could move unnoticed. I knew the way to the hidden treasure chamber and as bad as I felt about stealing, I knew I would need some money. So I went and took what I needed and as I was getting out, one of those bastards saw me. We got into a fight. I won, but not without a price. It was four hours ago."

"How did you manage to survive that long with the wound like that?" Ahmed asked in amazement.

Kasim smiled "You can be surprised what a man can get through. I also had a chance to take strong mead with me; if you drink it and don't eat, it can help to stop infection, but only for a while. I don't know what I was hoping for. I guess to run into someone like you"

Kasim made a gesture with his hand to his throat trying to show that he wanted to drink. Ahmed quickly responded. Kasim drank two glasses and only then could speak again.

“You have to hurry. I had a head start, those savages stayed to destroy the city, but it won’t be long before they will get here. You have until sunrise at most”

“But that is couple of hours no more” Leila gasped “There is not enough time to warn everybody”.

Ahmed already knew the answer to that. The wounded man looked up at his wife, then his eyes were back to him again. Kasim finally said what was already in Ahmed's mind “You have to leave now. There is no time for warning the rest”

Ahmed always thought that he knew what it was like to lead a hard life, and having faced tough decisions before made him to believe, that it is as hard as it can ever get. This night proved him wrong. He realized that a difficult decision was when you needed to choose between bad and worse and to make this decision you have to part with a peace of your soul.

The fact was he probably wouldn’t be able to leave, if his experience as soldier didn’t make him aware, what would happen to his family if he stayed. So he knew what needed to be done and there was no point to delay any further, but... “We have to clean you up quickly. I bought an extra mule two days ago, it can carry you. We need to hurry. Leila...”

“No” Kasim shook his head “I will stay”

Ahmed face turned red with anger “If I am to run like a coward without warning my neighbours about the

danger coming, I will at least remain human and try to save a wounded man”

“You can’t save me” Kasim's eyes became cold and all hoarseness was gone from his voice, it was hard as steel now “I will stay”.

This was not an argument, it was a command. Ahmed could see now that this man was truly a leader. Kasim's eyes grew softer again. He was looking at Ahmed with pity, knowing what he had to go through, perhaps because he went through the same thing himself.

“I will stay, my friend, and do not worry; I still have enough strength in me to warn everyone else. I will do it once you gone.”

Ahmed could see it was a lie. This man was at the point of dying and only his will was keeping him alive. ‘He will let go as soon as we left’ he realized.

“Leila wake up the kids. Take only what we need. We are leaving now.”

Leila hurried out of the room. Kasim followed her with his eyes and when she was gone he turned to face Ahmed. “I didn’t want to do it in front of your wife. Somehow it felt wrong”

“Felt what wrong?”

“My pocket. Get into my pocket” Ahmed saw that it was harder and harder for Kasim to talk.

He reached into the man’s pocket and pulled out a bag full of coins. There was enough money for him and his family to live for a month without working.

“Get into the other one”

As he did so Ahmed felt that it was full of stones. When he pulled out his hand it was full of diamonds. He could buy himself a palace with what he held.

“Take it”

Ahmed's face grew with shock “I can't”

“You'll be damned fool not to take it” Kasim's voice was angry “Why should it go to waste? Why should it go to the enemy? You need to take care of your family. You can start over. That is what I want, that is my dying wish and that is exactly what you are going to do.”

“You were right, it does feel wrong.”

“None of this is right. But you have to go on, it is not only up to you” Kasim looked over Ahmed's shoulder making him turn. He saw his family standing in a doorway. “You have to go my friend”

“Thank you Kasim. I wish I could do something for you”

“You already did. Go now and may Almighty be with you”

Ahmed remembered looking at the house from a distance and realized for the first time that it was the moment when he fully comprehended what he was doing. He was running away, leaving the place where he spent the happiest years of his life to burn. Nothing will be the same from now on. He gave up the only good thing that was in him: principles.

But there was no other choice and if he was ashamed back then, that feeling was slowly passing. He would do anything for his family, whether it meant fighting an army or crawling on his knees begging for mercy. He would sell his soul, because he himself as an entity did not exist anymore. He was alive for one reason and for one reason only: to make sure his family was safe.

Ahmed was deep in his thoughts when Leila drove next to him. He looked back to see his kids asleep crammed together inside a small cart, which was the only thing they had that could carry a family. Then he looked back at his wife and saw how tired she was.

“I'll take over soon. We need to stop and change over mules, and then you can rest. I'll tie the third mule to the cart and will drive.”

“I'm alright. Don't worry. You look very pale. You are the one who needs a rest. I can carry on for a while.”

Ahmed smiled. No matter how bad he felt she could always make him feel better. Leila smiled back and Ahmed, even after fifteen years, still marvelled how beautiful she looked smiling. But this only lasted for a second and then tired, worried look was back on her face.

“Where're we going Ahmed? What are we going to do?”

“There was a rumour I once heard about a land no army was able to conquer. The one who was talking about it said it's the paradise on earth. He said this land lays between two great lakes⁵ over the chain of mountings⁶. The road to the mountain leads over Garagum desert⁷.”

⁵ Black and Caspian Seas

⁶ Caucasus Mountain Range

All blood drained from Leila's face. It became as white as snow "We'll never make it Ahmed. It's hundreds of miles of empty desert. Where we'd get water or food? Not to mention the sun this time of the year is deadly out there"

"Don't worry, we're not going to go straight through the desert. We'll need to get to Konya-Urgench. There we'll join a caravan of traders and will follow The Great Silk Rout. As far as I know, it should lead us to the great chain of mountains. I think the land I heard a rumor about lies over it.

"There are too many complications. First of all, it is too far to the Konya-Urgench, we don't have enough money to get us there. And as far as the money goes, how do you plan to join trader's caravan? I heard they don't allow free riders."

"We've got money Leila"

"What are you talking about? Where from? Why don't I know anything about it?"

"Kasim gave me his money and much more. We don't have to worry about it any more. I mean ever."

Leila grew silent. They drove like this for a while. Ahmed finally turned to look at his wife and saw her crying.

"I think we can afford to make a short stop" he broke the silence. When they stopped Leila crawled into the cart to check on the kids. Ahmed, meanwhile, changed over a mule that was the most exhausted and got onto a front seat of the cart. He looked to see if Leila got comfortable enough and started to move again. It wasn't too long until Leila got up and sat beside him. Her eyes were red after crying. "He saved us"

"That he did"

They gone silent again. Then Leila asked "How long do you think it will take us to get to that place?"

"Half a year at least"

"I'm scared Ahmed"

"Everything will be fine. Trust me."

Leila smiled and put her hand on his face. "I always do"

Suddenly the same feeling washed over Ahmed as he had when he first saw his wife. The kind that made him believe he was indestructible, the strongest, kindest person. And he knew then, like he knew now, that she belonged to him for all eternity. And he was sure she knew that too.

5

Camp

Atlai woke up feeling someone shaking him by the shoulder. He tried to ignore it, but he heard his father's voice calling "Wake up you're sleeping you life away"

⁷ Kara Kum desert is a great sandy region in Central Asia

Atlai got up and shook his head “We finally stopped?”

“We can afford a few hours. You go ahead, help you sisters to prepare breakfast. I need to sleep.”

“You haven’t slept?” Atlai asked incredulously.

“No. We had to keep moving”

“What’s happening Pa?”

“No more talking Atlai. I’ll explain everything later. Now go, I need my sleep”

With that his father boosted him out of the cart and laid on his place. Atlai didn’t get fifteen feet from the cart when he heard his father’s snore. He stood there in amazement for a while, feeling kind of jealous of the fact that someone could fall asleep so quickly, when it took him at least half an hour of tossing and turning before he settled down and the sleep took over him. Thinking of that made him smile. He turned and headed towards the spot where his mother and sisters were preparing food.

“What’s for breakfast?” he asked when he came closer.

His mother looked at him half amused half annoyed “Up. Finally. We’ve got cold lavash, some cheese and milk”

Atlai made a sound of disappointment “I don’t like milk. And why is lavash cold?”

“Well, there is not enough heat from the sun and your father forbade us to make a fire”

“Is there any water?”

His mother ignored the question and instead turned to her older daughter “Aisha there is some water left in a cart go bring it, if I sent him he’d wake your father”

Aisha looked at her brother disapprovingly, but went without saying anything. Atlai’s younger sister Simin moved closer to replace Aisha and while her mother was cutting cheese, she poured milk in the glasses. “Ma, can I have Atlai’s share of milk?”

“It’s his milk, ask him.”

She turned to her brother with a question on her face.

She made him smile “Aha, and you can have some of my lavash as well”

Simin’s face lighted up “Thank you Atlai”

It took an effort for Atlai to regain a serious look, so without saying anything he responded by nodding. Leila watched her children with a mixture of love and pride. ‘It’s going to be a good day’ her thought was.

Aisha came back with a bag made of cow skin, which was used for carrying water and it was now only half full. “Not even a herd of bulls running at full speed could wake him up. Do you think we’ll be able to do that when it’s time to move?” this question was addressed to her mother.

“Your father knows how to fall asleep and how to stay awake when needs to”

Only few hours later his father was up. He looked rested enough for the long journey ahead, which was very strange to Atlai considering that he only slept for no more than five hours in three days. That convinced him again, that his father was the strongest man and everything Atlai ever wished to become.

“We should get moving” were Ahmed’s first words.

Aisha sighed. “Pa, do we have to keep driving non stop for three days again?”

Ahmed responded with a smile “No, spoiled one, we’ll be making camp from now on. In fact we’ll make one tonight”

Atlai almost yelled out in a relief. But the feeling quickly passed, as he saw his mother’s worried face.

“Are you sure Ahmed? Is it safe?”

His father turned to look at his mother “Do not worry.

I think we’re far enough”

Atlai was itching to ask ‘far enough from what?’ but pushed the urge down knowing he would find out eventually.

“Now everybody get into the cart and let’s start covering some miles”

‘Pa is enthusiastic as ever’ Atlai thought and good mood came back to him.

The sun was down almost to the point of disappearing and the night was slowly creeping up, when Ahmed stopped the cart “All right we deserve some rest. We’ll make a camp here.”

He jumped off the cart and helped the women to get off it as well. Atlai waited for his mother and sisters to get off and when he was the only one left his father smiled and said “I think you can make it down yourself”

Simin giggled and Atlai’s face became as red as the inside of a watermelon. He wanted to say that he didn’t mean for his father to help him, that’s not what he was waiting for, but thought that his explanation would sound like a fib and didn’t say anything.

Making a camp was easy enough task. First to build a bivouac big enough for the whole family and afterwards his father allowed to make a small fire, which was very convenient, since they could prepare a decent meal after three days of eating only cold food. So after a nice dinner of hot lavash, dry meat and baked potatoes, without saying much, Atlai and his sisters went to sleep leaving their parents sitting alone in front of the fire.

6

Over the mountains, between two great lakes

Leila waited for her husband to say something, but Ahmed was quiet. She decided to start the conversation “What did you mean ‘we’ll never have to worry about money anymore?’”

‘True woman’ thought Ahmed with an amusement, ‘even in the face of such danger a mention of money caught her attention’. He didn’t hold it against her though, it just was in women’s nature to wish for things ‘I guess the same as men, only with a different perspective’.

Instead of saying anything he reached inside his pocket and took out a bag with diamonds.

Leila gasped “This is a fortune. How did he manage to steal so much?”

“He knew where the treasure chamber was, remember? I am sure he could have taken much more”

“Why didn’t he?”

Ahmed gave Leila a reproachful look “He felt bad taking that much, although he needed it.”

Leila felt a little guilty and tried to change the subject “You don’t think that Mongols would move in the same direction we do?”

“There is no way to tell”

“Then why did we stop? Why not keep moving with the same speed?”

“Because we’d kill our mules. Besides, it’s only about two days drive to next village. It’s somewhat off the route to Konya-Urgench, but we need to get there first. We’ll buy a big cart there and more mules and supplies.”

“Why not horses?”

“Horses are much more expensive. We don’t need to draw unnecessary attention.”

They sat quiet for a while; finally Leila asked “Ahmed, are you sure about this land you heard about? Maybe we’d better stay in Konya-Urgench when we get there. We could lead a good life up there. The life we always wanted. Buy a small shop perhaps.”

Ahmed turned his head and looked in the direction where they came from “This is not a simple raid Leila. These Mongols are led by a man named Temudjin⁸. I heard about him. He was a slave before and fought his way through to his freedom. Men like him see the world as a personal playground and everything on it is theirs for the taking. The worst part is that he is not just a bully who happened to have a gang to back him up; he is the kind of man, who can take what he wants without any help from others. People usually can feel that kind of power and they would follow him blindly wherever he goes. He’s a conqueror, Leila. He’ll never stop until he gets the whole world or until he’s dead.”

Leila’s fear was unquestionable. She didn’t even try to hide it. “Then why are you so sure he won’t go to this magical land of yours?”

“I’m far from sure of anything. But if what I have heard is true, then I am sure he knows about it too”

“So what? If you said he is not the kind of man who stops at anything, why should this land be any different? What would make him afraid to invade it?”

“History. He is not the only conqueror who walked this earth. There were others and some of them were stupid enough to try to invade the land and enslave its natives. Tried and failed. I’ve heard a rumour that invaders were not just beaten, but crushed with such force, that those who survived the battle said all was over before they even could begin to fight back. And some of those armies went through half of the world like a knife through butter, up until they came across this land. If rumours about it only half true,

⁸ The birth name of Genghis Khan

Mongols don't stand a chance. And if this Temudjin is arrogant enough to try, well, I won't run anymore. I'd stand among those who'd fight him."

Hearing that didn't give much relief to Leila. All that sounded magical, but hardly seemed true "You have nothing to be ashamed for Ahmed, you've done what you had to. No one, who has ever known you, could've called you a coward. We do not belong to ourselves

anymore; we've got children to worry about."

Ahmed smiled "You're my wife Leila, you love me and no matter what I am I will always remain your husband, your last line of defence. It is only natural for you to defend my actions. But the hard truth is - I am a coward; there is no way around it. I became a coward to save my family and I'd do much worse things to keep you safe. However, you must understand that sometimes when you give up something important for your loved ones, you deprive them of that very thing."

"What do you mean by that? You saved us. You always took care of us. Everything you have done was for us. You have never deprived us of anything."

"What about Atlai? What about my son?" he looked at Leila "He'll know one day what happened, he'll know that I've run leaving my neighbours to be slaughtered"

"He'll understand it was the only way to keep us safe"

"I know he'll love his father. But he won't have an example of bravery to follow. And I won't be able to explain it to him, because I gave it up. We have to answer for everything we do. Life does not excuse mistakes, even those that had to be made."

Ahmed shook his head, trying to shake that feeling off "It's done and I can't change that. Too late to feel sorry." He saw a worried look on Leila's face and smiled "Don't trouble your head about these matters, for now there are bigger issues at hand."

Leila felt a little reassured, but it did not make her any less worried about the situation they were in "Are you sure people who live on this land will welcome us? If they are so strict about their territory they probably won't let us live among them."

"Strangely enough I've heard they are very hospitable people, so I don't think establishing ourselves there will be a problem. You're tired; you better go to sleep, in a few hours we'll have to start moving again."

Leila was still unconvinced about the whole matter of moving to some strange land that only seemed to exist in rumours. But she didn't argue. She got up "Are you coming too?"

"In a little bit"

When Leila left, Ahmed looked far ahead with much uncertainty in his eyes. The story he told his wife to put her mind at ease didn't sound real to him either. Those rumours about the unconquered land he heard during his time in the army and it made him laugh back then. It wasn't so funny anymore. He wished with every fibre of his soul that those rumours were true, because he could feel that this crazy Mongol will not stop and no matter where Ahmed goes, he will come eventually. 'Our only chance lies over the mountains, between two lakes.'

Message of The Dark Rider

Atlai woke up in the middle of the night feeling natural urges that called for the privy. He looked around and found that the entire family was sleeping, including his father. He wasn't too keen on going into the dark by himself, especially in unfamiliar places. Wishing just to get it over and done with as soon as possible, he decided not to dress. Shivering with cold, he got out of the tent and saw that fire seemed to go out a long time ago. He found it odd, since he figured that even if his father went to sleep straight after them, there still should be some pieces of smoldering coal left. Instead it looked like the fire was out for days. Suddenly he felt the presence of someone else. He spun around to see who was behind him and froze with a fear that he could never explain. It was not just a childish fear, not even a fear of the boy who has been thrown into a nightmare. This fear ran much deeper, in the place that connected Atlai's soul to his ancestors, back to the time when the first man brought evil into the world, creating a hole that remained in every man's soul from that day onward.

Atlai was looking at the figure, which looked like a man. He was all dressed in black, sitting on raven horse and even though he was no more than several feet away from Atlai, he could not make out the rider's face. It looked like his head dissolve into the night. Yet somehow, Atlai was sure that the rider was watching him and felt the fear of every man that was born into this world from the beginning of time. Just when Atlai

thought that he would lose himself to the darkness of the hole, he woke up. He did not scream. He did not leap up. He just laid there silently, still not sure what would happen to him, like a man who stopped an inch short from the end of the cliff balancing on the edge, not knowing whether he would fall or not. He stayed like that for quite some time, until he finally could regain enough strength to crawl outside where he felt his stomach turn, pushing out everything he ate last night. He heard his mother screaming his father's name; he looked up and saw her running to him.

A moment later he felt her holding him asking what was wrong. The dream was fading now, but even a distant memory of it sent such a wave of horror that he vomited on his mother's lap. He wanted to apologize, but couldn't speak. With an effort he tried to bring his sight to focus and saw his mother crying. His father leaned close to his face,

“What's wrong, boy? Tell me what's happening? Where does it hurt?”

How could he explain? He had no words for what he saw, for what he felt. He wouldn't be able to describe it even if he could speak. Atlai suddenly realized that it was not just a dream, no dream could do this to him; even nightmares as horrible as they are, have some sense of surreal. This dream was too clear, like a message. And if it was, what kind of the future would be preceded by such a message? With that realization Atlai fainted.

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Atlai's fever broke on the second day from the morning it started. Leila hasn't left his side for all that time. She didn't sleep, she ate what Aisha brought her and she only stepped outside a few times for a minute to leave for a privy. Only now she felt how exhausted she was. It came to her after the feeling of the relief, when Atlai's fever broke. All tiredness pored into every inch of her body. Most of it was the result of an emotional exhaustion from the constant worry for Atlai.

Unfortunately, her relief didn't last very long. Almost straight away she remembered that they have no food or water. Ahmed left yesterday to the nearest village for some supplies and she was very much reluctant for him to go, leaving her by herself with kids. But he insisted that it was the only way.

“We have enough water and food for a day, by then Atlai’s fever should break and he would need much of everything to gain his strength back” Ahmed tried to persuade her.

“But why can’t we all go. We’ll put him in the cart and the rest of us will walk. We can make it in couple of days. I know it will be hard with so little of supplies, but we can manage”

“Don’t be foolish Leila. You and the children won’t make it without water. If we walk all of it will go to Atlai and even for him it might not be enough. Besides, people in fever need as little disturbance as possible.

Moving Atlai in the cart would be too dangerous, you know that. So stop being so scared. I’ll be back in by next morning the latest. No one has passed us since we’ve been here, so you won’t be bothered by anyone.”

Leila knew all of that, but something was telling her that they should risk it and go together. But Ahmed’s tone told her that his decision was final and she knew arguing with him would be pointless.

He has been gone all night and most of the morning now and should be back any moment. But Leila had a very strong feeling that something was wrong. The question was: what was she supposed to do now? Should she wait for her husband or try to get to the village herself? ‘Since Atlai’s fever broke I guess its safe enough to get him into cart and start moving’ the moment she thought that, she heard her older daughter shout for her in a frightened voice. She run out of the tent and straight away saw what scared her daughter so much. Approximately half a mile away a group of riders, about fifty of them were heading their way at full speed.

“Are those the raiders, Ma?” asked Simin

“No little one, there is no reason for raiders to be here”

Aisha looked at her mother with frightened, but hopeful eyes. Leila tried to look as calm as possible although she was terrified “Go inside to your brother, both of you.” Maybe it was possible to talk to those men, convince them that her husband could pay if they waited for him. Riders were getting closer and Leila was standing, waiting for her fate knowing that there is nothing she could do.

8

It’s only a bad dream

Ahmed was making haste, he needed to get into the village as soon as possible because not only his son’s health was at stake, but he also hated the idea of leaving his family alone, as much as Leila hated for him to leave. That is why he spared no strength into pushing his mule forward at a full gallop and by the time he rode into the village it was barely alive.

The village looked like hundreds of others Ahmed have been through in his traveling days. About hundred and fifty houses lined up, making two streets towards the central market and that’s where Ahmed headed. First of all he needed to find a stable, as his first priority was to find a fast horse to get him back to the family as soon as possible. The mule he rode on would not make another mile and he would have to leave straight after he got supplies. The stable was not hard to find. Usually it was located on the outskirts of the market, because the horses are the first or the last things people buy. This market was no different from any other Ahmed had been to. In the stable he found only one man who was leaning against the doorframe looking outside.

Ahmed approached and asked “Are you the owner?”

The man looked him up and down, then looked at Ahmed's mule and said "I certainly am. But I don't buy mules and even if I were, this one looks like his going to pass. Have you been riding him long? Where have you come from?"

Ahmed ignored the questions and said "I'm not selling. I'm looking to buy"

The man's face turned from mild contempt to the most hospitable smile in an instant and even Ahmed who knew his fair share of tradesmen and was aware of how many faces they could have, was incredulous of how fast and completely the man's manner changed. Knowing that this one would be hard to bargain with, Ahmed cut to the chase "Give me your best horse for the price you're asking and as long as you won't try to cheat me, I will not bargain. But let me warn you, I know horses, the first attempt you'll make to cheat, will lose my trust and I don't have time to give out a second chance. Do you understand what I mean?"

The man's face hardened "I understand. Come with me"

He led Ahmed to the back of the stable, where he showed him a magnificent animal.

'This is going to cost dearly' but money was not what was on Ahmed's mind. To buy this horse, he would have to sell one of the stones and that meant to risk drawing unnecessary attention. What bothered Ahmed even more was the fact that he would need to come back to the village with the family and at least one person in here would know about his fortune. On the other hand he was much too eager to get back to his family, so such a horse would be handy. He finally decided 'sooner or later I'd have to sell one of them' so he asked the tradesman "How much?"

"This is the finest horse I've ever had. I was planning to sell him to a royalty, so you understand how much I cherish him. He is my most valuable possession"

Ahmed could see that the tradesman was stalling, trying to figure out what price to put on the horse. It was tricky because if he'd put a ridiculously high price Ahmed would walk out thinking he was being played for a fool, however it would be stupid to miss the chance of overpricing a sale. After all, Ahmed agreed to pay whatever tradesman would ask for. Any other time this little charade would amuse Ahmed, but today it only irritated him "I asked for a price" he said with a tone that left no room for further talk.

The tradesman sighed. "Sixty silver coins"

Ahmed smiled. It was too high price even for the horse such as this, but arguing would cost him much more.

"All right, but one more thing, I need you to take care of my mule for a few days until I get back and I assume it will be included in the price of the horse" he looked heavily at the tradesman.

Not believing in his luck tradesman agreed.

"Fine then" Ahmed said ready to go "I'm going to the market to buy few things. I'll be back in a short while."

"Should I prepare the horse?"

"Yes. Thank you."

With that Ahmed left. It took him an hour to sell one of the stones and to buy the necessary supplies. He was relieved to see that nobody paid much attention to him and even the jeweller assumed that Ahmed

was selling some family heritage, which wasn't such an unusual thing. So without any incident he returned to the stable, where he found his horse ready and waiting for him. He paid up sixty silver coins, after which he walked to his mule put his hand on the side of its neck and said "I'm sorry my friend but I'll have to leave you here for couple of days. I'll come back, don't you worry"

The mule responded with a nod. Ahmed turned to the tradesman "You take good care of him. I'll be most displeased if I don't find him in good health"

"Don't worry master. I'll treat him like a prince's horse."

Five minutes later Ahmed galloped out of village at full speed. The distance he spent an hour to cover on a mule took him only quarter of that time to do on a horse. And yet, he was pressing harder and harder. He couldn't explain why, but he had a terrible feeling that he was too late and something bad had happened. The closer he was getting to the camp, the worse he felt.

By the time he got close enough to see the camp from the distance, he was sure that his worst fears were true, so when he saw a group of men moving around the tent he was not surprised. Pushing his horse even harder, Ahmed made it run faster. He could hear by the sound the horse made that it went over its limit and won't be able to keep such speed for long.

Dismissing that fact Ahmed continued to push it when he saw that men finally noticed him. Pointing to his direction several of them picked up their bows and soon enough arrows started to fly towards Ahmed. The first bunch ended up nowhere near where he was, but as Ahmed was closing up arrows started to fly closer. He suddenly felt sharp pain in his right leg, but without even one glance he continued to ride at full speed. Shortly after, another one hit him in the shoulder followed by two more, one in the stomach one in the chest. He was only thirty feet away and yet another one hit him in the chest again.

A moment later he drove through the group of men like a bull through the crowd. And while the horse was riding through, Ahmed jumped off it aiming at the centre of the group, taking down six men with him. Before any of the raiders could understand what was happening, ten of them were lying on the ground torn or broken. There was nothing human in Ahmed anymore he became like a wounded bear. With arrows sticking out of him, he started to tear apart anyone whom he could get his hands on. In a blink of an eye Ahmed managed to kill five more men, when he saw his wife and daughters lying on the ground. With a terrible cry he leaped to them and started to crawl around shaking and hugging one after another. His cries gradually turned into unbearable howl. Having realized that this was no man, with yells of fear the raiders made a run in different directions, forgetting about their horses.

Ahmed started to feel that life was leaving him. Mortally wounded he fought fifty men with such force, that only God could tell how many more he would kill

before bleeding out, but now, seeing that he lost everything has done the trick. He sunk heavily onto the ground and before his eyes closed forever he saw a bright light and with that came realization: all the terrible things that happened weren't true. That it was only a bad dream and his family is all right, his wife as usual is preparing a breakfast in the kitchen, his daughters helping her and his son is getting ready to go to his training to become a blacksmith.

With a smile on his face Ahmed released his last breath.

9

Ghost of the boy

Atlai woke up from the feeling of suffocating. At first, he could not understand where he was and only after starting to move around did he realize that he had a bivouac fall on top of him. Still feeling weak,

Atlai with an effort made his way towards the light that was beaming through narrow gap in between the material. Once he managed to crawl out from underneath the bivouac, he got up and looked around. What he saw did not make him scream, did not make him run, it simply froze him in one place, much the same as seeing a dark man did in his dream. That very instant reshaped Atlai's soul, in a way that made him detached from everything that made him normal. One moment he was a boy with boyish dreams, boyish fears and boyish reactions to the world and the next moment he became like an empty vessel, alien to everything around, without an ability to express himself.

What Atlai saw would give shiver even to the most experienced fighter who spent most of his life dealing with death. About twenty bodies were lying on the ground. Some of them appeared in a terrible state with torn chests, ripped out throats or ripped off arms. But that was not what captured Atlai's attention. It is seeing the bodies of his family that made him the way he was. His father was lying with his face up to the sky with arrows sticking out of him all over. Not far off laid his older sister and his mother with their dresses lifted revealing parts of their bodies that Atlai had never seen before, which, even to someone as small as Atlai, gave an idea what his mother and sister went through before they died. His little sister laid not much further from them with her neck twisted in unnatural position.

Atlai stood there, looking at them, feeling nothing inside. His eyes empty and emotionless belonged not on a boy of ten, but on some lifeless doll. After standing like that for few minutes, he started to move mechanically, appearing more like a device than a human being. He walked to the cart, which was turned upside down with its wheels sticking up into the air. Effortlessly he put it to the correct position. Five minutes ago Atlai was still weak from his fever, but now he became someone who could lift up a cart that weighted hundred pounds like it was an empty bag.

Finding what he was looking for, which happened to be a shovel his father took when they left home, Atlai started to walk toward the bodies that were once his family. Few feet away from them, he started to dig a hole in the ground. He moved robot-like, impassive, cold, but determined. It seemed as if he could dig like that days in and days out. He did not breathe heavily; in fact he hardly seemed to breath at all.

What would take a strong man a couple of hours to dig out, took Atlai forty minutes to do. It was a hole nine feet deep and nine feet wide and it was more than enough for four bodies. No animals would be able to dig them out. In any case, they wouldn't have to, with all the food lying around. It took even less time for Atlai to bury his family, after which he didn't bother to initiate a burial ground with anything, he just tossed shovel aside and started walking toward the village

from where his father came not so long ago.

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Some of the raiders were brave enough to come back for their horses, but what they saw made them so uneasy, that none of them dared to come any closer. And so they watched the scene from the distance, whispering silent prayers. They saw a little boy, walking around the slaughter field among the bodies with unsettling disregard for the dead. And something funny was about the way the boy was moving. Not laughing funny, scary funny. It was like watching a ghost who had no business among living, only among dead and in that respect living had no business seeing it. Very quietly, as carefully as possible, raiders started to back up, fearing that the boy would turn his face in their direction, fearing of what they might see in his eyes. Long after that day they still talked of a ghost of the boy who came to collect his parents.

Body of the screaming man

Michael Gordon was running down the stairs, still not sure of what he just heard. News of Al Hassani's death was at least shocking, if not to say unbelievable. Of course, what first came into his mind was that the third party, the one that Michael suspected to be the reason for his failure to capture Al Hassani, initiated their own operation to eliminate Al Hassani altogether. In fact, it was the only explanation he could think of, which didn't mean it was a good one. Something was amiss; Michael could feel it in his guts. He became more convinced of that, the second he saw Jim's face.

Jim Harrison was the commander of the special search unit that was responsible for investigating and following hot trails, if any presented themselves. Jim was mostly an independent employee, answering only to Michael. The purpose of that was to release a search unit from wasting their time on writing numerous reports. Jim's team was the bloodhound of the Agency with authorization, if need so, to engage and to bring down the enemy by any means necessary. Out on the street search team was on its own, without any back up, or any contact to the headquarters. So, after being on the job for seven years, it was safe to say that Jim had seen it all. Michael never saw him look nervous for any reason. Not until today.

Jim waited for him in front of the entrance to the morgue with pale face. His eyes, usually straight and cool were restless now, unsure. That made Michael uneasy: "What's going on Jim?"

"You better see for yourself." his voice was shaken, which didn't make Michael feel any better.

He went inside with Sam and Jim following him. Three of them followed through the long corridor until they came to the metal door with smart card lock. Michael slid his identity card through the gap in the lock and the door opened. The room was of the average size, about twenty six square meters, absolutely empty with a big two-way mirror that covered almost an entire wall and through which it was possible to see the room on the other side of it. The second room appeared to be a bigger version of the first one with two differences. It contained two tables, a big operating one, right in the middle and a small one that stood on the left side of the wall, with medical tools on it. The other difference was that there were drawers for the bodies; build into the right side of the wall.

Michael stopped in front of the two-way mirror and looked at the operational table. He could clearly see that there was a body lying on it, but the Agency's coroner Ray Costello blocked his view, so Michael could only see the lower part of the body. Just when he was about to buzz in and tell Ray to move out of the way, he stepped away to the smaller table to get some tools revealing the rest of the Al Hassani's body. Michael stopped breathing. What he saw shocked him to his very core. The dead man lying on the table looked unnaturally alive with an expression of the horror on his face. And the most disturbing part was that, although Al Hassani looked alive, yet remained motionless. Michael

felt as if he was looking at vividly clear three dimensional picture that was taken while the man was screaming. Michael could almost hear his scream. And how he wished he didn't!!!

"His eyes are not dead" Jim's voice broke in like through the dream.

Michael said nothing. Instead he heard Sam asking "What do you mean?" his voice was so frightened, that it belonged more on a boy of ten than on a grown young man.

Without turning his head Jim replied "I've seen many dead men, who died in many ways: some with pain, some with happy smiles. I've seen men who died of fright with fear still imprinted on their faces. But none of them looked anything like this. Their eyes were dead and as horrible as they looked, those were just masks. After the first shock has passed you realize that it's nothing but a dead man, an empty

vessel. This one looks like he's still alive, still somewhere in there" he motioned with his head toward Al Hassani's body "living, feeling, SCREAMING"

With an enormous effort, Michael broke his gaze from the table and turned to Sam "Sam, you can go now"

But Sam just stood there, with his mouth opened, with eyes about to pop out of its sockets, not hearing what Michael was saying to him. He couldn't take his eyes off Al Hassani.

Michael walked to him, took him by the shoulders and

with a vigorous shake yelled "Snap out of it, Sam"

Sam looked like he has just came out of the state of hypnosis - unaware of what was happening around him. It took him a few moments to recover and when he was finally able to speak he said "I'm sorry sir I don't know what's got over me". It looked like he didn't remember anything that happened over the last five minutes: not seeing the body of Al Hassani, not hearing Jim's talk, as if his subconscious blocked the memory of terror stormed through him a moment ago. His frightened face was replaced by his usual face of a determined intelligent young man.

Michael relaxed a little "You can go Sam" he told him softly like talking to a child.

"Yes sir" Sam replied and left the room without looking back.

Michael turned to Jim with a grim face "Damn it Jim, did you have to spook him so badly? I thought he was having a seizure or something"

Jim robed his face with his hands. He looked tired and confused. "I didn't mean to. It just slipped out"

"What in the hell happened? How did you find him? Where?"

Jim looked him in the eyes "Have you ever been at the meat-packing factory? I've been once, my father worked there. One time he showed me a room full of minced meat. I didn't like it, not one bit. It's not the

same as seeing a kilo of that stuff in a shop. It was lying all over the room and you could tell how many living creatures have been killed to produce that much." He smiled in the next instant, but there was no humour in his smile. "I used to imagine that the whole cow was lowered into mince maker, alive. I even had nightmares about it. Man, did that scare me. My father never took me to his work after that, you know." Jim's eyes suddenly became empty. "The place where we found the bodies reminded me of that room. Only of course it was much worse, because it wasn't cow's meat, it was human's. Must've been fifteen people chopped to mince. Rotten..." he shook his head "You should've seen that place, Mike. I will never forget it. Two of my men who went inside with me got violently sick. They are hospitalized now. Only years of experience saved me from the same fate."

He fell silent for a moment, then said "That's where we found them. As for what happened...I have a hard time getting rid of the image of the room from my head, let alone try to imagine what could've done it."

Michael waited to make sure that Jim said what he had to say and only then asked "Them? Who's 'them'?"

“There was the second guy. I think he is still alive. At least he was, when I dragged him out. He didn’t look too good though. Looked like he was out of it, you know. I assume he is upstairs in the hospital.” Jim rubbed his face with his hands again.

Michael started to get concerned “Jim, are you all right?”

When Jim turned to look at him, Michael noticed that he looked older and wondered if he looked older himself. “Why don’t you have a few days off? It’ll do you good”

“If you say so” without saying anything else, he walked out of the room.

Michael frowned, turned to the two-way mirror again and noticed that Ray Costello was strangely unaffected by Al Hassani’s appearance. It gave Michael some confidence and with that he moved to the door on the far side of the wall that led into the next room. When he walked in, Ray turned to face him and the confidence Michael was able to master by seeing Ray’s calmness was gone. He could see straight away, that only Ray’s professionalism kept his emotions at bay. His eyes however told Michael that Ray was on the edge of losing control of them.

Michael frowns deepened “What’s the verdict, Ray?”

“Looks like he died of shock. And if so, this is the weirdest case I’ve had so far.”

“How’s so?”

“Well, the body clearly exhausted, which contradicts with the shock theory.”

Michael nodded “If something scared him to death, when did he have a time to get exhausted?”

“Exactly. But I’ve been a coroner for twenty five years

and I’ve never known anyone to scream himself to death. This is an abnormality if you ask me.”

“So what do you think happened to him?”

“You know me Mike. I’m a rational person, a man of science, forgive me for such a cliché remark. But even I have to admit that this is not a regular death we have here. You know what I mean?”

Before Michael could answer Ray continued “I mean no rational explanation applies here, at least not straight away.” He looked over the body on the table “Whoever has done this to him, was no ordinary criminal either.”

Michael scratched the side of his nose, looking more lost than ever ‘that doesn’t explain a lot’ he thought.

“When do you think you’ll be able to give me the full report?”

“It should take me a couple of hours, if I get right on it. Let me assure you, I want to be done with this as soon as possible. This corpse is creeping me out.”

“You and me both, buddy. When I saw him lying like that I was on a verge of running out screaming ‘mama’.”

Ray laughed. And although his laugh was genuine, Michael still felt a hint of nervousness.

Nonetheless, to hear it made him feel a little bit easier

“I don’t have to tell you how important this is. Do I Ray?”

“They all are”

“This one’s special”

Ray looked at him condescendingly “You go on now. I’m sure you have better things to do, than standing here telling me how to do my job. As soon as I’m finished, I’ll let you know.”

Michael wanted to say something else to make his point, but thought better of it: “Ok Ray. Thanks”

He saw Ray nodding in response without taking his eyes off his work and walked out.

11

We’ll need a whole new report

Making his way upstairs to the hospital wing, Michael was trying to make the sense of what happened. If before, the theory of the third party involvement was unconvincing, now it was more of the ridiculous sort. No drugs he knew of could have done that to a man. Besides, why would they need to kill Al Hassani in that manner? To make an example of it? That was not the Agency’s style. If anyone had to be taken care of, it was done with all the discretion possible. USA had to remain democratic, civilized and just in the eyes of others. So it was not the doing of someone within the Agency. There must be some other explanation, but right now he couldn’t think of any.

Hospital was located three stories above the morgue, on the right wing of the building. As Michael was not fond of elevators it took him a few minutes to get there. He walked to the reception, greeting the nurse who was sitting behind the desk “How’s your day been so far, Carol?”

Carol Spenser was a fifty five years old woman, who worked as a nurse for more than half of her life putting her two kids through college. Ten years ago she was given an opportunity to work as the head nurse for the USA embassy in The Kingdom and that’s what she has been doing up till now and gained a great respect from others. Even the most experienced doctors regarded her opinion highly. She was an authority figure that should not be dismissed lightly. Michael knew that, so he stopped to chat, to find out what she had to say about the guy Jim brought along with Al Hassani’s body.

“Could’ve been better, but it’s nothing new.” She looked up at him and her eyes grew with concern. “You look pale. Are you feeling all right?”

“I didn’t have enough sleep lately, but it’s nothing new.” Michael smiled trying to put her mind at ease.

Carol didn’t buy that “You have to rest Michael. There is not much you can do from here and the way you treat yourself, I can tell that’s where you’ll end up pretty soon.”

“Well, unfortunately they don’t pay me to sleep.”

Carol lowered her eyes looking at the papers “That’s what the last guy working in your place said” she looked up again “we both know what happened to him.”

Sedrik Stravinski was the head of the Agency’s headquarters in Saudi Arabia before Michael, ending up with the nervous break down. Doctors said it was caused by work overload. Michael knew that, but he

also knew that the guy was a pussy who wasn't cut out for the job. It was the job for an experienced field agent, someone who has been in a lot of battles, someone like him.

"Yeh, the guy's retired. So?"

Carol snored a laugh "What are you after, Michael?"

"Did you see the guy who was brought here about fifteen minutes ago?"

Carol stiffened "Yes."

"What do you think?"

"The guy is gone. He's a breathing dead."

"What do you think could have cause that?"

Carole shrugged "Some sort of shock. In this case probably a big one. He's down in thirteenth. There's a guard by the door, an unnecessary precaution if you ask me."

"Thanks Carol. We have to get together sometime, you and me." Michael smiled.

"You go sleep it off."

Michael followed down the corridor towards the man standing at the far end. As he came closer, he recognized him. It was a young black guy, six feet tall, a USA army recruit who has been here for a year or so. His name was Franklin. Michael forgot his last name, but he remembered that he was from Brooklyn.

"Is everything all right?"

Guard saluted him "Everything's fine, sir"

"Take it easy Frank." Michael looked inside to see a young Arabian doctor and a nurse examining a patient in whom he barely recognized Al Hassani's nephew, Sayeed Bahar, his second in command, who eventually would have become his successor.

Michael tried not to show his surprise. Still looking through the door's window he asked "How you've been doing Frank? Miss home?"

The soldier relaxed a little bit "Yes sir. Very much so. I hope I'll be able to visit my family for Thanks Giving."

Michael smiled and turned to look at young man "Sure you will" he said very well aware that he probably wouldn't.

"How long doctor's been in there?"

"He just got here, about two minutes ago"

"You're doing a good job Frank. I'll put in a good word for you to your superior."

"Thank you, sir"

When Michael walked into the patient's room, young doctor turned his head to see who it was. "May I help you? Actually you're not supposed to be here, this is a patient's room." He was speaking with a slight accent.

"Hi, my name is Michael Gordon. I am the head of the security for the US embassy", which was his official position. "I've heard that you have one of the prime suspects for bombing attempt at the embassy."

"Well I don't know anything about that. I'm still examining him, so could you please wait outside."

Michael looked at Sayeed and saw only the resemblance of the young fellow with cold, dangerously intelligent eyes, he saw on a photo. Instead, there was sitting unresponsive, much older version of Sayeed Bahar with the eyes that were blank now.

"Of course Doc. I'll wait outside. I needed to speak to you, really."

He walked out and saw Frank standing in the same position as before. "Tell me Frank, why did you join the army?"

"I didn't have much of the choice, sir. My parents aren't rich enough to send me to college. So it was either to get a job and stay in my old neighbourhood or this. I chose army."

"You didn't like your neighbourhood?"

"Well not exactly, sir. Don't get me wrong, I miss my home very much, my family, my friends. It's just when you thinking that you'd have to do the same thing every day for the rest of your life, without any prospects of a change, it kind of scares you, you know."

"Stability is not that bad of the thing, kid"

"To appreciate it, you've got to have it otherwise first"

Michael looked him closely "You are a smart young

man, Frank. It's a shame you didn't get to college. Why didn't you try harder anyway? There are other ways to get there. You could get a scholarship; I'm assume you're good at sports"

"It's a common mistake people make when looking at me, sir" Frank smiled "But the fact is I never was good at sports. Didn't have an edge for it. Never saw the importance of winning."

"Strange attitude for an army man, wouldn't you say?"

"Protecting my country is a little more important than winning a game, but that's just me"

Michael smiled "As sorry as I am to know that you wouldn't become a big shot and make some changes for the better, I'm feeling much safer with you on a watch."

Frank's smile widened revealing almost all of his teeth "I wouldn't be good at being a big shot either, sir. You have to be a sportsman for that."

Michael nodded. Through the glass in the door he saw the doctor was done with the examination and about to come out. He looked into young soldier's eyes and asked "What's your last name Frank?"

"Dinkins, sir"

“I’ll definitely remember you. Keep up the good work.”

“Thank you, sir. It was nice talking to you”

As Michael walked towards the window at the end of the corridor he thought ‘I’ll see to it that this kid will get to spend Thanks Giving at home even if I’d have to go through Washington.’

The door of the patient’s room opened and interrupted his thought. He saw the doctor was looking around for him. “Doc, I’m here.” Michael called.

The Doctor started in his direction and as he came close enough Michael could see his puzzled eyes “How is he, Doc? Would I be able to question him? Can he talk?”

“Well, the answer to your last question is no. As for the rest I can’t be sure”

“How do you mean?”

“His body functions are normal and putting aside the fact of water and food deprivation he is physically healthy. The problem lies in his mental condition.”

Michael frowned. He didn’t like what he was hearing “Could you elaborate, Doc, what you’ve said now doesn’t tell much to me.”

The doctor patiently started to explain “Whatever happened to him caused a severe mental breakdown. I’m not an expert of course, but it seems to me that he has completely lost the sense of reality. He doesn’t react to his surroundings whatsoever. Put simply, he’s gone.”

It took Michael a great deal of effort to keep his disappointment from bursting out of him “Is it permanent?”

“Oh, I don’t think I’m the person to make a judgment in this case”

Michael tried to remain calm, whereas all he wanted to do was to shake this shiny kid and yell ‘I don’t care what you think. Tell me what I want to know’. Instead, he said with a cold voice “I’m not going to hold you responsible for your answer, I’m sure as hell will get an expert opinion on this, but right now I’m asking you, what do you think, is it permanent?”

Something in Michael eyes made the young doctor recoil. Looking frightened he started mumbling “I can’t really ...there’s just no way to tell...without proper examination.”

Michael could see that he scared him and right now it was not productive, so he regained his easy going charm and spoke softly “Take it easy, Doc. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. It’s just that it will help me a lot. You know that it will take a lot of time to bring an expert here and I need to find some explanation to what happened, that explanation has to be based on something. Please Doc, it’s very important.”

Doctor eased up a little bit “You must understand Mr.. ahh?”

“Gordon, Michael Gordon. You can call me Michael.”

“Yes, thank you. As I was saying Michael, you must understand that whatever my opinion is, it is not substantial enough to base a solid theory on.”

“I know. But you are a doctor and your opinion counts.”

“Ok. From what I could see the patient has gone through some shock, serious enough to send him into catatonic state. He’s absolutely unaware of anything that’s happening around him. If you stick a pen in him he wouldn’t respond. Now, you must understand Michael that for me to predict when he’d get out of it or whether he’d get out of it at all, of course, is impossible. He might get better tomorrow, or he may never get better. Do you know what I mean? In cases like this, even an expert can’t be a hundred percent certain. But obviously an expert can give a proper analysis.”

Michael shook his head slowly from side to side thinking ‘More disappointments. It’s not getting anywhere.’

“What could have done this to him? Do you have any thoughts?”

“We can guess forever.”

“Could it be drugs of some kind?”

“It is possible, but he had to be on a strong dose for quite a while.”

Another dead end. Michael knew that Sayeed was not

on drugs. Something has been done to him and Al Hassani and done not too long ago.

“Could it be some strong hallucinogen?”

“Not that I know of.”

“How long has he been like this, can you tell?”

“No. I’m afraid there is no way to tell.”

“For how long he’s been starving?”

The doctor took a few seconds to think about the answer “At least three days.”

There was nothing else for Michael to ask. It was true, the doctor didn’t know much. “Thank you, Doc. Sorry if I was harsh before.”

“That’s quite Ok. Sorry I couldn’t be more helpful.”

The young doctor turned and walked away. Michael waited while he was gone and started to make his way back to the office, nodding to Frank as he passed him in the hallway. He knew what had to be done now. He hated this part, but could not put it off any longer. As soon as he walked into his office, he picked up the phone and dialled the number. It was about thirty seconds before he heard Harry’s voice on the other line. “Harold Peterman on the phone.”

“It’s me.”

“Is something wrong? Is there a problem with the report?”

“We’ll need a whole new report now. Al Hassani was found dead.”

There is some hope after all

There was a heavy silence on the other end. Then very carefully Harry spoke "Come again."

"They found him about an hour ago. Him and his nephew. Not a nice picture. The nephew is alive, but he might as well be dead."

"Wait, wait, wait Al Hassani is dead?"

"As Julius Cesar."

"You told me he has figured out the whole operation and did so no more than four days ago, now you're telling me that he's dead?"

"Hey, I'm just as shocked as you are."

There was silence again. "Do you have any idea what happened?"

"None"

"Listen Michael, that's just too many screw ups for such a short period of time."

A wave of anger hit Michael "Don't you try to pin it on me. I'm not the one who involved an unnecessary number of people into the operation." Michael's voice was cold. Harry could feel that he has pushed too far.

"Alright, there is no point in arguing. The question is - what happened?"

Michael calmed down. "Like I said, I don't know yet. I need more time. How long can you give me?"

"They are waiting for the report about operation failure. It's already late. There is simply no time."

"I thought I had ten hours?"

"Well, yes. It was two hours ago. You think you can manage everything in eight hours?"

"I don't know" Michael said with irritation "I'm still waiting for the autopsy report. And I need to find a psychiatrist for the nephew."

"Can't he talk?"

"No. Not now."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I have no idea. He's in some kind of shock. He's drooling. I have to find an expert to get him to talk. Listen Harry, I have to go. Try to buy me some time, will you."

"I can't promise anything, but I'll try. And Michael," he fell quiet for a second; "if we can't make this right, we're both history."

“I know” just as he hanged up the phone, he heard a knock and Sam’s voice asked for permission to come in.

“Yeh, come in Sam.”

When the young man came in, Michael couldn’t help but feel jealous. Sam seemed to forget all that nasty business with Al Hassani and looked as fresh as ever, whereas he felt old and tired.

“What is it Sam?”

“Jim Harrison has just called. He forgot to tell you, sir, that they found a camera in the room. He sent it in, it should be here shortly.”

Michael felt a rush of excitement ‘there is some hope after all’. He knew that Al Hassani had a habit of taping his interrogations and if Michael was lucky enough, the camera recorded what happened in the room.

“Thank you Sam. As soon as it arrives bring it in. And Sam, find psychiatrist, someone with a lot of experience.”

“Yes, sir. There is one more thing, sir. Saudi police uncovered the crime scene. It’s their investigation now.”

“Yes. Up until Saudi intelligence takes over. It doesn’t concern us very much Sam, but thank you anyway.”

Michael watched the young man closing the door behind him, as he dived into deep thoughts again.

13

“What in a hell is going on?”

The camera arrived fifteen minutes later. When Sam brought it in Michael asked: “Is there any luck with the psychiatrist?”

“Not yet, sir. I’m still on it.”

“Ok. Just make it your priority.”

“Yes, sir”

Michael waited until he left and started to connect the camera to a TV standing in the corner of the room. It didn’t take long to do that and few minutes later Michael was looking at the table that stood solitary in the empty room with a dark figure, whose face was covered by a shadow, sitting behind it with hand spread across. And then he heard an unpleasant squeaky voice coming from behind the camera “You will talk Mister Gordon, I can promise you that”

Michael stopped the camera, thinking he misheard. He rewound it and played it again. The unpleasant voice spoke from the TV speakers “You will talk Mister Gordon, I can promise you that.”

“Mr. Gordon”.... was Al Hassani talking to him? He assumed it was Al Hassani, who was the owner of the voice behind the camera. But regardless, it was his name that was spoken. Was this a message to him? Michael continued to watch the recording, but nothing came to the view, nothing has changed. The dark figure was still sitting behind the desk when a sudden scream came out of TV. Michael jumped

away from it, covering his ears. He heard people scream before and those screams were no music, but this was something else. It was a scream of the soul coming from beyond this world. Michael rushed to his TV and turned off the volume.

His hands wouldn't stop shaking. What could have possessed a man to scream like that? What was this tape anyway? Michael slowly turned his head and looked at the dark figure on the screen, still sitting behind the table in the same position. Something was very wrong about it, very scary. How could he not see it straight away? Michael could not look at it anymore, but when he was ready to turn the camera off, the figure disappeared, like it's never been there before. Michael quickly started to rewind the recording, but there was no one sitting behind the table any more. He turned camera off, rewound to the beginning of the recording and turned it on again. The chair was empty. There was no one sitting behind the desk now. 'I must be losing my mind'. He shook his head and pressed fast forward.

It took him fifteen minutes to fast forward three hours of tape, but the picture never changed. The same room, the same table and empty chair. He turned volume up, only slightly, but it was enough to hear the horrible scream. Michael didn't need to rewind the recording to know that scream continued throughout the entire tape. The image of Al Hassani's after death look popped into his head. It was the whole picture now. He could actually see Al Hassani screaming.

It took Michael a great amount of effort and quite some time to calm himself down. But even after that, he still couldn't think straight. This whole business just didn't make any sense. And what about his name, he distinctly remembered Al Hassani saying his name on the tape. Something was telling him that Al Hassani was addressing the dark figure behind the desk when he spoke his, Michael's name. He didn't know how he knew this, it was the most illogical explanation. To think that there was someone else by the name of Gordon in Riyadh, as unlikely as it seemed, was more logical. But no, Michael knew deep down that Al Hassani thought of the dark figure as him. And knowing that scared Michael badly, because from the same deep place within him, rose the certainty in the fact that it was the dark figure that made Al Hassani scream in such a horrible way.

Michael was a hard man to throw off the balance, but even in rare cases it happened, he was able to regain his feet quickly. It took much longer to do it this time and although after a while he could gather his thoughts again, he was positively sure that this Al Hassani business will be his undoing. Nonetheless, Michael was not the kind of the man who would go down without a fight. 'I have to show this tape to someone else', the question was to whom? Jim was a wreck; he wouldn't be much of the help. Someone from his staff? He didn't trust anyone enough to include in such a delicate matter. Except perhaps Sam, but he was just a boy, smart one for sure, but a boy with no experience.

He was still deep in his thoughts when the telephone rung. It was Ray "Mike, it's me. I finished with this guy. I thought you might want to come down here. If not, I'll send you a report in half an hour."

'Well, there is my answer, why didn't I think of him before,' was Michel's first thought.

"No Ray, I'll come down. I need to show you something."

"Ok then, I'll see you soon."

"Yeh" Michael hung up and after remaining in his seat for few seconds, thinking, he stood up, walked to the television, unhooked the camera and walked out of his office.

Walking into the morgue room he saw Ray washing his hands. Michael looked around, but the body was nowhere to be seen. Ray must've put it in a drawer and for that Michael was very grateful. "Hey Ray"

"Hey, Mike" Ray turned to face him "I suppose you want to hear the autopsy report first?"

“It’ll make more sense.”

“Ok then. Well, I wish I could tell you that I found the answer to what happened to him, but unfortunately this case proved to be a mystery. It’s like we were afraid of. He died of exhaustion, not of shock.”

“But how can it be? You said it was impossible.”

Ray shook his head “Damn if I know. Like I said, I’ve

never heard of anyone scream himself to death. It’s impossible to explain medically. I can’t even imagine someone screaming for days before the life runs out of him. But what I know is that this guy didn’t die straight away. It took a few days. That, by itself, wouldn’t concern me very much, but his facial muscles were in the same position for quite some time, which suggests that he had been screaming non-stop for days before he died. And that, my friend, is scary.”

Michael kept quiet, even when Ray stopped talking. Finally he said “You need to see something. Do you have a TV set in your office?”

“Sure”

“Let’s go.”

Ray’s office was not far from the morgue room, only a few doors down the hall. It took them two minutes to get there. The office was much the same as Michael’s, with only one difference. It was an office of a doctor. Michael’s was an office of an agent. Michael waked over to television set and hooked up the camera. When that was done, without giving much warning to Ray he turned on TV.

At first he thought that he connected the camera incorrectly, but after checking the wires he found nothing wrong. He looked at television set but it showed nothing, the tape appeared to be blank. Thoughts that were racing through Michael’s head mainly came down to one ‘how can it be?’ He fast forwarded the tape. It was blank, all three hours of it.

Michael wouldn’t be who he was if he couldn’t keep his emotions at bay. So even though the waves of panic and confusion were hitting him one after another, it was impossible to tell it by his face. He got up and turned around to see Ray looking at him questioningly. Michael smiled apologetically and said “Must be the wrong tape. Never mind I can show it to you later. Thanks Ray for getting back to me so quickly.”

“Well, that’s my job” Ray still looked concern “Are you all right Mike?”

“Yeh. It’s just that whole mess is getting under my skin, you know.”

“I’d give you advice to take a rest, but I know you won’t take it.”

“Thanks anyway.”

Ray nodded “You still want this report?”

“Just leave it for now. I’ll call you when I need it.”

“Ok. And Mike, just don’t sink too deep into this. I have a bad feeling about this case.”

“You and me both buddy. You and me both.”

Coming back to his office, he found Sam waiting in the corridor “Sir I found the specialist. His name is Batul Tohan he is the head of psychiatry department. He said he’ll certainly do the examination, but he suggested that the patient was brought to him.”

“Is he reliable?”

“I’ve checked his records, sir. He’s one of the best in the country. Studied psychology in Oxford University, earned his PhD on schizophrenia, worked in West London mental hospital for ten years as a psychiatrist. Then he moved back to Saudi Arabia and spent last twenty years running the psychiatry department of neurosciences in King Faisal Specialist Hospital.”

They both entered his office. Michael walked to the couch listening to Sam with half an ear. He sat heavily, releasing a sigh. “Good. Arrange for a couple of cars. One heavily guided send first in the opposite direction: Get Sayeed in the second car. Make it inconspicuous, put only couple of guys with him, no more.”

It was a standard procedure, nothing fancy. If someone was determent to get Sayeed this cover wouldn’t hold. But Michael had a strong feeling that Al Hassani’s organization was done for. There was no one who cared enough to go through the trouble of getting Sayeed out. Nonetheless, it didn’t hurt to take a small precaution.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sam, tell this doctor that I need him to do the examination right away. Tell him to call as soon as it’s over. I’ll come to the hospital myself. Sam, I want to be clear on this, I need this today, in a few hours from now if possible.”

“I understand, sir. I’ll get right on it.”

As soon as Sam left, he connected the camera back to his TV and turned it on. The same as in Ray’s office it showed blank tape. “What a hell is going on?” Michael said to an empty room. Maybe camera was programmed to erase the tape after the first viewing. Michael examined it and although the camera didn’t look like anything fancy, he could believe in such possibility, if not for one thing: he clearly remembered the dark figure first time he watched the tape, then it disappeared. And now this. There was too much strangeness going on, too much to explain it all rationally. He needed a rest. There was nothing he could do at the moment, but wait.

Michael went to the couch, laid down and closed his eyes, once again trying to fall asleep.

14

Man with the face of a shadow

For the first time in fifteen years Michael fell into a deep sleep. So Sam’s knock violently pulled him out of it. He sat bolt upright in amazement, not realizing what was happening. He rubbed his eyes trying to awake fully. Meanwhile, Sam was still knocking on his door.

“Yeh, yeh, Sam, come on in”

The young man came in “ The Doctor called, sir. He has finished with the patient.”

Michael looked at the watch on the wall. It was ten to five; he has been sleeping for three hours 'I was really out of it' this thought brought him back to reality. He looked at his young assistant and saw him waiting for the response.

"All right Sam. Thank you."

When Sam left, Michael got up rubbed his eyes again and walked across to the mirror hanging on the wall. The face of a tired old man looked back at him. Pale skin and red eyes that had a note of uncertainty in them, made him look ten years older than he was. For some reason it didn't shock Michael. Somehow, he was expecting to see exactly that. Maybe because he felt the same way he looked. 'It's time for me to retire. And I have a feeling it's going to be soon.' Michael took his jacket off the chair and left the office.

The hospital was not too far, but it took him about fifteen minutes to find Batul Tohan's office, which considering the size of the hospital, was quick. Michael knocked and walked into the waiting room. It was an average size with a desk standing in the far right corner and several chairs along the left wall. Behind the desk sat an elderly woman wearing glasses who was knitting. Assuming it was the secretary, Michael asked "Can I speak to Batul Tohan? He is expecting me. My name is Michael Gordon."

Woman responded with a heavy accent "Yes, go in." She showed him with her eyes to the door on her left. Feeling surprised Michael asked "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sure, go in."

Still confused Michael knocked on the door and said "Doctor Tohan. May I come in?"

From the other side of the door an intelligent, calm voice spoke in perfect English "Yes, please come in."

Michael walked in to the office, which happened to be only a little bigger than the waiting room. "I'm sorry Doctor that I am barging in unannounced, but your secretary told me to go right ahead."

"That is quite alright. Yasra is not paying too much attention to this kind of formalities. Please sit. I presume you came in regards to the patient you've sent to examine. I apologize for my rudeness, but I seemed to misplaced your name."

"Michael Gordon. And there is no need for an apology. I imagine that you have a lot of other things to worry about than remembering names of people, come out of nowhere with some queries."

Batul Tohan smiled. He was a man in his sixties with piercing eyes, a kind of a man whose mind only gets sharper with years.

"Well Mr. Gordon, I wish I had better news for you, but it seems that this man's condition is permanent."

Michael nodded "That's pretty much what I expected you to say. But maybe you have an idea of what happened to him. Was it some kind of drug?"

"No. I don't know of any drug that can do that. But even if it was some unknown newly developed medicine it's unlikely to have a permanent effect."

"So, what do you think happened? Because so far, the only answer I've got is that it was a shock."

"Yes, most definitely. Probably a case of severe fright."

Michael rubbed his forehead “Doctor Tohan, what I’m about to tell you is something that should stay only between us. It’s important for me to know that you understand that.”

The doctor frowned “I can assure you Mr. Gordon, that my professional integrity won’t allow me to discuss the matters of my patient with anyone. And if what you want to tell me doesn’t concern my patient, then I am not sure I want to know.”

“Please understand Doctor, I didn’t mean any disrespect. I need to talk with someone of your intelligence and experience. In order to do that, I need to give you some of the information that I am not allowed to share. I know a lot about professional integrity and in different circumstances I would never say anything, but I don’t have a lot of time and no choice in the matter. I just want you to know that.”

Doctor’s face relaxed “Ok Mr. Gordon. You have my word.”

It took a moment for Michael to start. He was not sure where to begin, what to tell and what to not.

“Few hours ago we found the guy you examined, along with a body of the man who seemed to scream himself to death.”

Michael expected some kind of reaction to his announcement, surprise, shock, anything. But the doctor remained absolutely unaffected. If he felt anything, Michael couldn’t tell it by his face.

“You know Mr. Gordon, it doesn’t surprise me in the way you thought it would. But it sure scares me, and I’ll tell you why. Back in the days when I worked for the West London Mental Hospital, I had a patient, well not exactly, let’s just say a sick man. When he was brought in, he was screaming.” The Doctor’s eyes become distant, like he went somewhere else “I still remember that scream..., horrible. I often hear it in my dreams.” He fell silent and after some time Michael had to clear his throat to draw the Doctor’s attention back to the story.

Batul Tohan blinked and then he was back in the room again “Yes, excuse me. Like I was saying, the man was screaming and nothing we could do would make him stop. And I do mean nothing: drugs, electroshocks... I believe we even tried to knock him out.” He smiled. “You’re an educated man Mr. Gordon, I don’t need to tell you how extremely bizarre that was. But I’m going to tell you what was even more unusual. I would even say impossible, if I didn’t witnessed it with my own eyes. How should I put it... the man wouldn’t eat or drink. We tried to inject necessary fluids to keep him alive. That didn’t help. It was as if we did nothing. For some unexplained reason his body didn’t recognize the injections. I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense, but I can’t explain it any better.”

“So what happened?”

“The inevitable. It took four days for him to dehydrate. Meanwhile he was screaming. We had to isolate him.”

“So you just watched him die?” Michael asked not believing what he was hearing.

“Not much we could do. I released my stuff from that case, because I saw not many of them could watch this man scream. I’ll be honest with you, it almost drove me insane and I can assure you I am used to the screaming; after all I worked in a mental hospital. Anyhow, I had to stay and watch him. I kept injecting him with drugs, proteins, whatever I could think of. Nothing worked.”

“You were going in by yourself?” Michael could not hide the incredulity in his voice. It was hard to imagine, that anyone could remain in the room with such a scream and what kind of devotion it took to do that.

“I gave an oath Mr. Gordon. You shouldn’t be so surprised. Every man has doubts about his own resolve, but when the time comes, most of us do what we have to. I am a strong believer that there are not too many cowards in this world.”

“Well, I don’t know if I could have done it. If the scream was the same as the one I’ve heard I wouldn’t last ten seconds in that room.”

It drew the Doctor’s attention “Oh, so you’ve heard it. Terrible thing isn’t it? Well, I hate to disappoint you but I wore ear plugs the whole time. It was hard to watch the man scream, let alone hear it.”

“Was this man violent, Doctor? Did he struggle when you were injecting him?”

“Strangely enough, no. In fact, he was motionless, as if he was not in his body.”

“Let me ask you Doctor and my question might sound strange, but humour me. Was this man a criminal?”

Batul Tohan leaned forward and looked him straight in the eyes. Michael suddenly felt as if he was under the x-ray. “It is a very strange question indeed. Now, why would you ask that? Is it because the man you found was one?”

Michael wasn’t sure whether to tell him or not and then thought ‘to hell with it’

“Yes, he was.”

The Doctor relaxed in his chair again “You know what’s strange, Mr. Gordon? I’ve asked myself the same question. Now, why do you think I did that? I mean, you knew the man you found was bad, but why I would assume that about the man that was brought to me?”

“I don’t know. Was he?”

“I have no idea. I just assumed he was. I even have my suspicion of who exactly he was. At that time the London’s police was looking for the serial killer who murdered seven children, brutally. They never found him. I suspect that screaming man was him.”

“Why, was there a connection?”

“Nothing logical, just this feeling, you know what I’m talking about?” he leaned on the desk again. “I want to tell you about a story my grandfather used to tell me right before the bedtime. As unbelievable as it may sound, it actually answers a lot of questions we just raised, so try to keep an open mind Mr. Gordon.” Batul Tohan looked closely at Michael, to make sure he was listening and then got up to walk to the window.

“The story took place many years ago, ten, twenty thousand, no way to tell for sure. Where exactly it happened is also unknown. But what my grandfather did say was that it was bad times back then; wars and raids were as common as minor car accidents for us. Anyone who managed to command more than three hundred men considered himself a lord, the ruler of the earth. Now try to imagine how bad it was, Mr. Gordon and when you do, triple it, quadruple.

The story tells that during that time, there was a man, whose family got killed horribly, by one of those warlords. This man went to the mountains and waged a war on everyone: on every raider, warrior, bandit that walked the earth. No one paid much attention to him, not even when he killed his first hundred. But after the second hundred and third, people started to talk and soon enough he became a legend. Nobody

actually saw him and that didn't matter, people started to gain hope, hope that there was a protector of the weak and poor, hope that there was a hero. Quickly people understood that they were wrong.

He did not fight for justice and order, he was just fighting. After he killed more than a thousand men, warlords started to plea for the truce realizing that otherwise the man would wipe them all out.

But even after they divided the territory and established order, killings did not stop. The man continued to hunt those who called themselves soldiers or warriors and no matter in what number they were, he would attack them appearing from nowhere. My grandfather said that no one knew exactly how many he killed, but it was thousands and among those thousands there were only few lucky ones who survived the slaughter. Even fewer of those survivors remained sensible enough to describe what happened. They spoke of nightmarish vision of the man who wore a face that was covered in blood so, it looked more like a shadow than a face. People started to fear him, women, children, poor and rich, everyone, with no exceptions. He became a monster, with whom mothers would scare their children, so they would behave, about who men would tell scary stories, when they were gathering after work. They'd say he could appear anywhere at any time. People started to call him *man with the face of a shadow*.

Right around the time when these stories were created, mass killings had stopped. The man started to choose those exceptional ones who were truly rotten, who were spreading destruction without any reason, those who were truly lost. And when he would come to those men he would make them scream so horribly that people around them would run away leaving them screaming. Their horrible scream would be heard from far away and that would continue for days before it would stop. My grandfather told me it was believed that if a truly evil deed has been done the man would feel it, and he would come and the scream would follow."

Batul Tohan fell silent for a short while and then turning around, he asked "Does it sound familiar to you Mr. Gordon?" he looked at Michael and saw that he was staring at him with a face as white as paper.

As soon as Michael heard the description of the man the Doctor was telling the story about, the image of the dark figure he saw on the tape, popped in into his mind.

And then, a frightened thought ran through his head 'this story is real and the man in the story is that dark figure from the tape'. Then he heard the Doctor's voice, as if from afar, saying:

"Mr. Gordon, are you alright?"

Michael shook his head to shake the image off and regained his focus "I'm sorry Doctor, I was just hypnotized by your story for a second."

"Bull shit." Doctor was looking at him with that piercing gaze again that went right through Michael, as if trying to look inside his head. "You know whom I was talking about don't you, this man in the story? You see Mr. Gordon, I believe it is not just a bedtime story, I believe there is more real to it than we can imagine. And you just proved my point, because it seems to me you saw *the man with the face of a shadow*."

Michael tried to smile, to dismiss the whole situation, but his smile was weak and not convincing "I'm not sure what I saw Doctor, it was just for a second and it was in the tape that showed a dark room with someone too far to see. There was nothing mystical about it." He thought it was for the best to leave out the unexplained phenomena of the dark figure disappearing from the tape. "And I don't think that we should go on believing in some stories. I don't need to tell you how people tend to exaggerate, so even if there is some truth to the story your grandfather told you, I'm sure what really happened was much more ordinary."

Doctor Tohan nodded, walked back to his desk and sat down “By God I hope you are right Mr. Gordon, because I really don’t like to think that there is such a creature walking upon the Earth, even if it brings dark justice to those who deserve it.”

He got up and raised his hand to shake Michael’s “It was very nice meeting you, Mr. Gordon. I hope that I’ve been of any use to you, but I’m afraid I have to get back to my work now, I’m sure you understand.”

Michael rose from his seat and shook the Doctor’s hand “The pleasure is all mine Doctor. You’ve been most helpful and I appreciate it very much. I presume it would be alright, if I leave the man I’ve sent in your care?”

“Of course. I will continue watching him and if I notice some development I will contact you.”

“Thank you very much, doctor.”

When Michael was about to leave Batul Tohan called after him “Mr. Gordon.” And when Michael turned to face him he said. “I urge you not to get too close to what you seek. I know you won’t stop looking for the answer; you have that craziness about you that pushes you to find the truth; that makes you not believe in things until you see them with your own eyes. But I urge you, Mr. Gordon, do not get too close. There are a lot of things that are much worse to lose than your life.”

The Doctor gave Michael a meaningful look. A look that said to Michael more than any words ever could.

“Best of luck to you.”

“And to you Doctor.”

Michael left the office.

15

Retired

The clock showed midnight. Michael was sitting behind his desk, staring at the wall. There was a strange calmness about him, like he had no care in the world. Everyone left home long ago and the only light in the entire left wing of the building was coming from his window. Not an hour ago, he received a call from Harry. Michael was expecting it and pretty much the outcome of it as well.

“Michael” Harry fell silent. Michael already knew what he’s going to say next. “I’m afraid I have a bad news.”

“They are shutting us down?” Michael responded with calm uncaring voice.

“Pretty much. Sent me down to the first level, babysitting greenhorns. As for you, they suggested an early retirement would suffice.” Harry’s voice suddenly changed from harsh to apologetic “I’m sorry Michael. I did what I could, I really fought for you.”

“You shouldn’t have had, Harry. That is why they sent you down to the first level. We knew this could happen, there was no need for both of us to go down.”

“Ahhh.” Harry’s voice was back to harsh again “I did it for me, as much as for you. In any case, maybe it’s for the best. I don’t know about you but I’m tired of being underappreciated. Its time to rest.”

“You’re right.”

“What are you going to do now? Planning coming back home?”

“Don’t know yet. Maybe travel for a while.”

“Could be good for you. You’ll finally be able to sleep like a normal human being.”

“I guess you’re right. Listen Harry, can you do me one last favour?”

“Let’s hear it; if it’s in my power, you got it.”

“There is a kid name Frank Dinkins. He is in the US army here in the Kingdom. Can you arrange for him to visit home for Thanks Giving?”

“Well I imagine it should be easy enough. What did you say his name was Frank..?”

“Dinkins. Thanks Harry.”

“No problem. When you’re back at home, you’ll give me a call alright? We’ll get together.”

“For sure. And Harry.....Thanks for sticking up for me.”

“Ahhh. Don’t mention it. I’m sorry for the way things turned out. By the way did you find out what happened? Not that it’s any of our business now, but still.”

“Nothing Harry. Absolutely nothing. I’ve cracked my head with that case. Let someone else try. I’m out.”

“You’re right, to hell with it. I’ll see you soon, ok?”

“You bet. Take it easy, buddy.” He hanged up, feeling in his guts that it was the last time he heard Harry’s voice.

Michael was mostly unaffected by this conversation. He knew that it’s usually how it goes. You screw up one time and all your previous successes won’t matter. It didn’t bother him much that he was thrown out like a worn shoe. After all, he wasn’t doing his job for money, or career, or even for his government. He did it for his country, for the people. And considering that he succeeded most of the time, he felt good about retiring. What was bothering him, what was making him sit in his former office, staring at the wall, were the words of Doctor Tohan, that he wouldn’t be able to stop looking for the answer. And what was making him so calm and relaxed was the knowing of inevitable, knowing that the Doctor was right.

Part Two:

Becoming

The boy

The sun was high in the sky, showing the noon of what seemed to be an exceptionally hot day, unusual even for this part of the world, where hot summers were very common. Both streets of the village were empty and remaining few people that were outside, tried to stay in the shadows, moving as little as possible. The village was asleep, an only option in order to survive during hot summers of the desert. What work needed to be done, was usually taken care of in the morning, or in the evening. The Market's work schedule was pretty much the same- open before sun was in the zenith, closed until it was near the sunset.

That is why the boy, who was the only one still working outside, appeared as an incarnation of the solitude itself. The heat and the smell from manure, that would make the working conditions unbearable for anyone else, seemed not to bother the boy in the slightest, even though he was working directly under the sun. He moved methodically without slowing down, or going faster. He did not stop, even for a short while to rest, or simply to catch a breath. He just continued shovelling with an utterly emotionless face.

It has been five years since the brutal death of Atlai's parents and sisters. Nothing has changed since that day. He still remained an impassive boy who talked only when absolutely had to; limiting his responses to a few words that usually involved getting a job. And since Atlai was up to any task for practically nothing, his lack of communication skills didn't get in a way of finding work. Unfortunately, it wasn't always like this. There was a time when he had to beg for food. It was a hard time, as his unresponsiveness did not help him in getting the necessary sympathy from people. And more often than not, he was starving.

The first years he spent alone were the toughest and how he survived those years, without proper amount of food, living on the street through cold and heat, was a mystery. Mostly, people were avoiding him, seeing that there was something wrong with the boy. It had nothing to do with his mental state. The villagers have seen crazy people before, quiet as well as aggressive ones. But the boy was different; it was his eyes, more than anything else. They were empty, detached, hollow. And that was what scared people, because even the crazy ones had some emotions, something that made their eyes alive. The boy on the other hand, looked as if he was a walking dead.

Of course, there were people who were stupid enough not to notice this strangeness about him, who only saw an opportunity to take an advantage of a small boy, who only saw an easy target. But even those soon were losing their interest in Atlai. And no matter how much stronger or how many there were, it always ended up in the same way: with them leaving confused and scared. A number of times it was some perverted men who tried to make Atlai do things, then it was some drunks who thought it would be hilarious to see a boy crawling on his knees, barking. And one time it was a band of street bullies who were protecting their territory. None of them bothered him afterwards and it was not because

he has always been able to fight them off, in fact sometimes he had to take quite a beating. It was because of the way Atlai was fighting, emotionless, without any sound. No matter how badly he was hurt, he never made any noise. Not a sound of pain, or anger, or fright. He was just fighting, until the last drop of his strength, crawling if he had to. It was scary in the way that made any person, no matter how thick he was, to retreat. The fact that it took a lot to take him down didn't help either (he was unusually strong for a ten year old).

But it was all in the past now. People got used to him and since his strength tripled during the last five years, even the most fearsome criminals weren't crazy enough to touch him. As for the starving days, they were behind as well. Atlai was strong enough now to do the job that took five grown men to finish. And no matter how hard, or dirty that job was Atlai's price was just a meal.

So, at fifteen, Atlai was a lean boy, with a lot of scars, slightly underweight, not because he was starving, but because he was working off any fat before it had a chance to store itself on his body. In any other circumstances he would be a normal boy. Someone who has seen his fair share of bad things perhaps, but a boy nonetheless, with his own ambitions and interests. Unfortunately, that was not the case for Atlai. He was different. He did not look younger or older than his years because he had nothing written on his face and the scars were the only signs that suggested something about his past experience. In any other way, his face was blank.

--

Farid couldn't sleep. After tossing and turning in his bed for about half an hour, he finally decided to get up. Passing his daughters' rooms he stopped to check upon them. Since his wife's death he was overcautious and because it's been a little over a year, he has only now started to come around of being a single parent. Life wasn't easy for the three of them. They moved a lot for the past twelve months. They had to leave their home in the first place because it was too painful, too many memories about the life they have lost. And from that day on, they haven't stopped moving, changing village after village, city after city, not feeling at home anywhere. That was until they came to this place. And although it was not so different from many villages they have passed before, for some reason they liked it here and so they stayed. Farid had some savings, enough to buy a house and a mill that stood closer to the outskirts of the market centre, not far from the stables. The mill was in a good working condition and Farid figured, it would provide a good life for his daughters.

He went to the window to look outside and straight away saw Atlai shovelling manure into a cart, doing the job, Jamal was complaining, he couldn't hire anyone to do. And since he didn't want to do it either, especially in that kind of weather, he found someone who was agreeable enough even for such dirty, hard work. But that was not what was pissing him off; it was the fact that Jamal was abusing boy's obvious mental condition.

Farid frowned. He has been living in the village for a couple of months now, but even after a week he noticed

that kid was mistreated. Being a new resident, Farid felt that it was impolite to start poking his nose into matters that did not concern him. So he kept his thoughts to himself. Meanwhile, he asked around about the boy, but nobody could tell him much. Only that he came out of the desert five years ago, on his feet, without food or drink. He was pretty much the same when he came into the village, as he was now; the only difference was he didn't talk at all. A few men gathered and went to the desert to see what happened, to find with whom the boy was travelling. But they've returned after half a day with nothing and since there was no way the boy could have walked that distance without water, his arrival, like everything else about him, remained a mystery.

Farid could see right away, that there was something deeply disturbing about the boy. He never saw anyone so detached from his emotions and you didn't have to be a genius to realize, that something horrible has happened to him. What, of course, was impossible to tell, but it was not important. The important thing was that instead of trying to help the boy to get better, most of the people in the village didn't care or worse, took advantage of him. Although, in their defence Farid had to admit, that kid's look was frightening. He was not insane, he was something else, or better to say he was somewhere else. Nonetheless, he was a child and he deserved to have a normal life. If God forbid something should happen to Farid himself, he would feel hell of the lot better if he knew that his daughters would be cared for. And that's what was bothering him, the fact that people of the village so quickly gave up on the boy, just because he was strange. Yes, that's what was

bothersome. What made him angry, was seeing that some bastards like this Jamal, would actually use boy's condition for their benefit. It sickened him.

Farid was looking at Atlai, who worked under unbearably hot weather, doing the job no one else wanted to do and thought that the most the boy would get would be bread cheese and some water. He had seen that happen before. Many people in the village were honest enough to pay the boy a proper meal for a proper job, without underpaying him greatly. But there were some who didn't and Jamal was one of them. Farid knew for a fact that he has done it once before. He even heard him bragging about it to his friends, talking about how great it was, that the village had its own local idiot, who was ready to do anything for a piece of bread. He was laughing, while telling that he made the boy do the job that would have cost him ten copper coins to hire three men to finish. Whereas he got away with just giving this idiot kid some of his leftovers. Farid laid awake all night feeling sick with guilt for not saying anything that day.

He hardly spoke to Jamal after that, but for the past month he got to know him well enough to understand: that kind of the men hold grudges. And since he planned to stay in this village for good, he thought it would be unwise to make an enemy with your neighbour. That's how he felt until this afternoon and he finally had enough 'That about does it', he thought walking out into the outside heat. He walked straight to the boy and touched him on the shoulder "How are you? Nice weather for work."

Atlai didn't answer, just kept shovelling. The smell was awful and the heat made it so much worse. Farid was amazed at how the boy could take it for so long, it made him sick even thinking about doing such a job in such a weather. He tried again "You must be thirsty. Lets get inside, we'll have a drink."

Atlai was unresponsive.

Farid stepped in front of him, put his hand on Atlai's shoulder and tried to look him in the eyes. "You can stop boy. It's all right. Nothing will happen."

Atlai stopped and looked at him. Farid felt sudden cold and in the heat of the hottest summer he shivered. Just for a second, he saw himself falling into abyss. Atlai turned away and started to shovel again. A very strong urge of getting away from the boy overtook Farid. And he almost gave in, but then he realized that it was exactly what others did. If he was to walk away now, everything would stay the same and he, like everyone else would have to continue living in pretence that everything was normal.

It took him a great effort to look at the boy again "You don't need to do this anymore. I have a better proposition for you."

Atlai stopped, which encouraged Farid to go on, "Let's go inside and talk." He made a few steps toward his house, then stopped to look back; he saw that Atlai was looking at the house "Come on. I'm telling you, I'll make it worth your while. Besides, what can be worse than shovelling manure in a hot day like this?" He saw

Atlai throwing shovel away and starting in his direction.

When they went in, he led the boy into the kitchen and sat him behind the table. "Wait here I'll bring water." said Farid and went to the basement. When he came back, the boy remained exactly the same as he left him. He looked as if he was a doll, set by someone into a sitting position. With all this strangeness, the boy had another oddity, at which Farid couldn't quite put his finger on before. But now looking at him sitting like that, so aloof to everything around him, he realized that the boy hardly broke a sweat. And considering that he has done shovelling half of the pile, it was strange indeed. Farid frowned looking at the boy's chest. His breathing was as if he hasn't worked at all. Farid started to get really nervous. Who was that kid? Was he even a human? As silly as that sounded he would think twice now, before answering that question "You are doing this" he told himself and walked into the kitchen.

He set a glass in front of the boy, poured cool water from the jug and put it on the table. "Do you want something to eat?"

He waited, but there was no response.

“Silly question, of course you do. We’ve got some of pilaf. Let me get it. First you eat, and then we’ll talk.”

He went to the basement again. It took him a little longer this time. When he came back everything was the same.

The boy was motionless. The only indication that he had moved was the empty glass, which meant that he drank the water. Farid put the plate with pilaf on the table beside the glass and poured the boy more water. He also cut some bread and placed it on a side of the plate with pilaf.

Not saying anything Atlai stared to eat without any haste or any noticeable enjoyment. In fact he was eating the same way he was working or doing anything for that matter, mechanically.

Quickly enough Atlai emptied his plate, drank his water and ate his bread. Meanwhile Farid was looking at him and his worries about the boy were replaced by the pity for him. The boy so young should not have so much pain in his life. That was not right. He should have dreams, he should have joy, maybe some sad days but some happy ones as well. He should not be cold and emotionless like a rock.

When Atlai straightened in the chair Farid asked “Do you want some more? I have plenty.”

Atlai shook his head. It was the first sign of communication that Farid received from the boy and it surprised him so, that it took a great effort for him not to show it. Fearing that he might scare the boy off, he got up from a chair to hide his enthusiasm. “Come on then, I’ll show you your work place and home. That is of course, if you’ll agree to stay. By the way what is your name?”

The boy didn’t answer. Farid waited for a moment, saw

that he wouldn’t get it and dropped the matter for the time being.

When they got outside, Farid headed their steps towards the mill. It didn’t look so big from outside, but inside it looked big enough to fit ten carts. Mostly empty, with the great millstone right in the middle and huge log sticking out of it, the mill was built in the way that there would be enough space for a few harnessed mules to spin the great log around. The log went to the top, resting against the roof. On the left side, not far from the entrance, there was a wide structural shelf supported by wooden columns. Shelf went ten feet off the ground and to get on top of it you would have to climb the ladder standing next to the wall. The small stable was built in on the far side of the mill. That’s where Farid kept his mules. The big stack of hay was piled beside the stables and that pretty much concluded the interior, except for the wooden bench on the right side of the wall, opposite the shelf.

“Here we are,” Farid announced as they came inside “Not much to look at, but its doing the job just fine. You’ll be working here with me. There are always plenty of things to do around here. Making flour is not an easy job. But you’ll have a hot meal three times a day, some share of the profit of course and as for your accommodation, I’m afraid there is no room in the house, so you’ll have to live here. It’s still summer, so there would be no problem with the cold. Here” He walked to the ladder; climbed on top of the shelf and patted the wooden surface. “You can put as much hay as you’d need to make yourself comfortable. I know it’s not much, but for the boy of your age, it can be as soft as any bed. When the winter comes we’ll think of something.”

He looked at Atlai, waiting for him to respond, or better yet hoping for him to do so. The boy didn’t say anything, just kept looking around.

“Well, how about it? Do you agree?”

Atlai suddenly stiffened; his eyes grew large and in an instant they filled with so much pain, that it threw Farid into shock. For a few seconds everything froze. Farid was sitting on the shelf staring at the boy, who was standing, looking in the direction of the stable, with the first emotional expression that Farid saw on him. And if earlier he waited with anticipation for the boy to express any emotion, now he wished he'd never seen that look on his face. It was better before, when he was impassive and cold, because at least it left some room for speculations, that the boy's condition was not so bad, that it could be fixed. But now, seeing him with so much pain in his eyes that seemed to be able to fill the whole world, Farid understood how pathetic his attempt to fix him really was. When he finally came to his senses, he jumped off the shelf and hurried to the boy.

"What's the matter?" he tried to find what the boy was looking at and after tracing his stare he realized it was a mule, the one he bought from that bastard Jamal.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly.

Without saying anything Atlai went to the mule and hugged him. Then the strangest thing happened, he

started to cry. Farid was dumbstruck. Why would the boy cry, seeing some mule was beyond him, but for some reason he was relieved. To see his tears was better than to witness so much suffering on such a young face, so much pain that had no release. For the very first time he looked like a regular boy to him, maybe a grieving one, but a boy nonetheless.

Farid has seen people in grief plenty of times. In fact, he was one of those people, and so he knew that it was the best to let the boy be. There was nothing harder than to respond to people's sympathy, at such moments. He was standing, watching how the young kid, no more than fifteen, was crying soundlessly, sharing his grief with an animal. To Farid, he looked like the loneliest creature he has ever seen. Not able to bear looking at this scene of sorrow anymore Farid started to walk away. And then he heard the boy's voice that sounded as if it was coming from the person who fell out of practice of using it.

"My name is Atlai."

Years after, Farid was never ashamed to admit that he ran out of the mill afraid to look back and to see the boy's eyes.

2

New home

Everything fell into place pretty much straight away. Atlai turned up to be a great help. He was capable of working much longer than Farid and considering how fast he was learning the mill business, Farid was sure that they would be making more flour than he had ever dreamed of producing. Even now, they were doing twice more work than he did in the past on his best days. Farid was hoping that the boy would be more talkative after he was able to express his grief, but not much changed there. Atlai still hardly ever spoke and was only a little better in expressing himself than before. That didn't discourage Farid, as he believed that the boy has made a huge step in recovering and needed only to lead a normal life. All would be fine in time.

Nathifa, Farid's youngest, was quite taken with Atlai, which could hardly be said about Reema, his older daughter. In fact, she despised him, telling her father that he was a street beggar and how he expected her to make any friends if they became a laughing stock of the entire village for allowing this street rat to live with them. Farid had to have a serious talk with Reema and explain to her that good people would never judge them. As for the stupid and spoiled ones, they wanted nothing to do with them anyway. He had to remind her how bad they felt when her mother died and asked her to imagine how this young boy

was feeling being all alone in this world. That took some edge off Reema, but did not convince her entirely. She was still young

and losing her mother made her more egocentric than he wished for her to be.

Nathifa was a different story altogether. She was gentler, more compassionate, more feminine than her sister. She was ten years old and already taking care of most of woman's work around the house. Reema, although three years older, never had such sense of responsibility. Her only interest was in cooking and no matter how hard Farid tried to make her take some of the load off Nathifa, she could never do the job properly. In the end, his youngest had to redo everything. His attempt to teach Reema to work in the mill has failed as well. She wasn't good at that either. Soon enough he left her to her kitchen, since cooking was the only thing the girl was good at.

If not for one unpleasant incident, their life could be considered as good one under such circumstances. But as Farid suspected, taking Atlai under his wing did not agree with Jamal. Not long after he left Atlai in the mill to be by himself and was fixing the door of the cabinet, Jamal stormed into his house.

"What is this Farid? You're stealing my workers now?"

"I haven't stolen anyone"

"Then how do you explain that the kid's done only half of the work I've hired him for and is now sitting in your mill feeding the mule, which I by the way sold you only for half a price as a favour? And that's how you repaid me?"

"Now, calm down and lower your voice."

"I'll speak as loud as I'm damn pleased to. Now answer the question."

Farid gave him a cold stare "You will lower your voice when you speak in my house."

That stopped Jamal short, making him understand that his insolence wouldn't be of any benefit to him here.

Farid returned to his work saying "You're well aware how long it took me to break that mule. Nobody wanted to buy it from you, so you took advantage of your new neighbour and overcharged me for a mule that was useless for over a month. It's a miracle I was able to use this mule at all. So you didn't do me a favour, but in fact coned me and if I were you I wouldn't bring it up."

He looked at Jamal disdainfully "Now regarding the boy, I have a question for you. How can you call yourself a man after abusing a child like that? How could you make him work under such conditions?"

"It was the kid's wish to work during the day. I didn't make him. And besides I was going to pay him generously."

"Like you did last time?"

Jamal's face reddened "Now why don't you keep your nose out of other people's business? It'd be healthier for you."

Farid ignored his threat "This boy is my business now. Now go, I'm sure you can find your way out, since you seemed to find your way in fairly easy."

Jamal, having nothing to say furiously turned to walk away. And just when he was about to leave Farid called out “And Jamal, I won’t expect you to greet me anymore, so you don’t expect me to do so either.”

On that final note he let Jamal leave.

Thinking back now Farid had no regrets for what he had said and although what happened next was inevitable, he was sure he would do it again, given a chance. It’s like what his father used to say ‘if you went through life without making any enemies, that means you’ve been afraid to do or to say the right thing’. Nonetheless it did not make the scandal feel any easier when Jamal started to spread lies, accusing Farid of the very thing he was doing to the boy himself.

Rumours of Farid using Atlai as his personal slave spread fast. It didn’t cost him a friendship of the people who could think for themselves and whose respect was not an easy thing to gain. But unfortunately there were not many of those. Most of the villagers were indifferent, accepting this gossip as part of an entertainment of the day and after a little chat and disapproving sighs they soon were going about their business without a second thought. And of course, there were those who abused the boy in the same manner Jamal did, those ones took Jamal’s lies to a heart. It was easy, since it did take away their guilt making them innocent compared to what Farid allegedly did. It was

very convenient, having a fall guy to take all the blame. So they made sure that the rumour spread fast, each time adding to these lies a little something for their part.

Life went on. Everyone needed bread and Farid’s mill was the only one producing flour. With time gossips started to fade away and eventually no one cared anymore, not even spiteful minority who helped spreading them. No one, except for Jamal. As he saw that life went back to normal and Farid was unaffected by what village folks were saying about him, he grew more angry and vengeful. Farid’s business seemed only to grow bigger and the boy started to look better every day and Jamal’s every attempt to worsen Farid’s life was failing. Much too often the thoughts of destroying a lot more than just Farid’s reputation started to enter Jamal’s mind.

3

A friend

Nathifa was the one preparing the lunch today. As Farid went away on business for a few days, Reema was not cooking. She refused to make the slightest effort to welcome Atlai and although it was six months now, since the day her father took him in, she was still hoping that one day Atlai would go away.

“It’s not my job to cook for some stranger, who imposed on our life” were her exact words.

Nathifa didn’t argue. She didn’t mind cooking for Atlai. In fact she enjoyed the thought of taking care of him. For some reason she liked Atlai, maybe it was that he was vulnerable in a way that made her feel sorry for him, or maybe it was that she felt safe with him, she couldn’t say for sure. And although he didn’t talk much, hardly at all, she was not bored with him. She talked and he listened. It was one of the special times when she could talk about anything, to tell her dreams, to express her opinion on things. Atlai never laughed, he just listened.

Unfortunately, her sister and her father were not great listeners. Reema was too bossy and her father was mostly unreachable behind his worries for them. She loved her family very much, but often enough she was so tired of no one paying attention to what she was saying, that she would go to her room and cry. But when Atlai entered their life, she stopped. And for the first time since her mother died, she was happy.

She prepared a lunch of salad and cold lamb with some lavash and after taking a jar of milk, went to the mill. Atlai hardly ever entered the house, so after trying to persuade him to join them for meal a number of times, Nathifa gave up and let him be. So as usual she was taking meal to him walking fast, unable to hide her eagerness. Atlai became her only friend and that was a big deal for her. Nathifa was a shy girl, who always had trouble relating to people. Her dilemma was that she wasn't a pushover and those kids who took her quietness in a the wrong way, were easily discouraged. But she also has never been able to make a first approach, refusing to admit even to herself that she needed a friend.

She's always been jealous of Reema for making friends so fast. In every village they've been through, Reema never had trouble of finding followers and lately she became even more popular. She came to an age when she slowly started to transform from a girl to a young woman and her striking beauty armed with dominant character won her many admirers. So it was safe to say that Reema wasn't suffering from the lack of attention.

Looking at her sister made Nathifa feel all the more lonely. But she accepted her fate and of course was happy for Reema. In any case, since their mother's death they both had to face new responsibilities. So Nathifa buried herself into the house work, in a way giving up on her childhood entirely. She would continued living so, but one day her father told them that he hired a boy, who was living on the streets. She saw him before and often felt sorry for him, never really thinking about him too long though; and certainly she could never have imagined becoming friends with the boy. That was until she talked to him.

The first thing Farid told Reema and her, was that the boy's name was Atlai and he wasn't well. So they should ignore it if he's not answering them and try to make him feel welcome. That's what she did. At the beginning it was weird, she felt shy talking to some boy and few questions she squeezed out of herself, were left unanswered. So they stayed quiet. She was just brining him food, waited until he finished and then left. But then one day, for no reason she started talking, telling him about her sister, her father, about how they traveled and the cities she had seen. Atlai never said a word, but she had a feeling that he was listening, although there wasn't much of interest written on his face, in fact none at all. Still she felt as if there was someone who actually cared for what she thought.

With time she even talked to him about her mother and was not ashamed to cry. He never judged, nor he ever showed any sign of compassion and it was easier to her that way. A few times she tried to ask him about his family, but he never answered. She also tried to find out what was the story with the mule, since it was the only creature that he showed slight signs of affection to. The result was the same. It didn't upset her much, because she believed that her father was right and with time Atlai would feel better. Meanwhile she was happy to have a friend to talk to.

Nathifa found Atlai pouring the last bag of wheat into the millstone, which meant there would be no work until her father came back with new supplies and she

knew that sitting around didn't agree with Atlai very well. For some reason on such rare occasions he appeared even more withdrawn, if that was possible. Of course, there were always some little things to do, like feeding the animals or cleaning the mill, but that could be taken care of in half a day and as for the rest of it, there was pretty much nothing to do. 'Well' she thought 'we'd have more time to spend together and maybe he'll even talk to me'

"Hi Atlai, its dinner time" she announced out loud.

The boy shook the last drop of grain from the bag and set mules into motion, watching the great log starting to turn grinding grains into flour. After that, he walked to the bench and sat down. He did that without giving much of acknowledgment to the girl, which didn't dishearten Nathifa a bit. She made her way to the bench, placed the bag with food and a jar of milk near by and covering the bench with a piece of cloth, made a small version of a table.

“You’ve done all bags already. Father thought he’d be long back before the last one is finished.” She was talking while setting up the food in front of Atlai, who watched her silently without any expression on his face.

“Did you know that Reema has a new admirer?” she asked, fully aware that Atlai wouldn’t care much. But since she did, it was a very important topic to talk about, which she waited to do the whole morning, from the moment she found out about it. “I wonder how long this one will last. It would be fifth one in six months, you know. She keeps rejecting them, treating them like dogs

and they keep coming back. Why, is beyond me.”

She kept on like this, expressing her opinion on every boy who fell under the spell of Reema's beauty. Telling him how shallow and stupid most of them were. Nathifa was not fond of Reema’s friends and since the last incident, she has become outright hostile towards them. It happened about two months ago. Nathifa was returning from the well carrying water to the house and as she was passing by Reema and a few of her friends she overheard two of the girls were making cruel jokes about Atlai. They were laughing, all except Reema, who although refused to take a part in this, said nothing in Atlai’s defense. Nathifa didn’t like that, so when Reema came home she confronted her, making a point that Reema should've said something. Reema in return tried to dismiss the whole matter, telling her sister to mind her own business. That’s when for the first time Nathifa raised her voice at the older sister. Reema was so shocked that she couldn’t say anything, she just watched as Nathifa turned and walked away.

“I can’t wait for father to come home” she changed the subject “I hate when he is gone. Reema becomes impossible to deal with, while he is away. I have to do everything by myself, she even stops cooking.” She suddenly went quiet, not sure if Atlai was aware why her sister was refusing to cook in her father’s absence. And seeing Atlai's indifference wasn’t saying much, because even if he knew why, she doubted that he would show it. Suddenly, out of nowhere she asked.

“Do you like Reema?”

She watched him closely hoping against all odds to get an answer, but as usual she got none. And yet for a split second she thought she caught surprise in his eyes, which was so fast that a moment later Nathifa was sure that it was only her wishful thinking.

She didn’t press the question any further, instead started to tell him about Festival that was coming in a week and how she wished that he would come to this one. Time past by quickly and even after Atlai finished his meal he remained sitting, listening Nathifa talk. And while he was looking at her he appeared almost normal as if he found a link that was drawing him back to life.

4

“This is it”

The darkness spread across the village. The kind that every once in a while a moonless night produced. Honest people were long asleep seemingly protected by the locked doors. No silly youngsters ran around. No lovers who were trying to have some alone time away from everyone’s eyes. And even homeless and small time thieves tried to find a cover on such a night. Only those who were considered being most dangerous criminals, who found a moonless night as an ally in their crimes, roamed the streets. That is why two silhouettes behind the stable could not be mistaken for innocent bystanders, but could be recognized for exactly who they were- conspirers.

“How many men are in the house?” asked one of the shadows.

“Just one.” The second replied “There are two girls and a boy. The boy sleeps in the mill. It’s an easy job and from what I know very prosperous. The man of the house is the mill owner I’m quite sure he’s got some stash. You can also use girls, sell them or give them to you master. But do not kill the boy and the man, wait for me. I want to witness their death.” The last words were said with unmistakable hatred.

“And I suppose you want your cut?”

“No. I told you, all I want is to see the man and the boy die.”

Quiet chuckles disrupted the night “Revenge huh? What did he do, slept with your wife?”

“I don’t have a wife. And telling you my business wasn’t a part of the deal.”

“You better watch what you saying or you too will end up a vulture’s food.” there was no more humor in the voice anymore.

Jamal was lucky the night hid the fear on his face, because his partner in crime misinterpreted Jamal’s quietness as a sign of seriousness and thought better off making an enemy of him. There was a long silence, until finally one of the conspirers said:

“We’ll take the prisoners tonight. You can catch up with us in a few days when everything calms down. Just drive west. You’ll find Zutar’s camp fifty miles from here, he’ll decide whether you’ll get your revenge or not.”

The hatred and desire to see Farid dead helped Jamal to regain his nerve “That wasn’t a deal Bahman. The deal was you’ll get what you want and I get to see the man’s death.”

“And how do you propose we do it, right in the village for everyone to see? Are you coming with us?”

As he didn’t get the response from Jamal, the man continued “Didn’t think so. If you want us to do your dirty business for you, you better play by our rules. So, as I said you come by the camp and Zutar will level with you.”

Jamal could say nothing to object. He didn’t want to be directly involved in what was going to happen, he didn’t want anyone to suspect his involvement at all. After all, he still had to live in this village. But Jamal didn’t like what he was hearing, because the sure way of making Farid pay for his insult, was now turning into uncertainty. Nonetheless it was the only option he had at the moment.

“Alright” he said with a sigh “I’ll be there”

Without further ado they went their separate ways, Jamal back to the house and Bahman to his accomplices who made a small camp not far outside the village. He was making haste as he had to gather his gang and come back to the village to make a raid on the house tonight.

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Since the death of his family, Atlai’s sleeps were of the dreamless kind, but not tonight. This night was different, this night was restless. He was dreaming about his family, but it wasn’t a happy dream. Atlai was reliving the terrible day he found his parents and his sisters dead. Once again he was standing in the middle of nowhere surrounded by corpses, looking at his father who was lying among those many he killed, looking at his mother and his sisters, feeling every bit of the pain and horror they felt before they had died. No, it was not a happy dream.

When Atlai woke up he was already standing. He did not make a move or sound. This nightmare didn't make him loose his bearings; he knew exactly where he was. But he also knew that something terrible was about to happen. He was sure of it. Making his way to the house didn't take him long. So moving unnoticeably in the dark he went to the backyard hoping to find any of the windows open. One of them was.

Soundlessly and quickly Atlai climbed into the house, stepped into the hallway and froze up. He saw two men standing at the end of the corridor, the one close to the front door and next one few meters further along. They faced four other men, two of whom were holding down Farid, pressing him to the living room floor and the other two who had Nathifa and Reema in their hands, holding them easily despite girls' outright protest.

What happened to Atlai next was a result of combination of emotions that for the first time in years went through him in such rich colors. First and foremost it was a fear that somehow his family's death was a dream and what was happening now was happening to them for real. Then realization of who was being attacked followed by feelings of outrage and anger. The final step was cold rage. And then, there was nothing, just undeniable conviction that these six men were going to die. Atlai moved with an incredible speed, twisting the second man's head almost full spin around his neck and at the same time throwing his body like a ragged doll at the first man standing by the door.

The weight of hundred and seventy pounds smashed into him carrying raider through the door outside into the street.

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When Bahman regained consciousness he found himself lying on the ground in front of the house buried under the body of Hareem whose head hanged from the shoulders as if his neck was boneless. Seeing the comrade's face next to him made Bahman shriek in fright. His desperate attempts to free himself weren't working. The body of Hareem was too heavy. Not to mention that Bahman's broken ribs made any movement extremely painful. He started to get really scared and what made it worse was that he had absolutely no idea of how he ended up in this situation.

Suddenly Bahman heard a terrible scream. He hardly recognized the voice of Kemmal in the sound that could've only come from a scared girl. And yet it was Kemmal who was making it, Bahman was pretty sure of it. He tried to shut his ears despite the pain he had to bear to do it, only not to hear that scream any more. He didn't want to think what made a grown man, a tough brute at that, to scream this way.

And just then, looking in the dark of the hallway like in the mouth of the beast that was about to swallow him in, he saw a head appear. It looked like it was floating in the darkness by itself without support of the body. The face that was supposed to be a boy's had a skin as white as a sheet. And maybe it was a bad lightning, but it looked like instead of the eyes the head had holes, without any whites in them at all.

This vision terrified Bahman so, that not feeling pain any more, he made an enormous effort and finally freed himself from the weight of the dead body. As soon as he was on his feet he broke into a run. He did not get too far before he felt a grip on his shoulder so strong that it crushed his collarbone. With a yell Bahman fell on the ground. He felt two hands grubbing him by his head and just before he died a silly wonder came to Bahman's mind 'will I see the face of the killer when he'll twist my head around'. To Bahman's misfortune, for a split of the second he did.

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With a death of the last attacker Atlai felt a delight he hadn't experienced before. The rush of complete satisfaction went through him and suddenly his face felt very strange. It took him a while to realize that he was smiling. Since it was a first one in quite some time, his facial muscles fell out of practice in making such a stretch. Atlai had little understanding of what just happened and frankly he couldn't care less. He felt like everything that was wrong in his life somehow turned right and nothing else mattered.

Still smiling he picked up the body of the dead raider without thinking and went behind the mill. When he came back to the house for the rest of the bodies his emotions returned to his normal flow, if Atlai's state of mind could be called normal. He glanced in the

direction of Farid and the girls and was glad to see that they paid no attention to what he was doing. The girls were still under the shock and all Farid cared about was how to comfort them.

Atlai picked up the body with unbelievable ease and carried out the dead weight of the hundred and eighty pounds as if it was an empty bag. When he came back for the remaining bodies, Farid and the girls already left the living room. Atlai guessed that he took them to the other room to calm them down. Trying to make as little noise as possible he picked up attackers one after another and carried them to where the other ones laid.

While digging a hole for six men he'd just killed, Atlai had only one thought that was repeating in his head over and over again 'this is it, this is it, this is it' and the smile, which to him felt like an old friend now, appeared on his face again.

5

Story of Jamal

As soon as he was back in the house Jamal went straight to the window, which had a clear view on the Farid's front door. He knew that it would take an hour before Bahman would return with his gang, but he wanted to relish every moment of anticipation in waiting for his revenge to happen. He was imagining how raiders would drag out the boy, how the girls would try to scream scared and helpless. But most of all he was imagining how Farid would beg crawling on his knees.

He didn't give a thought to the fact that attackers probably would knock out Farid inside the house, rope the girls and stuff their mouths. And as for the boy, they most likely would take care of him in the same manner as Farid, only later. It was reasonable to presume that gang would be as quiet as possible moving quickly about their business and Jamal wouldn't see much. Yes, it was reasonable to think that, but Jamal had never been a reasonable man. He was always too susceptible to the crazy voice of the demon that hides within every man, who pushes us to do unspeakable things, to whom only few of us submit. Jamal was among those few.

Right from the beginning of his life Jamal was a spoiled, selfish child and more so than most. He always lacked the proper sense of remorse or sense of responsibility, admitting to nothing no matter was it his fault or not. Always looking for a chance to slack off, to have it easy, he was growing to be a devious boy without any respect for anyone or anything.

By the time he was six he was already stealing, figuring that it was easier than asking. When his father caught him for the first time, he had a serious talk with him. But since Jamal's parents unconditional love for him translated into very few restrictions and no punishment, his father was no authority figure to Jamal. So to lie his way out, was not a problem to him. This experience only convincing Jamal that it was easy to steal and if he would get in trouble he would just come up with another lie to get away with it. Of course that's not how it happened. For the second time his father caught him he grew furious and probably scared of what his boy was growing into. So he beat him, badly.

That put some sense into Jamal, but only as far as to suggest that he should not be so blunt and should find a smarter way to fool his father. And he did learn to do that, fast. When he turned eight, his parents had another child and Jamal became second best, at least in his own eyes. That gave him a reason to hate his brother fiercely and that's when he really started to listen to this demon's voice inside of him. So when it told him to turn his head away and let his two year old brother crawl toward the edge of the high step, Jamal listened without hesitation. He did so fully aware that his mother, who was distracted by his father talking, wouldn't be able to stop the little boy from falling. The fall didn't kill his brother, it made him blind.

Of course no one blamed Jamal for what happened; his parents blamed themselves and his mother more so than his father. That's what put her in her grave at too young of an age. Jamal's father was left with two children on his hands, one of an age fifteen and another of seven. He did everything he could to make his kids feel normal, but Jamal's brother was too fragile and weak. As for Jamal himself, he had too much hatred in his heart to be normal; hatred for his brother and his father, hatred for the life itself. He blamed everything and everyone for the life he didn't want, everything and everyone but himself. The thought of taking the fault for his brother's misfortune and for his mother's death never crossed his mind, not even once. In fact, he truly believed that his parents should have thought better before bringing another child into this world and in the end everything was their fault.

By the age of nineteen he was getting extremely tired of his family and started to give much thought of how to get rid of them. He would probably even consider killing them if he wasn't so afraid to do it. And not even his brother's unexplained love for him and his father's trust in him would make any difference. Of course he could just leave, but then he wouldn't get his hands on his father's money, which there was a considerable amount of. Instead, Jamal spent his time behaving just right, to convince his father that he was a responsible adult and was ready to take over the family business. It took him two years to do so. And when his father finally retired putting all family's matter into Jamal's hands, first thing he did was selling family business, taking all the money his father managed to put aside for him and his brother and ran.

He ran leaving his old father broke with a handicapped teenager on his hands, knowing that there was nothing they could do but starve or beg. Jamal didn't lose any sleep thinking about it, in fact, he hardly ever thought about them at all. As far as he was concerned, people like his brother and his father should be eliminated by the law of nature.

Money didn't last long. Jamal quickly spent them away on gambling, drinking and loose women. So by the age of twenty three he was as broke as he has ever been. Having limited options Jamal joined the shah's guard thinking he would lead an easy respectable life. But after serving for a several months, he realized that he wouldn't be able to keep avoiding the fights for long and at some point his life would be in danger. He managed to ally with the local gang and knowing the routes of the tax money being transferred, he arranged an armed robbery of one of the carriages he was guiding with his other mates.

When the gang attacked the guards Jamal quickly stepped aside watching his outnumbered friends being slaughtered by the raiders. And the fact that he spent several months with them, living shoulder to shoulder, didn't bother him at all. His only worry was - where to hide until the fight was over.

This time Jamal didn't just spend all the money, but decided to be wiser about it. So he found a nice quiet village, not too far from the big city and thinking of settling down for good bought himself a stable. In doing so, he as usual took advantage of the old man who was selling it so he could move closer to his daughter living in town. That was couple of months before Atlai's father rode into the village.

Jamal's new neighbours didn't know much about him, most of them considered him a good businessman, the kind that knows how to make money and yet fair enough to keep good customer relationship. And even those, who saw Jamal for what he really was, couldn't imagine the depths of his

fall. No one ever saw the man who was sitting now in front of the window with all the sins revealed on his face. That man could only disgust people, much like a pile of rotten garbage would.

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What Jamal saw did not bring him joy. Not at all. But what it did, was to send through him a wave of terror of what his not too distant future might hold. When Atlai almost ripped the Bahman's head off, Jamal was ready to run out of the house leaving all his belongings with the thought of never coming back. And he would have done so if not for the voice inside Jamal's head, the one that compelled him to do all sorts of terrible things; the same voice that now made him stay still, which most likely saved Jamal's life.

Frozen with horror in front of the window, Jamal watched how Atlai was brining out of the house the bodies of Bahman's gang and one by one carried them behind the mill. All the desire of revenge was gone from Jamal's head and the only thought that feverishly circled his mind was how to make the attack on Farid and his family look like a random act. The fear made him confident that everyone would see him through, everyone would know about his involvement. The logic that should have told him he was in the clear and there

was nothing that could lead to him, was unreachable through the thick lair of fear surrounding his mind. The morning would come and Jamal would probably realize that Bahman, the only one who knew about him, had no time to tell Atlai anything. But for now, he was sitting in the darkness of the house afraid to breathe too loud, cursing the day he moved into this village.

6

The Battle

Atlai was looking into the emptiness of the desert, preparing himself for what was coming. He wasn't afraid because it wasn't something he hasn't anticipated. He knew that sooner or later it had to happen; and taking into account that there was only a dozen of incidents in the last seven years that he had been transporting supplies from the city, he considered himself lucky. Of course there was always a big chance that this trip would be the last, but such was the hazard of the job.

He wasn't complaining, Atlai never really complained about anything, but in this instance he wasn't even annoyed. When the scout returned galloping at full speed and told him there were about seventy raiders no further than few miles away, heading their way, Atlai just sighed taking this news as a trivial thing. That eased a little the nervousness of the others and there was plenty to be nervous about.

It was the biggest group of raiders they had encountered so far (previously there were a little over twenty men with whom they dealt easily enough). So the fact that their own group consisted of only six members (not including the boy they picked up along the way) could make nervous anyone. And even though every one of them was brave, experienced fighter, it wouldn't make up for such a shortage of men. But they had Atlai with them and that created a good chance of making through this seemingly impossible situation.

Atlai walked to the boy and said "Faris, take horses and mules and continue moving to the east, the village is no more than fourteen miles from here, we'll catch up with you later"

Faris frowned. He didn't like to be considered a child. He was only twelve, but he had the taste of danger before. He had been leaving on the streets of Konya-Urgench since his mother died and her new husband threw him out six years ago and he had to fight for his life plenty of times. "I can stay and fight" he said furiously.

“You’ll have your chance soon enough, no need to rush into things” Atlai kneeled beside the boy and looked him in the eyes “Do you know what distinguishes bravery from bravado and foolishness? Knowing of when it is necessary to step away from the fight and when to step into one. I need you to take care of the supplies. Mules could be killed if stayed here. We can’t have that” he was still looking into the boy’s eyes, trying to see if he understood. He did, although it was hard for him to do.

When Faris moved away leading eight heavily loaded mules and two horses further to the east Atlai suggested to the others that they should spread out. He figured it would be at least half an hour until raiders appeared. That would give Faris time to move far enough from the fight.

He had a good idea of what was going to happen. The raiders confident in their number would see them as an easy prey and attack in desire to kill them in close range, because there was no fun in killing from afar. That would give a chance for Atlai and his companions to pick out a few of them with arrows. And in case the raiders decided to shoot at them after all, they would be a hard target to get as every man would be in some distance from one another. This manoeuvre would give them another advantage of dividing raiders in separate groups, so they could get to each one of them.

After a little less than half an hour, the first of the raiders appeared on the horizon. They couldn’t see Atlai and his men lying on the ground, so they didn’t rush, but set their horses at an easy pace. It took them another ten minutes to get close enough for an arrow range and that’s when Atlai gestured men to shoot at once. Before the raiders had realized they were being shot at, six of them were dead. They broke into a gallop trying to reach their opponents as soon as possible. Just as Atlai thought, they didn’t try to shoot back, which gave him and his men an opportunity to take a shot one more time (in case of Ahmat, the best bowmen in the village, three times) without the worry of being wounded. So by the time raiders were close enough for six men to start preparing for hand to hand combat, they had already lost fifteen of their own.

Atlai, as usual in such situations, was about ninety feet ahead of the others to take the first wave of enemy’s attack. No one ever objected to that, because it always gave them an upper hand in battles which otherwise they would almost certainly lose. The most eager of the raiders and probably the most foolish ones rode onto Atlai wishing to crush him with their horses. The look on the face of the centred raider suddenly changed from murderous to utmost astonished one as Atlai jumped and, gripping horse by the bridle, flipped in midair appearing behind him. It happened so fast that the raider didn’t have time to grasp where the guy had just disappeared to, let alone to react. Meanwhile Atlai with a quick jerk twisted the man’s head, breaking his neck.

With an attacker he had just killed still in the saddle, Atlai turned the horse around to face the main group of the enemy. Drawing two knives with unusually long blades he set the horse to a fast pace and smashed into the attackers cutting his way through the group. When he rode out on the other side, he left the trail of dead bodies behind. The raiders were so shocked that most of them stopped to comprehend what just happened. Atlai didn’t give them a chance to recover and hit again. But this time while he was riding through, slashing raiders with blades, he jumped from the horse he was on, onto the horse behind another raider. And so the enemy was left in confusion, stubbing their already dead friend.

He drove out of the group and stopped about fifty feet away. He pushed the dead body off the horse and turned to see how his companions were doing. They have managed to kill six raiders and were battling with four others. That reassured Atlai that his friends were all right. And since no other raiders broke off from the main group, he was confident that they could handle the situation.

When he turned to face his opponents again he saw about thirty five of them left and they looked mad. Realizing now that they were too careless and shouldn’t have disregarded these six men so lightly, the raiders started to organize their next attack in more serious manner.

The remaining thirty five men formed one line and started to move, setting their horses not into a gallop but to a fast pace this time. Atlai on the other hand made his horse move as quickly as possible. Just before he drove into the raider in front of him, who was holding a sword to pierce him through, Atlai threw his knife and jumped at the same time. The power of the throw yanked raider off the saddle leaving the place for Atlai to land on. As Atlai landed on the horse, he cut the heads off of men by his left and his right sides changing the knife position from the left hand to the right with extraordinary speed.

Driving by the dead raider Atlai leaned to pick up his knife sticking out of the body. Without slowing down he turned his horse around and attacked his enemy with the full force. The raiders were still turning when Atlai rode into them killing another four. But this time he didn't ride away, this time he stayed among them jumping from one horse to another, killing them two, three at a time. Atlai was so quick that it looked like he was in one place while suddenly appearing in another. Just when the raiders thought they saw him on the ground, he already was sitting on one of their horses killing them left and right. He appeared to be invincible. Three dozens of blades in the arms of experienced killers were aiming at him, waving and piercing, looking for their target. Not one so much as touched him.

All was over in a matter of minutes. Atlai was sitting on the horse looking around seeing dead bodies everywhere. There was no impression on his face. He looked much like he did when he was a boy living on the streets of the village. The destruction he was forced to do was always bringing him back to the darkness he once looked straight in the eye, which reminded him of the endless fear he felt long time ago. And in such moments, the human side of him was squashed to the deepest corners of his soul leaving him empty, leaving him dead.

The other five men saw him that way before and knew that it was better to leave Atlai alone. Frankly, they were afraid of him. Seeing his utterly emotionless face always made them shiver. And no matter how many battles they have gone through, how many years they knew each other spending side by side through numerous trips together, none of them were quite sure if Atlai wouldn't just kill them. Same as he did with their enemies, with that cold impassive stare. Although they all looked death in the face many times and did not falter, they felt like scared children at such moments, knowing that if Atlai came for them, there would be nothing they could do. Absolutely nothing.

But like always, Atlai was coming back to normal. He lowered his head, blinked and when he raised it again, tiredness was the first impression on his face. It made him look twenty years older, as if he was an exile for so long and seen so many suffering through his journey, that coming back home only made him realize how tired he really was. Atlai's companions knew that it would pass as well and by the time they arrived home he would be himself again. As for now, they were just happy to see that he didn't have that horrible stare anymore. And so they relaxed, took care of their wounds and started east in the direction of the village.

7

Atlai's Fear

Every time Atlai felt this emptiness inside him, he was almost positive he would remain that way forever. But the single thought always pierced its way though, dragging him back to life. It was the thought of Nathifa and others close to him that was stronger than the endless fear washing all his feelings away, leaving his soul and mind hollow. And the tiredness that followed was from the understanding that the horror of his childhood dream and the loss of his family would stay inside, following him no matter where he lived, no matter how he lived.

But soon enough more positive thoughts took over, reminding him how happy everyone would be to see him, how they would come out to greet him and that there would be a small celebration for the safe journey he and his friends had. There would be only family and close friends. He would be telling them

about the trip, what's new in the world. Of course he would leave the part of an attack out of the story. He always did. There was no need to spoil the celebration.

These thoughts made him happy. It worked all the time, sending the horrible recollection of his childhood to the back of his head. It would be unfair to say that Atlai forgot his parents and sisters completely, but his memory of them faded into the background, as if it was so long ago that he couldn't picture their faces. And only on those rare occasions when he was forced into violence and destruction their dead faces became vividly clear.

Atlai forgot the time when they have constantly been on his mind. He forgot how it was to live a life of absolute apathy. Forgot how it was to float in the dead waters of the endless ocean, with not even a single presence of life. His first clear memory began from the moment he woke up in the mill ten years ago. He still remembered it as if it was yesterday.

He was covered with dirt, unable to tell what happened exactly, only a blurred memory of digging a hole remained in his mind. It didn't concern him though, because for some unexplained reason he was happy.

That's when the man, whom he remembered vaguely as well, walked in. Aware that he was the owner of this place and his name was Farid, Atlai for the life of him couldn't remember where he knew this man from or what he was doing in his mill and how he knew this was a mill in the first place. The man was upset and nervous. He had something on his mind, Atlai could sense it straight away.

Farid walked over to him, stood there for a while, looking into his eyes and then suddenly grabbed Atlai pressing him against himself in embrace. Atlai couldn't understand what was going on, but didn't object as he felt connected to this man and the warm feeling of having a friend made him even happier.

When Farid released him, Atlai saw that he was smiling and what seemed like for the first time he heard his voice.

"I'm sorry I didn't come over straight away, but I was

so afraid to leave them. They're better now but yesterday they were too scared to stay alone."

He was silent for a moment, then his smile was replaced with a grimace of hatred and anger. He lowered his head and said:

"I don't know where those men came from and although I have an idea of what they were after, I must admit I don't remember much about what happened. But I do know that I shudder to think what those men would have done if it weren't for you."

He raised his head and looked into Atlai's eyes "I don't want to ask what you've done to them or how is that possible that a boy of your age could overpower six killers. It's not my place to do that. I'm just grateful to God for sending you to us."

Farid fell quiet again. It seemed like he was gathering his thoughts "I'll try to say what I want and please forgive me if I'll say something wrong. You know I've always been concerned about you and cared for you, but it was mostly out of pity. This time it's different. I'm in debt to you with my life, more than my life." He waited for a second and then continued "I don't know what happened to your family and I'm not trying to replace them." Farid stopped, looking confused "I don't know what I'm saying. Look Atlai, you're not alone any more, I'm your friend, your future is my future and mine is yours. Do you understand?"

Atlai smiled and responded in a clear voice "Yes. I think I do."

Farid's reaction to his response was almost laughable. He looked as if he heard a horse talking back at him. He stood like that for some time and Atlai started to wonder if he's going to talk at all when Farid grabbed and hugged him again, this time much harder. Atlai heard Farid's voice in his left ear "Finally. It's sure good to hear you boy. It's sure good to see you smile."

Two girls appeared in the door way. The older one was crying, but it was the younger one that captured his eyes. He remembered her face clearly, which was strange considering he didn't remember much of anything else. In fact the memory of the girl's face was the only real memory he had. And the weird thing about it was that although he knew her name he did not know anything about her. It was as if he remembered seeing her image guiding him out of dark horrible place, the memory of which was also vague to him. Looking at her smiling young, innocently beautiful face made him feel reborn, like he escaped the grip of death or something even worse.

He could still recall the feeling he had that day. He didn't like to hold on to it too long though. Because for some reason if he thought about it for too long the fear of what would happen to him if he lost Nathifa was starting to creep up on him. This fear progressed to its worst about three years ago. It was then he realized that Nathifa stopped being a girl who had a strange yet strong connection with him and suddenly became the only woman he could picture himself with. At that instant the whole world started to revolve around the idea of what Nathifa thought, what Nathifa did and whether it would be good for her, whether she would like it. Lots of times he was embarrassed about seeing things in such a foolish perspective, but could hardly help it.

All this time he wished he could tell her how he felt. Hundred times a day he was catching himself at the thought of asking her to be his wife. But too many things were in the way, too many excuses. It was either her age or his job or something else, but Alai always had been able to find a reason to wait. However, the truth was Nathifa was old enough already and he certainly could have had another job. And although he was good at what he did, it wasn't the right line of work for a family man - too dangerous. But he could change it, open his own business perhaps, Farid would be more than happy to help him get started. He had been pestering Atlai to quit for far too long now, saying the life of the hauler was a life of risk (if he only knew how many times Atlai and his companions were under a grave danger, he would probably get so angry with him, Atlai wouldn't have a choice but to quit).

So his work wasn't good enough reason either and it wasn't like he had no place to bring a wife to. He built his own house when he turned eighteen (Farid was very unhappy about it, he didn't like the idea of Atlai living by himself, but somehow Atlai didn't feel right living in Farid's house or in the mill for that matter).

All these excuses weren't the real reason. The real reason was simple, he was scared. Scared of being rejected and having his hopes crushed. More than that really, because if Nathifa was to reject him he wouldn't be able to show his face at Farid's house any more. But that wasn't his biggest fear, what he was afraid of the most, was to begin his life with Nathifa as his wife, to claim his happiness and having to pay for it. He couldn't explain it but he always felt like someone was watching him, monitoring his life, weighing everything he did. That someone would make him pay one day and what if the cost would be too high.

He often dreamed about it. Dreamed that Nathifa died because of him. That because he selfishly dragged her into his life he put her in jeopardy. He always woke up in cold sweat after such a dream. Atlai tried to ignore his worries but the horror of his childhood left a deep imprint on his soul. And although he didn't remember much of it, it still rumbled in the deep dark corner of his mind. It couldn't be rid off easily.

Hardly anyone could call Atlai a coward, but the fact was he was afraid of many things and not in a way normal people were. Once, he saw a few men following Nathifa returning from the market. He heard them laughing and making sleazy remarks about her. She didn't react, but he noticed she was nervous.

The men sped up trying to catch up with her and they almost did, when they saw Atlai standing not far to the left of the street. They must have seen something frightening in his eyes because the men didn't just stop and walked away, they ran.

Nathifa quickly moved on not seeing Atlai, which was probably for the better. And he was left standing on the road with fear bubbling inside him. Not of those retards, but for what could have happened if he wasn't

around. So to say that Atlai was fearless would be a lie, there were things he was afraid of, more so than most.

And that was where he stood, hanging in the balance, afraid to tip the weights, because there was no way to tell on which side he would fall, on a side with soft pillows or on a side with sharp rocks.

8

Return home

Nathifa was busy preparing the meal that Atlai favoured the most. She was nervous because Atlai should be coming home soon and she was nowhere near finishing. And there were so many other things to do. "Should be alright, he's not going to eat straight away, he never does, I still have time" she often did this, talking to herself to calm down. She developed that habit since she started to think of Atlai in a way that made her heart race and the mere mention of his name made her blush.

It happened fairly long time ago. She already forgot exactly when. She guessed it was about the time Atlai built his own house six or seven years ago. Seemed like forever to her. In fact she could barely remember the time when she used to think of Atlai as her friend, nothing more.

Not many knew about her feelings though. To be more accurate only her sister knew. Not her father not Murad (her sister's husband) and certainly not Atlai. Although her sister and she were close and most of the time Nathifa was glad that Reema knew her secret, sometimes she wished she didn't. It irritated Nathifa that Reema found it fun to tease her, talking about Atlai in the presence of her father or Murad, saying things that could lead to discovery of her feelings for Atlai. And did that fully aware that it made Nathifa restless. Thankfully the men were not bright enough to catch the meaning behind Reema's words. But Nathifa was always afraid that one day they might.

The whole situation was very confusing for her, because she obviously wanted to be with Atlai more than anything and yet she was afraid that he would somehow uncover her secret. There was no logic behind her actions either, she knew that. One day she sewed a shirt for him and when Reema wanted to give it to Atlai, telling Nathifa made it for him, she begged her not to do this. It annoyed Reema so, that she refused to speak to her that day. Afterwards she asked Nathifa why she would want to keep it a secret if she cared for Atlai so much. She didn't know how to answer that. The only thing she could say was: "it's not supposed to be this way".

Besides, what if he didn't feel the same way about her, what then? In any case she was not the one to make the first move. Murad spent three months just to convince Reema to meet with him and then courted her for three years before she agreed to marry him. Nathifa wanted that. She didn't want to be any different from her sister. She, of course, wouldn't make Atlai circle around her for three months just to get her to meet with him, but she certainly didn't want him to know that she desperately wanted him to ask her, and for quite sometime now.

She heard a noise coming from the anteroom. It was Reema, returning from the market bringing a few things they forgot to buy yesterday. As she walked into the kitchen, she went straight to the pots standing on the stove and after tasting the soup she turned to Nathifa and said "Not enough salt"

Nathifa knew that as a cook she was no match to her sister, but she was good enough even by Reema's standards. So her sister's remark irritated her as it often did. "I'm the one cooking, did you forget?"

"Yes, yes I remember, I'm just saying it needs more salt" suddenly smile appeared on her face. The kind that usually was an indicator of some new tease she just thought of, Nathifa hated that "You know what they say about women in love?"

Nathifa rolled her eyes "No. What do they say?"

"Well, if a woman is in love her food becomes too salty or not salty enough. I guess it's because her mind is not on cooking but on something else" she gave Nathifa a meaningful look.

"Oh" Nathifa made an understanding face "that is why we had to bear eating your food when Murad was courting you." With a quite bit of satisfaction she watched Reema's face redden.

Without any humour in her voice Reema responded "I'll go set the table. And add some salt would you, I don't want to eat unsalted soup." And even though Reema mumbled the last part, Nathifa heard it and it made her smile. She probably touched some nerve because Reema's judgment about someone's cooking was always unbiased and Nathifa knew that her soup was almost as good as Reema's.

With a smile Nathifa was adding some salt, not too much, just a pinch, when she heard footsteps on the porch and happy voices of her father and her brother-in-law talking to someone and laughing. She knew straight away that they were talking to Atlai and her heart started to beat faster. It took her a great effort to remain calm or at least to look calm. She heard them come in and saw Reema pass the kitchen doorway running to hug Atlai. She heard her muffled voice coming, Nathifa guessed, from Atlai's shoulder "Finally, where've you been?" her voice became clearer ('she's probably looking at him with that patronizing stare of hers' Nathifa thought) "are you taking such long trips so often to avoid us?"

Atlai laughed wholeheartedly not annoyed with Reema at all. Nathifa couldn't explain how Atlai could take Reema's constant pestering and what often looked like even enjoyed it. After the night they had been attacked and Atlai saved them, Reema started to act like a mother goose around him. And although she was two years younger than Atlai, she was always after him about not eating right or spending too much time in the mill and not at home. Nathifa knew it was her way of showing that she cared, but by God it was annoying. Not for Atlai though, he usually took it all with a smile on his face.

"Leave the man alone, he just got home" it was Murad's voice. Reema didn't argue. She never argued with him when others were around. Instead she called for her.

"Nathifa, come on out, Atlai's home. Don't pretend like you don't hear."

Nathifa was so shocked that she couldn't even get

angry. It took her a few seconds to regain herself, after which she walked out to the corridor saying "I heard you, I was just too busy adding salt to my unsalted soup." She turned and saw Atlai standing a few steps from the door with her father behind him and with Murad by his side. Farid and Murad looked happier than she saw them in a month. Murad, a fairly big fellow, was looking at Nathifa smiling widely. And although Atlai was taller than most men, Murad beat him by six inches, mounting over Atlai with his enormous hand around his shoulder.

Trying to seem nonchalant Nathifa said: "Hi Atlai, how was your trip?"

“It was all right, made me miss home though. But it usually does.” He looked at her only for a moment, turning away almost straight away. But that moment made her breathe faster. She watched him looking around the house and wondered if she should have been more welcoming.

“Well, all the more reasons to find something to do in the village and stay at home, instead of wondering around the desert making us worry all the time” Reema’s response was instant.

Murad waved his hand at his wife “Don’t pay any attention to her. Although I would like to have a partner down at the bakery. It’s getting harder to do all the work by myself.”

Farid interfered on that note “All right, let’s come in. By the way where are the others, they’re coming

are they not?”

“Yes, in a little while. I brought a boy with me, an orphan I was wondering Farid if you could find him something to do, or you Murad?” Atlai looked at both man with a question on his face.

Murad nodded “Sure, if Farid has no work at the mill I’ve got plenty down at the bakery” everybody turned to Farid at once.

It amused Farid so, he could not help but laugh “Boy can choose whatever he wants; working in the mill or in the bakery. Where is he?” he said smiling.

“Ahmat took him to his house” Atlai replied smiling as well “He thought since he lived alone, the boy would be better of staying with him. Besides they are much too similar to one another, both cocky.” Last remark made Murad roar with laughter, suddenness of which gave Reema a fright. She pressed her hand to her chest and looked at Murad accusingly with displeasure.

They all walked into the living room looking like a perfect family they were and no one would have guessed what a horrible set of circumstances led them to each other.

9

Finding their way

The dinner was over and sunset showed that the day was closer to the end than anyone wished it to be. Atlai waited for the others to leave. He didn’t want to go home just yet, he wanted to spend some time with Farid, Murad, Reema and most of all with Nathifa, when there were no others around. Hearing Murad’s and Ahmat’s voices arguing about the prices of wheat made him smile. He knew they could go on like that until tomorrow. But Farid finally interrupted telling them to give it a rest, that they have been talking about the wheat for two hours now and if he would hear the word ‘wheat’ one more time he would make them eat the whole bag of that stuff. That did it, Murad and Ahmat quieted down letting other guests say goodbye for the day. As voices started slowly to fade into a distance Murad called after Ahmat:

“So I’ll see you tomorrow at seven in the morning, right?”

“I’ll be there at six thirty and you better not be sleeping” Ahmat’s voice was overenthusiastic. Atlai knew it was the mead talking and Murad would be lucky if he would see him at eight. Ahmat was a good man, dependable when necessary, but unfortunately it had to be truly necessary, otherwise he couldn’t take things seriously (except for the archery, he never joked about that).

Atlai heard footsteps coming from the kitchen and several seconds later Reema walked into the room.

“You really outdid yourself this time Reema, it was the best gravy I've ever had.”

Reema's smile was sincerely happy and somehow mischievous “You liked it huh?”

“Not only me, Rozan couldn't stop talking about it. I think he's still talking about it.”

“Well, it was made for your benefit, and this time Nathifa was the cook.”

She gave him another one of her mischievous smiles and walked out with empty plates in her hands. Atlai stood there with a confused look on his face, trying to understand what Reema just said. And finally when he realized what she meant a smile, that any other time he would consider idiotic, appeared on his face. To his luck no one was in the room at this moment and he had a chance to get himself together. Just then Nathifa walked in.

He tried to catch her eyes, but she wasn't looking at him paying her full attention to cleaning the table. Atlai decided to break the silence “Thank you for the dinner, Reema told me that you made it especially for me, right after I told her it was the best one I've had.” He was look at Nathifa trying to see her reaction. But seemingly unaffected she responded without raising her head from her task.

“You know Reema, she says things that have no meaning. I don't know how you can be so patient with her. I'm happy you liked the dinner though. I hope the rest enjoyed it as well, I made it for everyone.”

Atlai sensed coldness in her voice and his desire to stay a little longer vanished instantly. Nathifa left the room without giving him one glance. Atlai didn't have an urge to smile any more; all he wanted now was to leave. He was so upset that he didn't even remember to get angry at Reema for setting him up like this and neither to ask himself why.

Farid and Murad walked into the room and it took Atlai a great effort to appear normal.

“Did you hear what he was saying? The man is clueless when it comes to trade.” Murad's thoughts were still on argument with Ahmat.

“The whole neighbourhood heard you two screaming.” Atlai made Farid laugh.

“I think all went well” he said.

Atlai faked a yawn “I better get some sleep. A lot to do tomorrow, right?”

Farid nodded “Yes, you go on. The girls made a bed for you in Reema's old room.”

“Thanks, but I sleep better in my own bed.”

Farid frowned “Again you want to go into that empty house of yours. Why don't you stay here tonight?”

“Because I won't be able to sleep with you two talking in here” Atlai tried to smile “I'll go sleep easier if I know there is no one to talk to. I'll see you both tomorrow.”

“Are you alright?” Farid was hard to fool. After so many years he knew Atlai too well.

“I'm just tired is all”

Murad interfered “Let him be Farid, he is a private fellow our Atlai, there is obviously some girl involved and he doesn’t have time for us.” He winked at Atlai and said “I’m with you buddy”.

‘There’s actually more truth in your words than you suspect’ Atlai thought smiling in return.

“Ok, then we’ll see you tomorrow” Farid didn’t even try to hide his disappointment “But I need to talk to you first thing in the morning.”

“Sure. I’ll be here bright and early. You wait and see, soon enough you won’t know how to get rid of me.” He answered still trying to joke his way out.

“Yeh, yeh, go already” Farid waved his hand.

Passing by Murad, Atlai laid his hand on his shoulder and said “Say goodbye to Reema and Nathifa for me, will you?”

Murad nodded and with a hint of confusion responded: "Sure"

Atlai quickly exited the room sensing concern forming in Murad's head.

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Nathifa was crying when she entered the kitchen, she couldn’t help it. She probably wouldn’t be able to stop, so she didn’t even try. Reema, standing with her back to her, asked with a cheerful voice. “Did you talk to him? Did he say what he thought of your dinner?”

She waited for Nathifa to respond and when there was nothing but silence for far too long she turned to see why her sister wasn’t answering. Seeing her crying face made Reema scared in a way she hadn’t been since the night she was dragged out of her bed ten years ago.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” words came out in rapid sequence shooting at Nathifa with worry across the room.

Through the tears Nathifa said “Why would you tell him I made dinner for him?”

If before Reema often was annoyed with her sister for acting so weird, it was nothing compared to the anger she felt now “You stupid cow. If I ever see you cry over such a nonsense I would drag you by your hair to Atlai’s porch and leave you for him to deal with you as he see feat, because I’ve had it, you hear?” she was whispering but there was so much anger and panic in her voice that Nathifa felt her older sister was screaming, which made her cry even harder.

“Stop it right now. Do you have any idea how much you scared me?” Reema was still whispering, although she didn’t know why.

Seeing that her anger wasn’t helping and that Nathifa was genuinely upset, removed the throbbing fear Reema felt when she saw her sister in tears, replacing it with compassion for the poor girl. As Reema had never had a day in her life when she doubted herself, she couldn’t fully understand what Nathifa was going through. And as much as she loved her husband, not for a second had she ever worried that Murad might not end up with her as his wife. So now her sister’s circumstances were the closest she came to experience troubled love.

Reema sighed and walked to hug Nathifa. Trying to sound as soothing as possible, Reema made her first attempt to really talk to her sister without making jokes or dismissing Nathifa’s worries as silly ones:

“You have to stop making up fantasies and wait for them to come true Nathifa. You think if everything would happen your way the magic world would reveal itself and you would have no doubts anymore? This isn’t a fairytale, this is life. But I’ll tell you, it’s not so bad, life has a way of figuring things out for the better. We might not think so sometimes, but then again we don’t see the big picture do we? All we see are the small parts that trouble us. We think up the ways to make everything better, often making it worse. You are so sure that I had it all with Murad. Well, I’ll let you in on a little secret, there were million and a half things that I wished to change, but I quickly remind myself that if changed anything I might've not had what I have today.” Reema held Nathifa’s face up to look into her eyes “We all have a different fate, with our ups and downs. My happiest moments are different from yours, which doesn’t mean they’re better. If you keep pushing life away waiting for your version of happiness it’ll pass you by.”

Nathifa finally stopped crying and started to wipe her tears away. Reema frowned and smiled at the same time making the impression of fake displeasure “If you didn’t make such a fuss I would've told you that Atlai was smiling like a fool when I told him about the dinner. He thought I left, but I saw.”

“Really?” that made Nathifa extremely interested “How do you know he was smiling about that?”

“What else? I only had a time to tell him that, then I left.”

“You didn’t leave, you were peeking”

Reema made a dismissive gesture with her hand “So what if I did.”

Suddenly worried look was back on Nathifa’s face “What does his smile mean anyway? He smiled, so what?”

Reema’s frown was real this time “Don’t start Nathifa. I’m not making this speech again. You know as well as I do that he likes you, so stop being so negative.”

That brought back a good mood into the room. Reema

took her sister’s hand and said “Now let’s go to the living room we’ll all sit down and talk. It’s been a month since we all sat together.”

They walked into the main room and found their father and Murad talking. Atlai was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Atlai?” there was a surprise in Reema’s voice.

Murad was the one who answered “He left. Was too tired. He asked me to tell you goodbye.”

A wave of disappointment washed over Nathifa, making her pale. Although she couldn’t explain how, but she was sure that she was the one to make Atlai leave. She leaned close to Reema and whispered in her ear “I have to go”. Without another word Nathifa left.

Reema watched her sister go into her room and sighed ‘Now it will start all over again’ her thoughts were interrupted by her father’s voice

“Is she alright? What’s going on, first Atlai, now her.”

Before she could answer, revealing the side of him Reema always hated, Murad blurted out “They’re in love.” There was no thought behind this comment, just something men say without thinking.

They fell silent. None of them felt so uncomfortable with each other before. It was as if they had stepped into someone's secret room where they have no place to be and felt ashamed for intruding into that person's private life. Decent people are always ashamed at such moments and it matters not whether they have done it by accident or on purpose, whether it's their fault or not, such feeling never goes away. And every time they look back, memory of that incident brings the feeling of shame. That is our conscious tells us that there is line no one should cross, for our own sake.

That is what was going on in Farid's, Murad's and Reema's mind right now. After the long silence Farid finally asked "What do you mean they're in love? With each other?"

Reema became red and seeing her husband scared confusion brought her some satisfaction.

Murad looked from her to Farid, not believing that they took it so seriously. He wasn't even sure he knew what he meant. In fact he didn't: "I don't know, I was just joking" he looked nervously at both of them again and asked "You think they are?"

Out of three of them Reema was the only one who didn't look puzzled and Farid saw it straight away "Reema?"

"I don't know Pa. It's not my place to say anything." She was getting upset. Murad wouldn't go to sleep easy tonight, she promised herself that.

Farid shook his head looking unusually old "You're right. We shouldn't be talking about this. It's just that I'm worried about them. They look lost to me. But I need to stop smothering them; they're grown people,

they need to find their own way."

Reema broke her stare from Murad, who was sitting very quietly now and said "You shouldn't worry so Pa, it's just a phase they're going through. They'll be alright. Listen Pa, we will stay here tonight, since Atlai went home, alright?"

Farid fell silent for a moment and then nodded in agreement "It would be good." When he looked up at his daughter he noticed how angrily she was looking at Murad. That made him smile "Tonight won't be easy for you big guy"

Murad winked at his wife and said "I'm afraid not only tonight."

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Atlai didn't go home straight away, wanting to stop at the mill first. He thought it would help him to calm down, reminding him that life was not over just because he thought Nathifa was cold with him. As his eyes got used to the dark he saw the old mule standing on the far side of the mill. He favoured this mule the most, for some unexplained reason he felt connection with this animal. As he came closer he patted it on the back "Hello old pal, how've you been? Me, I had better days"

Atlai heard footsteps behind him and turned around. He saw a shape of a woman in the door way and right away he knew it was Nathifa. "I saw you coming here" her voice was the sweetest sound he ever heard. He wondered why he hadn't noticed it before, maybe he was distracted by others or was too nervous to really listen. But not now.

"I sneaked out of the house." She fell silent for a second to gather some courage before continuing "I wanted to tell you that I lied. I made this dinner for you."

Atlai felt flash of relief mixed with happiness. Never before he experienced that, and he suspected, nor would he ever again. He couldn't say anything, no words felt right for this moment. Instead he walked to Nathifa and wrapped his arms around her. Nathifa shaking, pressing her arms and face against his chest made Atlai feel like the whole world belonged to him and yet he himself belonged to this small delicate creature in his arms. All his fears washed away. Everything was as it should be and there was nothing to be afraid of. She was his, there was no way around it, no one could change that. He would go through the circles of hell and beyond to claim her and nothing could stand in his way. She was his for all the time, through all the time.

Nathifa was scared no more and even though she felt small and fragile as Atlai pressed her against his chest, she had never been safer. She wondered how she could be so silly and wait all this time when nothing felt more right than to stand here with Atlai. And everything else in the world didn't matter to her at all. Reema was right, life has its way of figuring things out and now, feeling herself being a part of him, she knew she could never exist without Atlai. She belonged to him now, fully. She accepted that gladly, knowing there was no turning back, but as she realized that, she knew one undeniable truth, he belonged to her also. And fully as well.

They stood in the warm darkness of the night without saying a word. And knowing there would be plenty of talk later, all they wanted to do now was live this moment. The moment when they became a part of each other. As long as they remained silent, this moment would continue forever. Time itself would stop making a memory of it, a special type of sanctuary, where they can always escape from the troubles of the world to. All they would have to do was to dive into their memory and there they would be, standing in the mill, holding each other for all the eternity.

10

Together

The week passed way too fast. Atlai and Nathifa always found time to spend together without others around. And although they hadn't announced their relationship, they didn't hide it either. What surprised them was that everyone took it as the most natural thing, as if it was how it supposed to be, or in fact how it has always been. Murad gave them an occasional smile and Farid's only indication of accepting Atlai courting Nathifa, was a nod (not that they told him anything yet).

As for their friends, few that they had, most of them acted as if they knew all along. Atlai and Nathifa were glad that they were spared from all the explaining and congratulations, jokes and winks, but part of them was disappointed as well. The only one who showed any excitement was Reema.

"Finally to be done with all the secrecy and watching you both so moody all the time afraid of looking at each other" were her first words when she found them one night sitting together behind the mill. They tried telling her they had just bumped into each other, but she only waved her hand at them and waked away smiling. Nathifa told Atlai then that Reema was the only one who knew about her feelings for him and was the only one she could talk to. And she still did, more than ever.

So today was like any other day, when they both waited for the meeting hour with anticipation. But it was still morning - the busiest time of the day, and all they had

time for was to give each other occasional happy glance, that's all. Atlai loaded the last bag of flour into the cart and was ready to go to Murad's bakery "Faris, where are you? Hurry up we need go already."

The boy ran out of the mill saying "Farid said to tell Murad it's the last load for this week. He'll have to rationalize it carefully because there won't be any until the end of the next week."

"I'm sure he'll be thrilled to hear that. Alright, come on, we should've been half way there by now."

Faris quickly got beside Atlai on the seat in front of the cart and it started moving. They hadn't got too far when Faris asked "Are you going to marry Nathifa? I would."

Atlai snorted "You probably made it clear for her that you would, hah?"

Faris made a serious face "Yes I did. And if you weren't my friend I would already be courting her"

Atlai laughed this time "Please don't do me any favours. By the way since you're so graciously gave up Nathifa for me, do you have your eyes on anyone else?"

"I like the tailor's daughter."

"So, I gather you've got on with everyone famously." Atlai was amused.

"Sure, everyone pays me a special kind of respect since

I told the story down at the korchma⁹."

"What you've been doing at the korchma? That is no place for a kid of your age and for an honest working man as well for that matter." Atlai's voice showed concern and disapproval.

"Ahmat took me there. He wanted to meet some woman and asked me to wait behind the table."

Atlai shook his head "I should've guessed. I better have a chat with him. If you going to stay at his house we'll need to set some ground rules, like "go to meet women at the korchma alone". Anyhow, what story have you told?"

"The one where you destroyed the army of raiders, what else."

Atlai frowned and stopping the cart turned to Faris "You shouldn't have done that. It is not something you tell people. You're a man Faris, you should be more reserved. Just take it as a rule, don't say more than people should know. Do you understand?"

Faris was confused and scared a little "Yes, of course. I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Atlai nodded and got mules into motion again. They drove in silence for a while until Faris asked "Are you angry with me, Atlai?"

Atlai patted him on a leg saying "No, Faris. We all make mistakes. That's how we learn to do better. But only fool continues making the same mistake without any effort to change" he gave the boy a meaningful look.

By the time they got to the bakery Murad was waiting for them in the doorway anxiously. "Where have you been? I have orders waiting and nothing to bake from. That'll teach me to rely on you two. Come on let's get these bags inside."

Murad grubbed two bags at once, hundred pounds each, put them both on his shoulders without evident effort, making Faris exclaim in amazement: "Wow, did you see that?" he turned to Atlai "Two bags at once, it takes two of us to bring one. I didn't know he's that strong"

⁹ Bar

Atlai smiled “And he doesn’t make a big deal out of it, does he? There is no one stronger than Murad in this village. There are not many men as strong as he is in this world, truth to be told. And yet he is the most peaceful, modest person I know. He is a perfect example for you to follow.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You stood against fifty men alone. Ahmat told me that if it weren’t for you there is no way they would have survived.”

Atlai came closer to him and put his hand on Faris’s

shoulder. “It’s not strength Faris. As men it’s our duty to protect our way of life, our family and friends, our dignity for that matter. In order to do so sometimes we need to destroy lives, there is nothing heroic about it, nothing to admire. It is our responsibility, our burden. And when you are old enough you’ll understand why men, the ones who bear that burden, try not to think about it. Because in the end, whether we like it or not, we will have to answer for what we’ve done.” Atlai’s stare suddenly became cold, distant, he was talking to himself now rather than to Faris “we’ll have to pay.”

He blinked as if waking up and looked down at Faris. Seeing that the boy was obviously scared, he tried to ease his mind and, clapping him on the shoulder with more cheerful voice, Atlai said “So you see now, strength and responsibility are two different things. One is a gift Almighty gives us and the other is an obligation he lays on us. Depending on how we carry these two, we’re judged afterwards. There are some men who meet their responsibility without destroying anything, quite the contrary actually, creating something. Those kinds of men have a special aura around them that makes other people happy, secure. No one wants to fight around these men and those troublemakers who do, usually leave or don’t come at all. That is a true strength and I only met two men like that. So apart from Farid, Murad is the strongest man I know.”

Atlai and Faris stood looking at each other when they heard Murad’s voice coming from inside of the bakery: “What are you two yapping about? Bring these bags inside. If all of them are not here in fifteen minutes you won’t have bread for lunch today, you hear?”

Atlai smiled, winked at Faris and motioning with his head towards the back entrance of the bakery, moved to the back of the cart to pick up the bag. Faris followed.

11

Revenge

Jamal was getting closer to the point of his destination ‘it should be no more than a couple of miles’ he thought tiredly. Zutar’s camp was always moving in the perimeter of forty miles around the village and the last Jamal heard, he was thirty miles to the north. That was two days ago. Jamal figured that Zutar would stay in one place for at least two months, waiting for the caravan passing by from the Konya-Urgench further to the east. The reason Jamal was looking for the raider’s camp, was that he had just found out the crucial part of information, which would help him to get his long awaited revenge.

After the night he saw Atlai kill Bahman and the rest of the gang, Jamal became like a shadow, afraid to draw anyone’s attention to himself. But after a few days, seeing that no one really suspected him of anything, he relaxed. Yet still, his fear of Farid and most of all Atlai was so strong that he abandoned any thoughts of revenge, what he was sure of, for good. The time had past and a false respect that he was able to earn was fading now, leaving him with a reputation of lonely middle aged man who was too cranky for anyone to care. And since another stable was opened on the other side of the village, his

business was steadily declining, which made it very hard for someone like Jamal to make any profit. Soon enough he stopped trying, finding it easier to wobble in self-pity rather than to make any effort to find another approach.

That was few years ago. All this time Jamal was living off his savings that were running out quicker than he hoped and spending all day long at the korchma made it even faster. Jamal was staring bankruptcy dead in the face and very soon he would have to sell his business, he knew that. It wasn't so much selling his business that bothered him, but the thought of what would come next. What would he do? He wouldn't be able to find work, no one in this village would hire him and he dreaded the possibility of starting over somewhere else. He didn't have energy anymore. So there he was, refusing to face the truth, drinking himself to death.

The fear of Atlai started to disappear. And the night when he crawled to the corner of his house scared to make any noise, waiting for Atlai to come and kill him, became a distant memory, buried under the weight of years. What he started to remind himself more and more often is that his misfortunes started on the day when Farid adopted the boy. So without any logic behind it he just held Farid and Atlai responsible for what happened to him, as usual blaming someone else for his misery. And so much so, that he begun to fabricate ideas in his head that Farid and Atlai conspired against him, ruining his reputation and his business.

Trying to come up with a plan to get even, Jamal wasn't interested in just revenge, this time he wanted to make profit as well. He wouldn't be as stupid as before, he wouldn't just send six guys. He would find a way to get an army to back him up. Zutar was an obvious choice. The only complication was to convince him to invade the village. And since Zutar was a business man, not just a bloodthirsty idiot, he wouldn't just attack the village without a very good reason. After all it was his territory, if he destroyed the village he would have to move closer to the big city and that was the whole other mess. That is why it had to be a really good reason, serious enough for Zutar to consider giving up his comfortable nest for.

Jamal was cracking his head, looking for an answer and he already started to lose hope of ever finding it. Until last week the boy Atlai brought with him, told in the korchma a very interesting story. In the last seven years Zutar lost over a two hundred men under the strange circumstances. About dozen of times one of his scout teams were killed and when Zutar found his men lying on the ground there was no opponent's bodies around. Of course it was possible that whoever did this gathered their dead and left, but the strange thing was that there was no talk of the battle. As if there were some ghosts wondering around the desert, killing the ones who crossed their path.

Who could have thought that it was six men team causing so much damage. The boy's story was an amusement more than anything, at least to the others in the korchma. No one believed that six men could outstand seventy. And what was even more unbelievable was that the boy claimed Atlai stood against fifty men by himself. Everyone listened to it with interest, like they would a story out of a book, but there was no belief in their eyes. And Jamal would be one of them if not for that night when he saw Atlai, as a boy of fifteen, killing six raiders, downright murderers, like it was a kiddie's game. So even if the boy was exaggerating, Atlai was a force to be reckoned with. And Jamal did. He would convince Zutar to attack the village and even Atlai wouldn't be able to stand against five hundred men.

The question was how to present the story to Zutar so he would believe that it was the village folks who dared to go against him. Jamal didn't even consider telling him it was only six men. Zutar would laugh in his face and throw him out, if not worse. But if he could convince him that the village was secretly gathering the force to destroy him, Zutar might get angry enough to miss some flaws in that story.

Jamal noticed the dark line on the horizon. It was the raider's camp. He finally arrived.

Zutar was in a very bad mood. He received a report from the scouts that seventy of his men were killed. He still had to check it out, but Zutar was pretty sure it was another one of those unexplained incidents that started to occur six years ago. This time it was much worse though. To lose seventy men was bad enough, but what worried him more was that there was someone who could destroy a relatively large group of raiders and disappear without a trace, with no word from anyone about what had happened. If he knew anything about people it was the fact that they liked to talk, to create gossips, make up stories. But there was nothing, not even one word in any of the previous incidents and there would be nothing this time as well, Zutar was sure.

‘It would be better if there were some rumours about ghosts or something, at least I could get some sensible information out of it’ the moment this thought popped into his head one of his personal guards, tough but simple minded looking fellow (Zutar didn’t like to keep the men who could think close by) walked into the tent and reported “There is a man, master. He came from the village; he wants to talk to you. Should I let him in?”

‘Probably some trader wants to negotiate the price for the clear passage to the city’ he thought lazily. And even though he had bigger problems on his mind Zutar was a business man and this was his business, so he waved his hand allowing the man to come in.

As soon as he saw Jamal he frowned. This was no trader; it was some drunk who looked like he had a very long ride.

“Who are you and what do you want?” he asked harshly “You’re better not waste my time beggar”

Man took a deep bow and said “Pardon me master, but I’m no beggar, my name is Jamal and I have very important information for you.” Jamal stopped to wait for Zutar’s response.

“Well, speak then.”

“I know who killed your men a week ago.” Jamal fell silent again

Zutar leaped from his sit and roared “WHO!!!?”

“It was a special force gathered by the village I’m from. They’re planning the attack on you, master”

Zutar didn’t just get angry, he was blinded by rage. Jamal was right to suspect that he wouldn’t stop to think whether it was true or not, he swallowed this lie in a blink of an eye.

“How many?” he was forcing himself not to yell.

“Close to three hundred, but they’ll have more in a month.”

Zutar was a kind of man who was often bested by his temper and although he was practical enough to keep his emotions separate from business, if someone would hit his nerve, rational side of him usually gave in to rage.

He was the youngest of seven children and as his father believed in the notion ‘the strongest man rules’ his usual response to any request was "want it bad enough - go and get it". Being the weakest in the family meant it wasn’t easy for Zutar to survive. But he was also the brightest of seven boys, and brighter than his father for that matter. So in the very early stage of his life he learned that the brain can

get you further in life than muscles. He grew up to be a quiet boy, who listened more than he talked, who could come and go unnoticed.

Zutar had his fair share of beating from his brothers and father, as well as from others. It was inevitable in that kind of environment. But the bright boy that he was, Zutar figured out the way to plot people against each other and at the same time to get what he wanted, using others as a tool. He became a master of intrigue, gathering enough supporters to make his own gang. As soon as he became the leader of the band he became more and more aggressive, violent and short-tempered. He still proved to be a smart strategist and quickly overpowered other kid's gangs, left with the only opponent - his oldest brother. Being five years older than Zutar, his brother was the leader of teenager's gang, the strongest one in this part of the city. Of course Zutar and his boys were no match for the strength of his brother.

What Zutar did, was to ally with the member of his brother's gang, who was the second in command, dreaming of becoming a leader, and persuaded him to commit mutiny. He promised him his support in the right moment, but when the band was ripped apart and two sides started fighting against each other, he waited. His brother won, but it cost him dearly, only one third of his gang remained. That's when Zutar attacked. There was not much struggle, the ones who survived the fight quickly surrendered to Zutar. His brother was left alone with no one by his side. He laughed and spit at Zutar's proposal to accept his leadership, which drove Zutar mad. He killed his brother right then, on the street, smashing his head with the a stone. He was fourteen years old.

This incident changed Zutar forever. Nothing remained in his heart, but fear and hatred for those who might oppose him. His strength grew rapidly. In six years he became the leader of the youngest raider's gang who dared to challenge the great Solomon, the head of biggest band of raiders between Konya-Urgench and Bukhara. Zutar was able to fight off the right for the territory around the village, not far from the big city and to gain the respect of Solomon. That was ten years ago and his gang expanded from hundred men to five hundred. Soon he would have enough men to defeat Solomon and to claim the title of the head of the biggest raider's gang.

So it was easy to imagine his anger at losing seventy of his men to some farmers and traders. It was an outrage. Being a good strategist and intrigant Zutar had one fundamental flaw: he was short-tempered and gave in to his anger way too easily. With time, as his paranoia grew, this problem became worse forcing him to make a lot of bad decisions lately. This was one of them.

"Prepare the men. We're leaving in the morning"

One of his men made a mistake of trying to put some sense into him and not smartly chose the worst time to do it "Master, maybe we should think about it."

Zutar nodded thoughtfully as if he was actually considering this proposition and walked to the speaker. When he was close enough he drew his blade and run it through the man, who stared at him in the face with pain and amazement in his eyes. The room fell into utter silence, no one made a sound fearing to be the next victim.

Zutar turned and with a grimace of hatred and rage screamed at the top of his lungs "PREPARE THE MEN"

Seeing his guard rushing outside calmed him a little. He turned to Jamal and asked angrily "And what you might want for this peace of information? And don't lie"

Jamal knew that Zutar still might need him, so he felt safe enough not to be too scared. Still with caution he started to talk "I hate this village master. Folks there are ungrateful and arrogant. No wonder they are trying to stab you in the back after you've been so kind and gracious."

“Stop with compliments, tell me what you want.”

“Two things master. Both of which are no problem for you.”

Zutar’s smirk didn’t discourage Jamal “First of all I want to be paid a sum of money that will allow me to lead relatively good life. And secondly, I want to witness the death of two men - Farid and Atlai.”

“And what is stopping me from just cutting your head off?”

“Nothing master, but I can get inside unsuspected and open the gates sparing you the unnecessary losses.”

Zutar nodded in approval “Alright, as for your second request I see no problem. As for you first one, it would depend on how quick you are. When my boys will enter

the village you’ll have an opportunity to take what you want or can.” He smiled maliciously “if I like your style I might let you join my gang.”

“Thank you master. You’re truly a fair leader.”

Zutar didn’t notice the sarcasm behind Jamal’s reply or chose not to “So, what’s your grudge against these...what’s their names?”

“Farid and Atlai, master.”

“Yes, Farid and Atlai. What’s the deal?”

“They’ve ruined me master, just in spite. All my life I worked hard and built a successful business. Everyone respected me. But as soon as Farid moved in into the village things started to change. He and his so called adopted son Atlai, beggar and thief, hated me right from the beginning. They were jealous of me. So they started to spread lies turning everyone against me. As I said, the village folks are not good natured people. They easily believed those scams over an honest working man. It became unbearable to live there. They pushed me too far. Even an honest man has his limits”

Zutar’s smile was devious “You’re a cheeky bastard aren’t you and you sure can tell a tale.”

“No, master.” Jamal tried to protest.

Zutar waved his hand “Don’t bother. I know your type too well. The good news is I can use someone like you.

So it might turn out very nicely for you. Now leave. Tell the guard outside to find you a spot. When I need I’ll call for you”

When Jamal was outside he gave out a deep sigh of relief. His plan was working. Soon he would get what he wanted.

13

The way of The Faceless Man

Atlai was going home as usual, with the feeling of complete happiness. The night hid his smile. Not that there was anyone to see it: the street was empty. The sound of the storm rumbled through the sky promising a nasty weather for tomorrow. Yet such minor inconvenience couldn't spoil Atlai's mood. He

had just took Nathifa home and was walking slowly towards his house. And although he didn't live far away he tried to prolong his walk reliving every moment of holding Nathifa only few minutes ago. He remembered how reluctant she was of him letting her go and it brought another wave of joy, stronger this time, enough to make his head spin.

He was still smiling when taking the first step on his porch he suddenly stopped. The thunder roared with unusual intensity sounding to close to be regarded as normal. But that was not what froze him, as a matter of fact he hardly noticed it. What caused his stillness was far more shocking, far more horrifying. Atlai felt himself standing on the edge of the fall, staring into abyss.

Before he turned he knew who was there behind him. But he turned anyway. And when he did, he was a boy again standing in front of the black rider, looking into the utter darkness where the head was supposed to be. And the utter darkness was looking back at him. The only difference between Atlai's first encounter with this hellish vision and now, was awareness of the reality of this situation. He knew what would happen and his fear was ultimately worse than before. Because he remembered now what happened to his family and knew the same thing would happen to Nathifa and the others.

Fear for Nathifa drove Atlai from the state of hypnosis and he broke into a run. It was an act of instinct more than a rational thinking. Abnormality of this situation made Atlai's fear abnormal too. He felt powerless. And certain that he wouldn't be able to stop the tragedy from befalling on Nathifa if he stayed, Atlai made the only decision he could fathom in such circumstances. So he ran. Ran as far from Nathifa as possible in desperate hope that this ambassador of disaster would follow him.

He was running non stop for six hours, always looking back, hoping to see the black rider, but as before there was no one. And yet he continued to run anyway. He had a crazy idea that he might outrun what was coming and whatever catastrophe should befall would befall only on him avoiding the others. He was about thirty miles west of the village when turning for the hundredth time to look behind he saw a smoke on the far horizon in the direction he ran from.

Atlai stopped, realizing now what a grave mistake he made. With a cry of agony he turned around and started to run back to the village with one thought in his head "No, No, No, No, No".

Atlai was running faster now, which, considering he ran for six hours without drink or rest, was hard to believe. But he was convinced that the black rider tricked him into leaving the village and now his fear for what had happened to Nathifa made him inexhaustible.

It took him four hours to get back and the morning was already in it's midst. The sun was covered by blackness of the sky, which amongst other signs preceded the coming of the storm. Atlai was standing in front of the entrance of the village, staring through the open gates at the remains of fire licking what was left of the houses, it's flames dancing with every blow of the wind. His shock only lasted for a few seconds and he was running again in the direction of the Farid's house. Passing by Murad's burnt down bakery he glanced to see if there were any signs of struggle around it. There was none, only bodies of those in whom he recognized his neighbors lying further away. He didn't give them much thought, his only concern was for Nathifa.

He ran past the ruins of his own house without even turning his head. Looking straight, Atlai was hoping against all odds that only by the power of his wish Farid's house would be the one to survive the raid and all his loved ones would be safely protected by its walls. He hoped that miracle would happen and his determination would make the image in his head come true.

It didn't. He saw Farid's decapitated body lying in the dust of the road and his head not too far from it. Atlai could hardly recognize the face of the only man who was as close to him as only father could be. Sixty feet from Farid's remains was the body of Murad surrounded by no less than thirty corpses, which must have been raiders. Among them he recognized Faris's face that in the moment of death was

disfigured by the grimace of hatred. And finally, he saw Reema and Nathifa. Both of them were lying on the ground, not far from the porch of the house. Reema, face down, with the blade in her hands, the blood on which was the evidence she had managed to use it before her end. And Nathifa, with her face white and peaceful, looking almost alive if not for the dead, glass-like eyes, directed up toward the sky.

Atlai ran to her, dropped on his knees and grabbing to hold her started to howl, much like his father once did, but with one distinctive difference: his father could die, Atlai couldn't. He buried his face in her chest, muffling inhuman noises coming out of his mouth. The death was so thick in the air that despite the presence of dogs and other creatures that had survived this disaster, deadness of the village was akin to a graveyard. All the more disturbing were the indescribable howling sounds Atlai was making, that could be heard on the other side of the village once he raised his head again.

Atlai did not close up, like he had on the day of his family's death. Something else entirely happened to him. A caged beast broke free inside his mind making his pupils so big his eyes seemed covered by black. Rising to his feet with a nightmarish grin on his face he started to run.

It seemed that his body had no memory of running for ten hours straight without water or rest. His mind certainly hadn't. As unbelievable as that was, it was not as amazing as the acceleration his body was able to master. Atlai's transformation made him into something more than human. And impossibility of his speed was accentuated by the fact that even though Atlai was running as fast as a full blooded stallion, his breathing was as normal as of a walking man. He didn't think which way to run, the concept of thinking was lost to him, at least in traditional sense. On some level he just knew the way and he was gaining on his prey. Fast.

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Jamal was happy. It was one of the finest days of his life. And although his triumph was spoiled by unexplained absence of Atlai, the thought of him returning to find Farid and the rest dead, almost made it worth while. He made quite a bit of money, plus Zutar was happy with him. So much so that he let him stay with his gang as long as Jamal wished for. 'No surprise there' he thought enjoying himself.

Tricking the village guards wasn't difficult and with his help, Zutar's men killed them quiet and easy, which gave the raiders an opportunity to enter the village without anyone being aware of it. Before people realized what was happening the raiders had already spread among the houses killing everyone.

Just as they agreed, Zutar made it clear to his men that the house next to the stable on the east side of the village to be surrounded and not to be harmed until he arrived. Even now, after all was long over, Jamal's mind was still in the moment of seeing Farid's eyes, full of pain and hatred for him. He was annoyed a little that Farid didn't beg for his or his family's lives, but he wasn't surprised. Nonetheless, it was a great pleasure to see his head roll. What happened next didn't interest Jamal much and he just disregarded the respectful comment of Zutar when Murad was crushing raiders all around him, not letting them to get close to two women.

Even Reema managed to wound one eager raider, who passed Murad's guard. In anger the raider killed both Reema and Nathifa running them through with his blade. It seemed to brake Murad's concentration and he was struck down by the group of attackers yet managing to take another one of them with him. The young boy was killed last by the raider, whom Faris tried to stub yelling out unintelligible curses.

All that was unimportant . Jamal didn't think about Farid's family much. His mind was occupied by Farid himself and by the image of Atlai's sorrow when he would find the people he cared about murdered. He was deep in his thoughts, smiling, when he heard some men shout in frightened amazement. He didn't even have time to listen carefully when those shouts turned into screams of panic.

Jamal rushed outside and froze in horror. The sight opened to him was nothing he had ever seen. Nothing he ever imagined could exist. Someone or something was cutting down men with a speed and ferocity that could only be compared to the force of a tornado. No one had any time to react. It wasn't a battle, it wasn't even a slaughter. It was an act of something beyond understanding. Raiders tried to run, but the force found them, cutting them down, throwing them away like chips in the storm.

Five hundred men were wiped out in a matter of minutes. When this craziness stopped, Jamal saw a man, or at least what resembled a man, completely covered in blood. The last few raiders, including Zutar, who was shaking with fear, this monster killed leisurely tearing them with his bare hands, in spite of their crying plea for mercy. This beast had none. When it turned the blackness of its eyes towards him, Jamal in some inexplicable way recognized Atlai. And when he did he started to laugh hysterically, INSANELY.

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Killing Jamal hollowed Atlai. There was nothing left in him, not even grief. He dropped on his knees and it seemed that he was looking through the cloth of this reality. Only then he saw the dark rider again.

"It's you. Why have you done this to me?" although Atlai was shouting his lips did not move.

"WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS TO ME?" the voice went through Atlai, filling every inch of his body. It was nothing of this world.

"I don't even know you. Who are you?"

"I AM YOU. YOU ARE ME. THERE IS NO ESCAPE FROM IT. YOU HAVE TO ENTER THE CIRCLE."

Suddenly Atlai was sitting on the raven horse looking at himself kneeled on the ground with the face covered in blood. He looked into his own eyes and then he was no more.

The desert looked like a battlefield with about five hundred bodies spread across it. Wind made this place even more dead, if that was possible. And the only leaving things that remained were vultures circling high above in the sky.

Part Three:

End of the Cycle

Death of Torkvemada

Thomas de Torkvemada¹⁰ was sitting on the bed, barricaded in his chambers. He reduced his world to the size of three rooms and even that was beginning to look too big now 'I guess it was inevitable' this thought brought tiredness and fear. "Why can't I just die" he said to an empty room. And as much as he wanted to, he was unusually fit for seventy eight years old. Nothing suggested near death. He prayed for several hours a day. He never prayed so much in his entire life, but God wasn't listening and the sweet release of death wasn't coming. Thomas was afraid. Not of death, not really. He was afraid his death wouldn't be just an easy passing, but something else.

It all started about ten years ago, when he first dreamed about the black hole. In this dream he was as usual looking at the execution of one of the marranos¹¹ and suddenly instead of fire and burning flesh, a black hole appeared. With all his will Torkvemada tried to see past the darkness of it, but there was nothing. He woke up screaming. From that day he hardly ever left his chambers and even when he did, he surrounded himself with hundreds of men. This brought a great uncertainty into his life and that was a hard blow for Thomas.

He remembered himself as a young man who was sure of himself and what he wanted in life. It was simple; he needed to get to the top. And he did that relatively easy (he was not without a talent), but somewhere along the way Thomas lost a clear picture of what he wished for. He couldn't say whether it was power or money, maybe love and respect, perhaps loyalty. Whatever it was he didn't remember. Life became a blur that consisted only of distraction. Why? There was no reason, or at least he couldn't name one. He was killing people just to kill, it was simple as that.

Shortly after he realized it, dreams started. Was there connection? He didn't know. Maybe there was, but it was irrelevant now, what was done could not be undone. Dreams became more frequent in time and in the last year it got to the point where he hardly ever slept. He stopped going outside of his rooms and three days ago he refused to let his maid in, completely cutting himself from the rest of the world.

The late visit of Isabella¹² was the last trigger for his paranoia to take the next level. She was the only one he ever trusted, the only one with whom he felt some sort of closeness. Not this time. This time he saw danger, even in her. Thomas couldn't take it any more. He would wait for his end in these rooms. There was nothing outside that he needed.

He heard the noise on the other side of the door. That must be his maid, bringing his food. He left her specific instructions how to handle it. Bring nothing but vegetables and some bread; slide it into the hole in the door and that to be done no more than twice a day.

Thomas walked to the door picked up the plate of carrots, baked potatoes, some cucumbers and piece of bread and went to the cage where he kept his rats. He gave rats a piece of everything that was on the plate and started to wait for the effect. The biggest paradox of his life was that even though Thomas wished to die he was afraid of any cause of unnatural death. For some unexplained reason he thought

¹⁰ The first Inquisitor General of Spain Thomas de Torkvemada lived during 15th Century and became known for his zealous campaign against Jews and Muslims.

¹¹ Marranos were Jews converted to Christian faith, who secretly continued to practice Judaism. They were one of Torkvemada's targets for extermination.

¹² Queen of Castile and León which was historic region of northwestern Spain bounded by the autonomous communities of Asturias, Cantabria, and the Basque Country to the north.

something terrible would happen to him afterwards. But if he had happen to die of natural causes he would somehow escape any possibility of going to hell and would get straight to haven.

When Thomas turned around, he saw his Father, who was dead for a long time now, standing by the cupboard watching him. Thomas smiled in relief “Finally, it’s time”

Just as he said that, his father’s face grimaced in agonizing pain and before his eyes he lit on fire. Thomas recoiled dropping the plate, and bumping the table with his back turned over the cage with rats. He sat heavily on the floor watching his father burn and that’s when the black hole appeared, same as in his dreams. The possibility of this being another of his nightmares never crossed Thomas’s mind. Maddening horror of this moment squeezed any last drop of emotional self - control he had. Just when Thomas thought that he was in hell and it couldn’t possibly get any worse, something even darker than utter darkness of the hole materialized inside it. Thomas could see the shape of the man advancing until his face became the black hole itself.

He saw his father again, but this time his father bore a mad grin. He saw his father was getting closer and he had a rusty fork in his arm. His father reached for him and started to gouge his eyes out. He felt every bit of pain, but could not move. Thomas thought pain was never going to end, but next he felt himself being a rabbit. He knew he was Thomas de Torkvemada, but he was also a rabbit, looking into the eyes of an enormous snake. He felt every bit of hopelessness and when the snake started to swallow him whole, he felt every bit of suffocating revulsion that he never would’ve thought was possible to imagine. He was burned, he was broken, he died fast and he died slowly. He died thousands, millions of times, in thousands, millions different ways and each felt as first. And when the hell ended, he saw something he knew he could not comprehend, but still he understood the doom, the insanity of this no-place. He saw the fear, he saw the eternity, he saw the unknown.

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As her master ordered Catalina slid the plate with food through the gap in the door and stayed to see if he heard her coming. Maybe he would let her in. But even if not, just to hear his footsteps would be enough. Catalina was Torkvemada’s servant for over thirty five years. She was twenty when he took her in and often she did more for him than just cleaning his sheets and bringing him food. He didn’t show her much of compassion although they’d been intimate many times, but still to her he was everything. And no matter what terrible things people were saying about him she always believed him to be a great man, a saint perhaps. So now just hearing him walk around filled her with joy.

One moment she was smiling thinking about her master and in the next she was pressing her hands against her ears with her eyes popping out and mouth opened in a mute shout of horror. The second she heard the scream coming out of her master’s chambers her hair, touched by silver only in few places, turned completely white.

The unbearable scream coming from Torkvemada’s rooms continued for over a day until it stopped. No one dared to come close to the rooms. In fact the entire wing of the castle was emptied and the next highest inquisitors after Torkvemada himself forbade anyone to speak of what happened under the penalty of death. Catalina was secretly placed under the care of nuns and everything went back to normal. No one came to Thomas aid; he was left alone to scream endlessly with horror.

Thomas de Torkvemada died 16 of October 1498 and buried with honours. If anyone in his staff was asked how he died the answer would be- peacefully with a smile on his face, as if he was embraced by Jesus himself. And yet no one saw his face. He was buried in a closed casket.

Agent of terror

Joseph was sitting behind his kitchen table fully dressed, waiting for Gestapo. He was told to do so and obedient man that he was, he didn't think to object. He had an idea that this visit was not a harmless kind. In fact, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be back once they take him to whatever place Gestapo was taking the Jews these days. But he couldn't care less. He was dying. Joseph lived for eighty years and had not a single day to regret and now, if his life journey came to an end what did it matter what kind of end it would be?

What Joseph didn't understand and found incredible to say the least, was that authorities would go through such a trouble to get rid off some dying old music teacher "Well if they need to..." he said to himself shrugging his shoulders in confusion.

Joseph waited for two days and on the morning of the third day he died, sitting behind the kitchen table, waiting.

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Black car stopped in front of the old apartment building in the west of Berlin. Back door opened and Eugen stepped out. Dressed in a black SS coat, he was holding the folder containing a file on Joseph. Eighty years old music teacher Joseph Bruner was Jewish on his father side and apart from his last stage tuberculosis there was nothing else to add. Certainly there was no real reason for Eugen to come here personally, to send one man would be more than enough. But he liked to brag about his thoroughness "no one is unimportant when it comes to Fuhrer's orders." He used to say. Of course the fact that he liked to be an agent of terror made it so much easier to uphold the reputation of a bulldog.

His youth, intelligence and ambitiousness had nothing to do with his extremely fast rise in the Gestapo hierarchy. It was pure and simple: Eugen Hitzig was born to be a part of Third Reich. It gave him freedom he always dreamed of. Even as a boy Eugen was unusually cruel, but back then he could never unleash his true nature. Bounded by society rules, he was withering, dreading the thought of becoming a banker like his father. Luckily Adolph Hitler didn't let this to happen, although in all fairness, Eugen didn't care whom to hunt, Jews or not. He would enjoy hunting Aryans just as much. Truth be told, he would kill his own parents if he wasn't beaten to it.

Eugen cruelty was beyond reasoning, he didn't do it for his career, for the money or power. He didn't even do it to appear fearsome in other's eyes. He was doing it because it made him happy. Once, when he was arresting his father's old friend and partner, who happened to have some Jewish relations, he was asked why he was doing what he did, what possible gain was worth more than his soul? He only laughed and asked in return "Why the drunk drinks, what is worth more than his dignity? Why you and my father bankrupted all the middle men turning the hardest blow of depression on them, what was worth more than your honesty? I'll tell you why, because we can. Because it makes us feel good."

Eugen wasn't an atheist, quite contrary, he was a strong believer. He believed that God made man a ruler of the Earth and everything on it belonged to him. And if so, a man had a right to do with what was rightfully his anything he desired. Needless to say, the strongest men had right to take and to do what they wanted, because if God did not intend equality between humans and over creatures why should there be any between men. Eugen was convinced that any man was in obligation to himself to live a life to the fullest, doing whatever made him happy and if it happens that others suffered in process, well such was life. So now he came here to enjoy his triumph, even if it was only over some old geezer.

Bruner should have been brought for interrogation two days ago, but Eugen had more important things to do and confident that the old man wouldn't go anywhere he decided it could wait until he was free to go to collect Bruner himself. Accompanied by two men convoy, with Schmeissers¹³ in their hands, he marched to the entrance of the building and walked inside. Old musician lived in a small apartment on the top floor, so it took Eugen and his men few minutes to get to the right door. As usual he knocked heavily and waited for the response. Just when he was about to repeat he heard the sound of opening locks. Eugen frowned, there were no footsteps coming to the door prior.

He had no time to think about it for long as the door opened and Bruner looking at them said:

"Hell, hello. What a pleasant surprise. Please, please, come in." as three men followed him through the hallway full of confusion and wonder, Joseph continued chatting along in most natural voice. "Welcome to my humble abode. Sorry for keeping you waiting. It seems that it takes me longer to get from one room to another nowadays. I remember when I moved in here forty years ago this place looked so tiny to me, now I think it's too big. Listen to me yapping. Please officers take a seat. Perhaps we'll have some tea, what do you say?"

Eugen was thrown off by such a greeting. No one ever met him in this manner, not since people started to recognize him for who he was. Not even when he wore civilian clothes, let alone with two armed men of convoy in SS uniforms. Something wasn't right with this old man. For one he didn't move like one. He moved graciously, smoothly like a young athlete. Not to mention his excitement for the visitors. He acted as though they were his dearest guests, not Gestapo agents. That annoyed Eugen greatly. This old fart took away his triumph 'we'll see how you'll sing in a moment' he thought maliciously.

To musician he said in a calm most friendly voice "Thank you Herr Bruner, tea would be lovely. I hope you don't mind my men. They're here for you protection."

"Oh please Herr Hitzig, the more the merrier." Somehow it sounded sarcastic.

Eugen grimaced in irritation. Someone told the old fart he was coming and now Bruner tried to turn this whole matter into some sort of charade 'all right, let's play a little'

"How is your health Herr Bruner? I've heard disturbing rumours that your tuberculosis has been acting up."

Situation started to become extremely weird. They were talking to each other as if they were old friends. Bruner set two cups of tea on the table and sat down with a sigh "Well what can I say. I have good days and bad. Nothing anyone can do now. But I'm an old man, my time has passed. Its young people like yourself, who have a life ahead of them." His smile was wicked and scary "at least I hope you have. Life is so fragile in such times." He raised his eyebrows in a question and asked sipping his tea "Mmm, perhaps your men would like to join us for cup of tea Herr Hitzig?"

There was something disturbing about Bruner's face. His eyes made it seem ageless, despite numerous wrinkles. Eugen started to feel like a kid in scary story, the one where poor and hungry he is being picked up by a smiling nice old lady, who turned out to be a witch, child - eater. 'Game's over' he thought and stood up.

"I'm afraid we have to go." Putting on his hat he ordered his men "take him."

Eugen turned to leave when he saw two solders were lying on the floor lifeless. He spun around snatching his Luger out. He saw old musician, or whoever it was, looking at him, holding cup of tea and

¹³ Automatic weapon designed in Hitler's Germany

smiling. This time his smile was outright terrifying. It was unusually long, almost ear to ear and what was worse it was growing longer.

When this gap, (not a smile any more, a gap) cut Bruner's face in two Eugen shrieked and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled the slide, reloading the camber and continued squeezing the trigger. Meanwhile Bruner's face disappeared entirely, revealing only a black hole. When Eugen looked into it he stopped squeezing, he froze hypnotized by its endless darkness. His mouth opened slowly in a wide gape and he started to scream with such an indescribable horror that no human vocal chords could ever produce. It was as if Eugen was not in this world any more but somewhere else, in a place where terror had a whole new meaning and the body that used to be Eugen Hitzig was only a transmitter now, from that unimaginable place, to our world.

3

Death of the nameless

"Excuse me. Do you know when the next train is coming?"

Hoyt Simons raised his head from the paper and saw two teenagers, a boy and a girl of about eighteen holding hands looking at him with big innocent eyes "It should be here any minute" he lied in an instant with a charming smile. The last train just left and Hoyt saw it leaving. He didn't think twice about lying, because that's what he was a LIER. Not just any kind, but the one whose entire existence was a series of lies. For any other person lie is a way of achieving one's goal, it has a purpose (the question of morals is a separate issue all together), but meaningless lie rises a man, or better to say lowers him to a different level, level where chaos rules. Mostly, those who let themselves sink that low, try to find their way out, because once they have a glimpse of the madness that chaos is all about, no one in their right mind chooses to stay in it. Not Hoyt though, he was one of the exceptional ones, who dove into madness head in.

In some ways Hoyt's mind was weaker than most people, but it wasn't the reason why he became what he was. Being attuned to the madness, he was too perceptive to the insane voice inside him and rather rejecting any crazy idea that popped into his head Hoyt readily accepted it, making irrational decisions, doing things that made no sense. He raised his head from the paper again hearing laughs coming from the further side of the train station. He looked to his left in the direction the laughs were coming from and saw two thugs approaching the teenage couple sitting on the bench, waiting for the train, he told them would come soon. It was obvious what was going to happen next. It was closer to night time; the train station was empty, with no one in sight beside him. Boy was no match to two oversized brutes and so he and the girl became an easy target. Hoyt smiled, folded his paper, got up and walked away. He wasn't a coward and he wasn't weak either. His combat training made him into someone who could take care of half a dozen of such hooligans in ten seconds and yet the thought of coming to kids' aid never occurred to him.

Hoyt wasn't a schemer, not in general. When he lied to these teenagers about the train, he wasn't planning to get them into trouble. He didn't know what would happen. Truth be told, he didn't care. He was going through life by indulging every little thing that came to his mind. And strangely enough ninety percent of the times he did well for himself. But that wasn't the best part of such an existence. The best part was to witness an outcome of his doings. How good it felt to see that such a small lie like saying that train should come soon when it wouldn't, could actually cause great deal of trouble. It was like tipping one shelf in the library and watching the rest tumbling down. He wondered weather he would read tomorrow in the paper about rape and brutal beating of teenage boy and girl in the train station, or maybe something even worse. He liked to test fragileness of fate by pocking it here and there, watching with amusing wonder how strong or weak it sometimes could be.

Nothing in his previous experiences suggested the reason for the way he was. In fact he had a very normal life. He was loved as a child and even though his father died in a construction site accident when Hoyt was a boy, he was raised by his mother for whom he was the whole world. And Hoyt loved her in his own way.

But that didn't change him a bit and when it came to consideration of others, including his mother, Hoyt was unreachable. So much so, that when his cousin, his mother's favourite niece, came to tell that she was getting married, he seduced her and sent photos of her kissing midsection of some man (his in that instance) to her fiancé. He did this just to see what would happen. He wasn't even that attracted to his cousin. And when he heard that she took her own life by poison, the only thing he felt was curiosity.

He had no signs of remorse even when his beloved mother had her first heart attack hearing the news about her niece. She died shortly after. He was twenty five then and his trail of destruction only begun. Hoyt was always good at persuading people, it was his gift and his curse. He was convinced that as long as you lie, people would believe anything. It's only once you started telling the truth, they would stop.

With time he became invisible in a way. No one knew him, who he was, what he did. He was one person and then he was the other. He worked for the British Intelligence, whereas the Soviet Union believed him to be their double agent. He was a businessman and he was a broker, he was a social service worker and he was a teacher, he was a car salesman and he was.....well, so on. One might think that he was an exceptional human being and one would be right, but it was not because he could do all these things, he could do none of them; it was because he could lie so freely, so senselessly and yet people believed he was good at what he did.

The most disturbing fact about Hoyt was that he had no idea who he was either. If someone asked him to tell one true thing about his life, he wouldn't be able to do so. He forgot what the truth tasted like. He wasn't even sure about his true name anymore and although he remembered his mother calling him by it, to him it meant nothing, since his mother like everyone else believed him to be someone he was not.

Hoyt Simons, Ralph Perkins, Edward Lufkin, Simon Roth, Julian Smith or put simply a man with a truly lost soul, was coming upstairs to one of his many offices.

"Good evening Mr. Johnson, I was about to go home, do you need me to stay?" His secretary Laura Marks was unattractive middle age woman, someone whom Hoyt normally wouldn't give a glance. But she was efficient enough to run an office on her own and although she called herself a secretary, in truth was the one who was doing all the work. Yet she was convinced that Hoyt was a brilliant business man, who had very little time and that is why she has to attend most of the meetings in his stead.

"Did you have to work late again?" he responded, in which seemed like genuine regret "I'm sorry Laura, I got held up by this meeting, big opportunity. A possible merger with Williams Co. I can't let this one slip. I'll probably be out all week. I'm sorry to drop it on you like that."

"Don't worry Mr. Johnson, everything is under control. I know how busy you are. Men like you don't sit around office all day. That's why I'm here" her eyes were sparkling and in this moment she was almost beautiful "I really hope merger will work."

"I don't want to sound too hasty, but I think it will"

"That's great news" she said smiling "if you need me I can stay Mr. Johnson. My holiday can wait. "

"No, no" he protested "I feel guilty as it is. Besides I just came to take some files home with me. Another big meeting tomorrow, better to prepare. Go on Laura, have a good holiday. I'll probably see you in few days." Before she could ask him he smiled and showed her a key "Don't worry I'll lock up."

“All right Mr. Johnson. Good luck tomorrow.”

“Thank you. I’ll need it.”

Laura Marks walked out of the office. It was the last time anyone saw Hoyt Simons, Ralph Perkins, Edward Lufkin, Simon Roth, Julian Smith.....man with no name, alive. No one would remember him, there would be no service, he would be secretly cremated perishing into unknown. And the last contribution to the countless lives he destroyed would be an old janitor, former soldier and participant of slaughter in Rwanda, who would be found dead next to a man whom no one really knew. The face of the man would be horribly disfigured, with a jaws wide open in an endless scream.

4

Link

Michael felt someone shaking him. He opened his eyes and saw a pretty, young stewardess leaning over him, smiling apologetically “I’m sorry Sir, but we’re landing, you need to put your sit belt on.”

“Thank you Joanne” seeing her name tag from the corner of his eye, he responded calling stewardess by her name, making it a little more personal. That was one of his habits stuck from the days of being an agency operative (people are usually much more responsive once you get personal with them). Stewardess’s smile became a little bit of a flirting kind as she straightened up, which made Michael remember that he was still young enough to be noticed by women, even as fresh and pretty as this one. ‘Still some left in me, I guess’ he thought following stewardess with his eyes.

Ryanair jet London to Milan landed 5 pm Milan time. Michael still felt dizzy from his sleep. Harry was right; his sleeps became as normal as of regular folks. For more than three months now he was leading the life of retiree, travelling around, visiting places he had never been before, few that there was. His last stay was London, where he spent two weeks and felt well rested now. He didn’t have to worry about paperwork, sending memos to superiors who weren't going to read them. And most importantly he didn't have to answer to anyone but himself anymore.

His life would be as comfortable as he remembered only having during his childhood, if not for one thing. Michael was still haunted by the mysterious dark figure he saw on the tape. He tried to stop thinking about it, but it never worked for long. Eventually his thoughts were always back to the tape. Although, he had to be honest with himself, he never tried too hard. He didn’t really want to let it go.

The most obvious reason, the reason Michael tried to hide the truth behind, was having some unfinished business, something that he needed to be done with before moving on. But there was much more to it than that. He was who he was, nothing could change that and as appealing as the thought of complete rest was, it became more of an unrealistic dream, something that you like to think about, but deep inside know you can’t let yourself have.

Throughout his career he mostly worked on his own (back-up was a luxury he could never afford). And now the lack of official documentation was irrelevant, because in the end retiree or not he was Michael Gordon, the man who brought down six terrorist groups, becoming one of the few people who could say they had literally saved thousands of lives. He did it without hundreds of agents watching his back and no training in the world would've saved him if he didn’t have something inside of him, something that was stirring up his emotions into cold calculated rage. This something he was born with was still in him and would remain there till the day he died, making him do what he did best- stop bad things from happening.

Hatred for any kind of injustice would be the simplest way to describe the force inside him. Even as a boy seeing someone being bullied raised his anger, driving instinct of self-preservation away, which involved him in more troubles than his parents could handle. That is why he joined the army, going to war in Vietnam and why he joined the agency going to war against terrorism. In the end it led him to the present point in his life, where he sought a mysterious person who thought the justice was some toy to play with.

And so he continued to investigate, spending a lot of time on the internet, calling on favours from the people who owed him, travelling around looking for the evidence of the death with similar circumstances as Al Hassani's. He was able to dig up some strange stories associated with the phantom character, but all of them sounded more like a scary fictions than anything real. Much like Dr.Tohan's bedtime story. Michael wouldn't even consider them as a find of any value at all, if not for one unsettling connection between all these stories: no matter how different circumstances of these stories were, there was always a figure whose face was covered by darkness and who made his victims die screaming horribly. Batul Tohan was right, it was this figure that Michael saw on the tape. He was sure of that now.

The last two weeks he spent in London trying to find out about the mental patient Batul Tohan was talking about had brought him nothing. But during the hours of net searching, he came across an odd response on one of the forums, where the theme of the discussion was global terrorism. The response was: "All these rotten men will find themselves in the end screaming the endless scream of horror." It wasn't just one of the hateful remarks people would write in righteous anger. It was more of the statement of the fact. And the words rotten men reminded Michael the story of Dr Tohan, he used the same phrase to describe the victims of the dark phantom in his story.

He had to call on one of the favours again, but Michael was able to locate the author of the response. It was a Sergio Perry, a sixty years old history professor, who lived in Milan. Michael had a feeling that this man could give him some answers. It wasn't his first visit to Milan and Michael knew his way around. It didn't take him long to get to one of the hotels he used to stay in on his previous visits, so after taking a shower and grubbing couple of slices of pizza for bite to eat, he called a cab.

"Eighty six Corso Magenta, please" while speaking fluently in several languages, including Italian, Michael didn't always use them. First of all because it was safer to play clueless tourist in his line of work and secondly often it was possible to hear some useful information listening to people who thought he didn't understand them. He felt dirty doing it, but sometimes it was necessary.

He was looking at a five story building, old but in a good condition. The street was not as busy as the centre of the city, but busy enough to have cars lined one after another, filling up all parking spaces parallel to the house. Michael looked around and then up, trying to figure out which windows belonged to the apartment he was looking for. Counting to the third floor, he decided it was most definitely last three windows from the right corner of the building. Such a precautionary scan wasn't necessary for him anymore, but habits die hard. Giving another glance around, Michael walked inside the building.

Just as he thought, professor's apartment was located on the far right side of the hallway. Michael knocked on the door, took step back and stood waiting. After a while he heard sound of locks being open without asking who was knocking. When the door opened he saw a small man in his sixties with intelligent, but distracted eyes behind the glasses. The man was wearing an old sweater and slightly shabby pants. He looked at Michael wondrously and said:

"Come posso aiutare- How can I help you?"

Faking a heavy English ascent Michael answered "Sto cercando il professor Sergio Perry – I'm looking for professor Sergio Perry."

Man nodded “Yes, it’s me” he responded in almost perfect English.

Michael’s source told him that professor Sergio Perry was a famous history expert and was giving lectures all over the world including UK and United States. Knowing that professor spoke English and another twelve languages fluently, Michael thought it would be better if he thought of him as just some regular private investigator, who came for expert assistance, looking for a lead. Which wasn’t entirely untrue, but the fact that he was ex CIA agent, a man of special skills, he wanted to leave out (such an introduction wasn’t exactly an ice breaker). And so, there was no need for professor to know he spoke Italian.

Michael sighed in relief and said smiling “Great, you speak English. Excuse me professor, my name is Michael Gordon. You don’t know me, but I’m looking for something and I was told you are the man to see.”

Looking amused Sergio Perry gestured Michael with his hand to enter “Please come in. I’d be happy to help anyway I can.”

“Thank you, very much professor.” He said coming in “I’ve spent quite some time to find you. Streets in this city are very confusing.”

The corridor of the apartment wasn’t very big, furnished only with a shoe stand and a coat hanger. Rooms were on the other hand surprisingly spacious, filled with book shelves from top to bottom. ‘How many years do you have to spend collecting these books, let alone reading them’ Michael thought. Out loud he said:

“When I see so many books, it makes me feel illiterate.”

Professor waved his hand dismissively “Don’t over think it, to read that much you have to devote yourself to books entirely, giving up all the rest in your life. But looking at you gives me an impression that you’ve done just so, only over something other than books. What do you do, if don’t mind me asking?”

Michael didn’t mind “I worked in the embassy, handling security. I’m kind of working on my own now.”

“Oh, Central Intelligence Agency.” Man nodded.

Michael didn’t get surprised easily, but now being discovered only after two minutes of conversation astonished him. His eyebrows went up in amazement making the man smile: “Don’t look so surprised. I read a lot about espionage.”

‘So much for keeping low profile’ Michael thought saying to professor “Makes you a dangerous man.”

He shrugged “Not really. There is a lot more people who know about different agencies and their tactics than you might think. But most of them don’t care, just like me. I read a book once, written by someone who spent more than half of his life working as a spy; he said that ‘espionage is a special form of paranoia’.”

Michael laughed wholeheartedly “You’ve just demeaned twenty years of my life to nothing. But you know, I think whoever said that was right.”

“Don’t take it the wrong way” professor’s tone suggested that Michael misunderstood him “When you spent time protecting you country from the hidden enemy it’s one thing, but when agencies of two civilized courtiers trying to fool each other creating a threat to the public in the process, is another. But

what do I know, I'm no agent. Besides if I start talking about prehistoric European horticulture it'd probably be your definition of wasting time. We all have our obsessions and my guess is that's how anything gets done, if we cared about nothing, believed in nothing, the world would stop. I don't know if that would be such a bad thing, but.....anyhow I got carried away, I have a tendency to do that. Please Mr. Gordon if I start to blabber too much don't hesitate to stop me."

"That is quite all right. I've come to ask and to listen, so nothing you say would be uninteresting. And please call me Michael."

"Very well then Michael, you're my type of person. So tell me what have you come to ask me?" without waiting for Michael to say anything he continued "but before you do, perhaps you would like something to drink. Wine - red, white or maybe some tea or coffee?"

"Coffee would be just fine. Thank you."

"Ahh, an American. Although you don't have an accent. You must've spent a lot of time away from home." He raised his hands in apology "look at me blubbing again. I'll be back with a coffee momentarily" he got up and quickly left the room. Small yet full of energy and determination Sergio Perry inspired the feeling of respect.

'I wish I could be so lively when I'm his age' Michael thought jealously. He looked around the room. It was as big as others he saw from the corridor and also filled with books.

'There must be thousands of them' Michael thought. incredulously

Professor's voice called from the kitchen: "How do you drink your coffee Michael?"

"Black, no sugar. Thank you" Michael called back.

Professor walked in the room a minute later handing him coffee cup on the little plate, "You really should revise your lifestyle Michael. Black coffee isn't good for you."

Michael nodded taking a sip "Yes, but it was the only saviour in my line of work."

Making himself comfortable in his armchair the professor asked "So, Michael, what can I do for you?"

Michael already had a reply prepared, but since he had no need to pretend to be someone else, he decided it was the best to be straight. More and more he was becoming convinced that Sergio Perry was the kind of man who didn't appreciate dishonesty and being a hard man to fool, lying could only provoke hostility in him.

So instead of covering up, Michael started by telling the truth "I had a very strange case few months back. The man I was looking for was brought to me...how should I put this.....in unnatural state of death, or to be more precise he died from exhaustion, by screaming."

Professor frowned "Why did you assume that I would know anything about it, or really I should ask, how did you know I would?"

"I found your statement in the forum about terrorists. I can't say how I knew, but I had a one of those hunches that you might have some information, something that can shine a light on this mystery."

Professor moved his glasses placing them more comfortably on his nose and said "There is more to what you told me, isn't there?" he looked at him closely "There is no point in our conversation Michael if

you're not prepared to lay it all out. Now, you don't have to worry about sounding crazy, if I learned anything from my countless studies it's that nothing is impossible."

Michael jaws tightened "You're right professor, there is more. I received the camera that initially was intended to record a torture procedure, but instead it recorded something else. The first thing that it showed was a dark figure behind the table, then I heard a voice coming from behind the camera saying my name. The voice belonged to the man who was brought to me in horrible condition. Obviously when he was talking to this mysterious figure he was under the impression it was me. If all that sounds strange professor, it's nothing compared to the scream that followed through the entire tape. And on top of that the figure on the tape just disappeared and when I tried to rewind it to see if it was some kind of montage, figure wasn't there any more.

I wanted to show recording to one of the man I worked with, but it appeared blank, there was nothing. I thought maybe camera was programmed to erase the recording. But it didn't look like anything sophisticated and besides, it doesn't explain the disappearance of the dark figure. I'm telling you professor I can't make sense of any of it. I've been searching for an answer for three months and all I could find was some old grandpa's stories, which by the way scared hell out of me, because there just too damn many connections between these stories and what I saw."

Sergio listened without interrupting. Not once he showed any sign of disbelief, on the contrary his impression suggested that he believed every word. Instead of relief, it gave Michael another thing to worry about. Sergio kept quiet for a while and when he spoke he sounded calm and deadly serious "I'm afraid the answer might not bring you a comfort you seek Michael. You can choose to forget about all of it and move on, because I'm telling you right now that your failure to find an answer has nothing to do with your ability as an investigator. No one would be able to find this dark figure unless he chose to find you and believe me you don't want that."

Michael shook his head stubbornly "I need to know professor."

"Well, it's your choice. Now, before I start I want to show you something." He went to one of the book shelves, and started to scan through the lower level shelf, pointing his finger. Suddenly realising something he turned and asked "How good is your Italian Michael?"

Feeling sorry now that he lied about knowledge of the language Michael was compelled to continue this cover up, if only not to seem rude "I can understand most of it and speak some"

Professor nodded and returned to his search. Finally finding what he was looking for, he took out a book and reached for something in the appeared opening. He brought out what seemed to be a piece of cloth and put the book back. He returned to his seat and handing his extraction to Michael, said:

"My great, great grandfather was one of the few who met the Faceless man and survived. Met is a wrong word actually, had a glimpse of him, would be correct way of putting it. That's what he wrote the next day."

Michael saw unclear scribbling obviously wrote by a shaky hand. He squinted trying to make out the words and with some difficulty read:

"I see the blackness in its face, I see the blackness and I can't stop.....there is nothing....I can't stop.....please make me blind"

While he was looking at the cloth professor continued:

"My great, great grandfather was a common thief when that happened, I don't know the exact circumstances of this incident, but I found out that he became a priest after that. Apparently he saw

something that changed him drastically. And although from that day onward he led a decent life, was loved and respected by many, I was told that he was still afraid of the dark, sleeping only with a light of the candle.”

Listening professor intently, Michael lowered his eyes to the cloth again. Message radiated with horror, he could feel it. Looking up at professor puzzled, he said “I can’t say that this makes me less confused, professor.”

“Precisely” Sergio Perry nodded “You can’t make rational conclusion in this case. And that is what I’m trying to tell you, if you’re looking for logic, you’re looking in a wrong place. There is none. The Faceless Man is not a person, Michael. It’s a connection between our world and the eternity, the nothingness.”

Michael shook his head refusing to understand “I’m sorry professor this all sounds too fantastic, crazy actually. First of all what with all this names - The Faceless Man, Man with the face of the shadow, Hollow face man ... what is he some kind of dark avenger or something?”

“You’re looking at it from the wrong angle” he explained patiently “He’s no avenger, he’s nothing, there is no he actually, at least in a normal sense. Let me try to explain. Throughout the history of human kind we witnessed that the fear is the most natural emotion people experience, like love or hatred. Don’t you agree?”

When Michael nodded professor continued “I devoted my entire life to find the origin of the fear in us, which is why I became a historian.” His eyes become even more distracted “I never believed in Darwin theory, too many holes in it. You must admit that all these scientific explanations to our evolution sound phoney.

In fact I think it’s just a pathetic attempt to cover up our fear of unknown. I believe that at some point we were created pure, until something happened, which created a black hole. I’ve been searching for a long time now and my search led me to believe that this hole is the origin of our fear. And do you know how it was formed in the first place?” before Michael could answer professor went on “I have a theory. I think it appeared when a man had done something unspeakable, something so bad, so unreasonable that it questioned the very nature of order. I have no idea how long ago that happened and that’s not important, what matters that once it happened it created a link with unknown. Do you understand what I mean by that?”

Michael was frustrated. It was all gibberish to him “I’m sorry professor I don’t. What any of it has to do with the man I’m looking for?”

“You’re not looking for man, don’t you understand” professor’s patience was inexhaustible “It’s as if you tried to look for an air.”

“You mean he doesn’t exist?”

“No, no, no” Sergio waved his hands “that’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m saying he does exist, but not the way you think. The air does exist, doesn’t it? You just don’t see it.”

“But professor it doesn’t make any sense. I saw this Faceless Man or whatever you call him. Maybe not his face, but his shape quite clearly. And again, you just told me yourself that one of your ancestors saw him as well.”

“Well, you can actually see the particles of air through the special equipment, can’t you? But that’s beside the point, again Michael, you trying to put you own spin on the whole matter. You must understand that not even everything in our universe plays by human rules and let me assure you what

Faceless Man represents is much bigger than our universe. He represents the origin of our fear. And what are we all afraid of the most? The unknown, the incomprehensible. That is why the fear has no face, that is why The Faceless Man has no face, ergo the names. When he comes for those he needs to take, he comes in a form that our limited mind can perceive, after that I imagine he drags them through hell beyond, to other place.”

Michael frowned. “What place?”

Professor took a sip from his cup and said “I used to be terrified of dark; I suppose most of us do at some point in our lives, but in my case it was so bad I still have an intensely clear memory of this fear. I remember hating having to go to the bathroom at night. In fact, I only went when I had no other options but to wet my bed or go. There was this unbearable moment when opening the door I saw nothing but darkness and I was almost sure then, that someone was waiting in there for me. As much as I wanted to turn on the light it was impossibly hard for me to do, fearing the darkness I also feared to see what was out there. But it was not the worst moment. The worst moment was, when I was finally switching on the light, for a split second I was actually seeing someone waiting and my mind was starting to scream with a horrific insanity. Only for a friction of the moment mind you, then the logic was kicking in making me realize that the room was empty all along. But in that split second, when the light shines on all of the unknown fears and while still not completely sure, you think that all of them are true, you loose your mind. You watch yourself loosing your mind.

I believe that The Faceless Man’s victims dive into to such moment and he makes them realize that it’s eternal. It’s never going to end. There is no redemption, no going back. They forever trapped between the darkness and the light, between known and unknown, in the moment when they still not sure, but think they see their darkest fears.”

He shrugged “That, of course, is only my theory on horror, for someone it might be the bridges that are most terrifying things of all”

Michael thought he misheard “Did you say bridges?”

“Oh, yes, you heard me right. You’d be surprised how many different types of fear people have. There are hundred of thousands. I read a book once about it; there are people who are afraid of buttons, if you can believe that.”

Actually Michael couldn’t. This whole conversation was uncomfortably creepy. So still trying to deny all of what professor told him Michael suggested “Maybe there is some sick sect, which formed long time ago, going around spreading what they think is justice, but really is just another murder. I admit the way they kill is unsettling, but I think these rumours of supernatural being they’d spread themselves. I’m sure as a historian you aware that such cults are not something unheard of.”

Professor smiled with pity “You don’t really believe that Michael. You just like one of those people who try to squeeze their existence into a small box, refusing to look past it. But even those people deep down know that there is more beyond this box of theirs. And that’s where the fear is born. You know that what you desperately try to explain has no explanation, the quicker you accept it the easier it would be for you to find your answer.”

Michael sighed “All right. Let’s say you right and what you said is true. How do I find this Faceless Man?”

“Why would you want to?” the incredulity in professor’s voice was so pure that it made Michael wandered ‘why indeed?’

This made him angry, which gave another boost to his determination or in another words-stubbornness

“Because that's not the way it supposed to be. Those criminals maybe the lowest scums on earth, but that's all the more reason for people to judge them. I'm telling you professor, I don't like the idea of someone doing my job for me. My whole life I've been dealing with bad guys and if there is anyone deserve punishment I myself and people like me would deal with it, not some abomination out of hell.”

Sergio took off his glasses and wiped them with his sweater “Michael, Michael, Michael. You trying to give a form to something, enormity of which we can't begin to understand. You think that you have complete rights to this world and your will is what weaves its destiny, which is true to some degree. But you're a part of natural order and The Faceless Man bears a part in it too. Our fate does not rest in our hands Michael. If it was, human race would be long gone. Humans are sick, we infected ourselves with fear. Take the arm race of the cold war for instance; can you explain it any other way than an act of lunacy? It was a fear, which we created, that drove us insane for a while and thank God we woke up soon enough. You see Michael, there is nothing mystical about The Faceless Man. It's only logical that our fear has a form.” He stopped for a second, put his glasses back on and looking into Michael's eyes dead serious, without his usual hint of amusement professor said “Man has created the fear by his unreasonable deed and he created The Faceless Man as well.”

Trying to get his mind around the idea of eternity Michael said “I'm not an atheist professor, I want to make this clear, I believe in God and devil and if there is heaven I'm pretty sure our world is hell. We can agree in one thing though, we - humans, are responsible for that. So my question to you, why all this, isn't it a punishment enough to exist in the craziness we call life?”

“When we picture hell, we picture the place where we're being punished for all our sins. I believe in that to be true. You might be right and our world is an actual hell or it might be that hell is more horrible than we can imagine. But horrible it might be, it still consists of the series of events that will continue to happen to us. So as much as the thought of being sent to hell worries us, that is not our fear. It is a fear of unknown that lives within us. And the reason we even know about it, is because of the link. The link is The Faceless Man and The Faceless Man is our fear. Do you see the circle now Michael?”

Michael nodded “But why only selected men, professor? Why not all criminals: killers, rapists, thieves, molesters and other degenerates? Why only some, I can't see the pattern.”

“We can only speculate. I imagine those selected ones crossed a line. You know that all we - people do, we do in pursue of some goal and most of the criminals –degenerates, how you called them” Sergio smiled “are no different, they're trying to make their life better. The fact of their wrong doing is another matter. But there are men, who, like I said, crossed the line where the logic ends, they break without reason. Those are lost souls and they can't be brought back. If others can be changed even if it means going though hell, lost soul is ruined forever and has no place in our universe.”

“In that case there are a couple of things that doesn't add up. If all you say is true and only those who truly lost get attention of The Faceless Man, why in all stories I've heard, men who'd been through something terrible become The Faceless Man. From what I could gather they'd done nothing wrong, on the contrary were victims of awful crimes. What did they do to deserve such a fate?”

Frowning professor sighed “Most probably those unreasonable bandits committed horrible crimes against these unfortunate men and in doing so they've deformed them in a way that created a bond with unknown. You see, Michael, until there is destruction and fear in us, the link with unknown will remain and so will The Faceless Man. As long as he exists in this world there will always be some poor soul who had to take his turn in entering the circle, to continue the legacy of The Faceless Man. The link will always draw someone to itself.”

“What about all those who seemed to escape their punishment, monsters like Hitler, Stalin and many others? If any should be chosen by The Faceless Man, it's them.”

“Who’s to say they weren’t. History has a very substantial flaw, Michael, it’s recorded by men. Men who did not want to face the truth, men for whom it was just easier to record things the way they wanted them to appear.”

“Are you suggesting professor that the death of Hitler, for instance, was falsified?” Michael was smiling doubtfully.

“Hitler had many doubles. That’s no secret” professor answered seriously “Now how can we be sure that it wasn’t one of them whose body was presented to public? How can we tell for sure, when and how the real Hitler died? In the end, like I said we can only speculate.”

“Do you have any evidence of what you’re saying professor?”

Professor smiled “I’m not interested in evidence Michael. I’m interested in research. I look through what people put on the paper and I try to read between the lines to get the picture. That’s why I surrounded myself with books.” Trying to make a point he gestured with his hand toward the shelves.

The next question was on Michael’s mind throughout the whole conversation “Have you ever seen any of his victims professor, have you ever heard the scream?”

For the first time since Michael started talking to him Sergio Perry’s eyes showed the hint of discomfort, nervousness “Unfortunately I have.”

Michael waited for him to continue, but professor was silent. In fact his chatting mood vanished completely. Feeling guilty and uncomfortable, Michael decided that it was the time for him to go; he didn’t want to know any more than he already did. He finally rose. This was the end of the meeting. “I thank you professor. I’m still not sure if I understand, but I think that I believe you, at least as far as a confused person can.”

Professor shook his head rising as well “None of us understand Michael. We can’t be sure of anything, we can only presume. But maybe that is a basis of the big plan God has for us.” He winked and his face for a moment revealed all the goodness and wisdom of this man, making Michael glad that he met him.

“I hope I’ll have a chance to see you again professor” he extended his hand for a shake “It was pleasure to meet you.”

Sergio Perry shook Michael’s hand saying “You will young man, you can be sure of that.”

5

Nino’s story

Michael took a deep breath. He was standing outside of the building, building where he spent an hour talking to Professor Sergio Perry. This hour changed him, making him see the world from the entirely different angle. In everything that appeared before his eyes, he saw more than one layer now. He was standing looking at the world within world. Reading things like that in books, he never really took them seriously. And although deep inside he believed that there must be more to our existence than what we see, he couldn’t imagine coming across it so closely.

Feeling light-headed from all these new emotions, Michael decided it was best to have a walk. It would give time for the received information to sink in and maybe it wouldn't feel like he was losing his mind anymore.

He walked about couple of blocks when passing by the alley he heard some noise on the far end. As he turned to see what was happening he saw a boy of no more than sixteen, cornered by four men, two of whom were on the watch-out and two others spread from one side of the alley to the other trying to cut any way out for the boy. It was darker in the alley than on the street, but Michael was able to see the desperation on the boy's face when men started to close in on him. Michael frowned, turned and started in their direction. Two that were on the watch-out noticed him pretty much straight away:

“Voi, stronzo, va a farti fottere - You, bastard, F**k off”

“What is going on here?” Michael replied in English

“Go...Go” said one of the men with a heavy Italian accent.

Trying to play an ignorant tourist Michael squinted as if he couldn't see what was happening. The Italian swore again and reached under his jacket leisurely drawing his pistol. Thinking it would scare Michael off, he waved it and said again “Go.”

The Italian appeared to be lefty, which gave Michael advantage of moving closer to the wall away from the second guy on his left. Michael was still ten meters away, when he exploded into motion moving slightly to the right to avoid the bullet. The Italian only had time to fire once, but by that time Michael was by his side gripping his wrist with his left hand and hitting the man's elbow with his right. There was a cracking noise and looking astonishingly at his arm, which appeared now in unnatural angle, Italian started to scream in agony.

Although the other men reacted quickly, which suggested previous combat experience, they were still not quick enough. Not for Michael. Shielding himself with a man he attacked Michael grabbed his gun and sent three bullets exactly between the eyes of each man. The whole incident took no more than five seconds, including breaking neck of the screaming Italian.

As he dropped the dead body, he turned to the boy extending the palms of his hand towards him in non-threatening gesture “Non abbiate paura - Do not be afraid”

“I won't harm you”

The boy was watching him with eyes that looked like they were about to pop out.

“I want to help” Michael tried again

The boy relaxed a little bit, but remained tense, on his guard, in case he needed to run. Seeing that the boy was still suspicious of him, Michael stepped aside, showing with his hand that boy could go if he wished “Go if you want, but I might be able to help.”

The boy suddenly sat on the ground and started to shake. Michael approached him and squatted beside the boy “It's alright. It's over.” He said putting his arm around the boy's shoulders.

“We have to get out of here. Police will be here soon”

The boy nodded and got up. As soon as they were out of the alley Michael asked “What's your name?”

“Nino” the boy responded in a shaky voice

“Ok, Nino. My name is Michael. Now that we got acquainted properly why don't you tell me what those men wanted from you?”

Believing now that Michael was not going to harm him, Nino started to talk with hope that maybe he could actually help him “Those were Bruno Gavani's men. Bruno has been looking for me for a month now.”

Bruno Gavani was a member of Satino family, one of the largest crime organizations in Italy. Bruno was only a middle man, but he was important enough to draw attention to himself. And although Michael did not pursue any mafia organizations directly, he came across some files on Satino family and he certainly heard of Bruno Gavani before.

“Why would he be interested in you, Nino?”

The boy swallowed nervously and looked at Michael uncertainly. “Go on, boy. You can trust me.”

Finally decided Nino begun his tale.

“Like I said it all started a little over a month ago. My father owned a small grocery store. It was right under our apartment and our whole family worked there, which really only included my parents ,my little sister and me. It was Monday late morning, a quiet time for the store, when a car stopped in front of our door and two men with dark beards appeared in window-shopping coming to the car. As they came closer to the back of the car, the trunk popped open, they took some box out of it and then left. The car drove off afterwards and that was it.

Later this week news showed a photo of the same bearded men we saw on Monday and it said that they've been involved in bombing of Palazzo Real. A lot of tourists died. Just before the day the car stopped in front of our shop my father installed cameras (be cursed that day)” boy said grinding his teeth “so the whole thing was taped and what's worse is that it recorded the plates of the car. That stupid careless brute Bruno sent a marked car to the meeting.

My father obviously wanted to show the tape to the police, but my mother was so scared that he couldn't just ignore her begging and was convinced to forget about it. And that would be it, if my father wouldn't be such a naïve man. He talked to someone about it, asking advice and the word reached Bruno that my father had evidence against him. Long story short, Bruno sent cleaners to take care of the matter.”

Nino's face became as white as paper and fearing that boy might faint Michael led him to the bench they've been passing by “I can't get this memory out of my head” Nino continued as they sat down “I see it in my dreams all the time” he started to cry now. Michael let him be, knowing that the boy needed to deal with his grief by himself if he was ever to move on. It wasn't too long until the boy was able to go on with his story:

“My father was behind the counter when they walked in and so was I, but just before they did, I leaned to pick up some change I dropped. I heard them asking my father's name and I saw my father reaching for the shot gun. I still don't know why I kept hiding, even after they've shot him and my mother, as she run out to the noise. I just kept hiding, I knew even then what a cowardly way that was and still I accepted that.

But then my little sister ran out too. I imagined them pointing their guns at her so clearly, it felt as if I was actually looking at them. And then something happened, something that overpowered my fear of death.” The boy fell quiet for a second, thinking

“I guess it was the fear for what would happen to my sister that was stronger than the fear of death. It was so overwhelming I jumped out of the counter and yelling from the top of my lungs grabbed my

father's shot gun, shooting almost instantly. I can't explain how I did it, I had never even held a weapon before, my father never let me, but I managed to blow the heads off of two killers before they had any time to react. I didn't even see their faces." Nino's eyes became distant in a way reminding Michael an endless horizon.

Feeling unexplained discomfort, seeing him like that Michael put his arm on the boy's shoulder to bring him back. Nino blinked and lowered his head as if in shame "There is nothing more to tell. All I have left is my sister now and she is all I care about. I don't care about revenge; I don't care about my shame or what's right and wrong, for that matter. Bruno can have this cursed tape, he can sell bombs to terrorists or blow half of Italy himself, for all I care. But I can't just go and tell him that, he won't believe me. So here I am, running for my life, trying to survive, trying to keep my sister safe. The worst part of it is I can feel that I'll loose eventually. I don't now what to do."

Michael felt even deeper desperation in the boy's voice than he saw it in his eyes twenty minutes ago in the alley. He has seen sorrow before. To his shame he was the cause of one few times in his life, but Michael never felt as sorry for anyone as he felt for this boy now. Somehow it was all too personal; maybe because he couldn't hide behind his job anymore.

"Why don't I take you home? You rest today and tomorrow we'll figure out what to do."

The boy looked at him with eyes so full of hope, it was painful for Michael to look at them "I promised that I'll help and I will." Michael got up "Now, let's go home."

6

Good men are hard to find

Nino and his sister lived twelve blocks over from where Michael found him. The boy said that his father's shop was not too far from the alley. He made a stupid mistake of coming back to the shop, because the money he managed to grub running out, only lasted for so long. He was hopping to get in quickly, take some more from the hiding-place and get out before anyone noticed. Of course it wasn't that easy, Bruno put his men to watch the place, figuring Nino would come back one day. The rest Michael knew.

It was a small room in the basement. Nino was renting it from an old man, who took pity on a teenage boy with a little sister on his hands and didn't take much "He let us stay even when rent was due and I didn't have money. He even fed us. I'm eternally grateful to him."

Nino sister's name was Sophia. She was a beautiful eight year old girl with light olive skin, long thick dark hair and big innocent dark eyes. She pressed herself against her brother frightened of Michael and Nino's attempts to convince her he was their friend didn't work. Michael smiled and squatted to the girl's level "Hello little one. I'm friend of your brother. Do you love your brother?" when the little girl nodded Michael said "Your brother is very brave and he loves you very much, that is why he asked me to help him to make you safe. I promised I would. So, Sophia, can I be your friend too?"

The little girl let go of her brother and said "You can call me Sophie."

Michael smiled "You can call me Michael"

He rose. "All right, Nino. You sit tight and don't go anywhere. I'll make some calls and tomorrow we decide what to do. Agreed?"

"Agreed" the boy smiled and his face free of worries revealed his true youth.

When Michael left two kids, he went upstairs to the apartment where, Nino told him, the old man lived. It took him a few minutes of wait and two presses of the doorbell before he heard a voice calling “I’m coming, I’m coming”. The door opened and Michael saw a lean tall man in his mid sixties, who gave an impression of once possessing a great strength, which didn’t leave him completely.

“Yes?” he looked at Michael suspiciously.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I’m a relative of the boy who's renting a room from you.”

The man frowned and his eyes narrowed. Michael could see that he was about to make a move on him and despite his combat experience and the fact he faced an old man, Michael wasn’t sure this would be an easy one to handle. To avoid unnecessary conflict he extended his hand. “My name is Michael. I can understand your suspicions of me, but I can assure you I mean no harm. In fact I came to pay the boy’s due.”

The old man looked at him for almost a minute completely ignoring Michael’s hand and finally gestured with his head to come in. His apartment was only a little better than the room in the basement and that only because it included the kitchen. As for the remaining one room, it was exactly the same size. Without any words, the old man motioned for Michael to sit down.

“Nino told me about your kindness. I’m much obliged.” Michael said as he sat.

The old man nodded “It was only my duty as a human being to help two kids in need.”

“Not everyone would’ve done it”

“Unfortunately.” Old man responded.

Michael waited thinking there was more coming, but old man just looked at him calmly, which clearly showed he has said what he wanted to say and that was that.

Michael cleared his thought “Anyway. How much I owe you?”

“Nothing.”

This certainly was a man of few words. Michael started to feel awkward “Money doesn’t come easy in this parts. I know that. I’m sure you could use some extra.”

“What for? Besides, I helped those kids because I saw they needed it and now taking money would be as if I gave my help for a loan.”

“Can I at least know your name?”

“Mario. Mario Lorenzo. I didn’t catch your last name Michael.”

“Gordon.”

“You’re not Italian?”

“No. I’m from US. The kids and I are not blood related.”

Mario relaxed “Forgive me for my hostility. I figured boy is in some kind of trouble and I thought that you are it.”

Michael nodded “Good men are hard to find these days. I’m sure glad that kids met you.”

This time Mario received Michael’s gratitude with a warm smile “I suppose you will take them with you.”

“Yes.”

“I’m relieved to see that kids will be alright now, but almost sorry for them to go.”

“You don’t have any kids?”

“No. My wife died of birth and that was the end of my life pretty much.”

The old man said nothing else and Michael felt it would be cruel to continue this conversation. He rose. “I better be going. I hope it’s alright with you if the kids stay for one more night. I just need time to take care of official part of the matter.”

“Of course. They’re safe here.”

As Michael was returning to his hotel he couldn’t stop wondering how drastically his life changed in just a few hours. He arrived in Milan determined to find his answer. To find a dangerous vigilante, who although did him and many others a favour by killing Al Hassani, yet had no business of taking the matter into his own hands. Too often Michael witnessed that such individuals caused more harm than good. But all of this was irrelevant now, believing that professor was right Michael accepted that it was a way of Nature to balance things out. Or whatever it was, he was sure he had no place to interfere. Not to mention that all this talk about eternity, nothingness and fear, made him feel small and insignificant. And now having another problem to fix, a task that was actually up to his standards convinced him that this ‘dark figure’ matter is over.

7

Loneliness

As soon as Mario closed the door behind Michael he hunched deeper and his eyes lost all its sharpness and determination, only tiredness remained. He was sixty five and has been through so much pain in his life that he couldn’t remember half of it now. But it did not bring the sweet relief of oblivion, Mario felt drained.

He didn’t lie to Michael, he was truly glad to know that kids had some relative who would take care of them. But as he sat in his chair he sensed the presence of loneliness in this quiet small apartment. And loneliness was a lady hard to get rid off once she let herself in, he knew it too well. It wouldn’t be half as bad if not for the complete uselessness his life represented for the last five years. These kids gave him a reason to get up in the morning and Mario had forgotten how wonderful that feeling was. Actually, the last time he remembered feeling that way was when he was young and his wife was still alive.

She died at the age of eighteen. They both were too young and lived together for too short a time for the loss of her to have such a great impact on Mario. And yet it did. He refused to have a life without her and while depriving himself of all the good things in it, bad ones he left intact. He involved himself in every war and fight he could possibly find. Starting from joining Resistenza¹⁴ in 1944 he went through many wars becoming a professional soldier. After coming back home he became a private

¹⁴ Anti-Fascist movement during World War II

contractor for the police, fighting mafia. His whole life was a constant battle in pursue of someone to lay his rage on.

When he turned fifty five Mario could take no more of such existence. It became so bad he was sure he would go mad if he saw another death. Mario knew he needed change of direction and so he joined social service, helping troubled kids, abused wives, homeless and such. He didn't do it to redeem himself for those he killed. He did that simply because he needed something to do and apart from becoming a doctor or teacher any other job he considered meaningless. Mario was too old to study medicine and there was nothing he could teach about, so he chose social studies.

The life of the social worker was of course just as ugly as the life of a soldier, in some way even worse. In the army there was at least a sense of brotherhood and although being a loner Mario was never a part of it, yet even to witness others have it, was at least something. The job of the social worker, on the other hand, was a fight that was rarely won.

Nino and Sophia entered his life unexpectedly, like a fresh breeze into a stuffy room. And although Mario was glad to retire from the job where he got to help lots of kids, this was different. They came directly into his life, not through application papers. They didn't take his help for granted; they took it gratefully warming his heart. He felt alive, even if it was just for a short while. "Back to the pit" Mario said to himself.

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He was still in his chair next morning dosing off, when he heard footsteps passing his door. 'Sneaky bastards' he directed his thought towards his nosy neighbours, going back to dosing off. Not two minutes went by and Mario was on his feet, listening carefully for the repeat of what he thought a girl's scream. All tiredness had gone from him; there were no remains of an old man in his posture. Almost two meters high he transformed into a scary vision of a very dangerous individual. His hunch reminded not of tiredness any more, but readiness. His eyes narrowed into a vicious stare. He was a soldier again, ready to burst into action.

He stood like that for ten seconds and then sprinted into swift movement refusing to wait any longer. The next moment he was already downstairs by the kids' door, listening for any noise. It didn't take him long to realize that some strangers were in the apartment. Mario cursed himself for not being on his guard, knowing now that footsteps he heard earlier were not of his nosy neighbours.

He hit the door with the force that ripped it off the hinges and rushed into the room. It took only fraction of a moment to notice two men, one of whom was holding the girl; the boy was no where in sight. Men were so stunned by Mario's appearing that it gave him enough time to jump on one of the intruders seizing him by the throat with the death grip. Mario's enormous strength squeezed the life out of the man in a matter of seconds.

The pure instinct of self preservation drove the other one, holding Sophia, out of the shocking state. He tossed the girl aside and brought out a gun as he saw Mario turning to him. The sight of the gun did not stop Mario, he jumped on the second intruder regardless. As he was closing on his prey Mario felt a bullet hit him in the chest with the force of the hammer. It didn't stop him either. He grabbed his victim by the throat and although the man was able to shot him two more times in the stomach Mario had enough time to choke him to death, watching as the light went out of the man's eyes.

Mario released the dead body. He felt a relief of being on time and even three deadly wounds did not bring him down, Mario was still standing. He was smiling at Sophie reassuringly, who was watching him with big scared eyes, when he felt another hit of the hammer, this time in the back. He wheeled

around and saw another man standing behind watching him with cold curiosity. Mario was ready to jump as the man shot him again and again without a blink of an eye.

Mario felt a massive weight on his shoulders pressing him down to the floor. And only his strength let him remain standing. The man shot one more time. Mario gave up, falling heavily. But he did not die. He lied there helplessly watching the man taking Sophie away and hearing her scream, filled him with shame. How could he be so careless? The thugs he attacked first were obviously just pawns. The man behind was the dangerous one, a true killer. He should've noticed him, he should have taken care of him first. Thirty years ago he wouldn't have been fooled so easily, he would have killed them before they knew what was coming. Time and quiet life has taken this edge off him.

As well as the shame and helplessness he felt tiredness again, much stronger this time. And yet he hanged on, still alive when the boy stormed into the room, watching as he ran around searching for any sign of his sister, watching as the boy read some note on the table and as he stormed out again grabbing a kitchen knife on the way out. He knew where he was going, but could do nothing. This helplessness again, hopelessness.

He was still alive when Michael arrived. He saw him leaning beside him, hearing Michael speak, but unable to tell what he was saying. He felt so ashamed, so tired. "You need a sleep, everything will be alright in the morning" he heard his wife's voice and it felt so natural, as if she lived with him through all these years saying this every night. He closed his eyes. Then a sudden flash of responsibility went through him and squeezing the last drops of his strength Mario said.....

8

The answer is coming

As soon as he was in his room Michael picked up the phone and dialled a number of Stanley Sims, a long time friend who worked in the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services. Once a field agent, like Michael himself, Stanley was captured by a terrorist organization six years back and would have been decapitated if Michael hadn't saved him. Although alive, Stanley was never the same after that, he didn't have the nerve to be active agent anymore.

Thirty years old, only at the beginning of his career and already mentally broken Stanley was left to live off the pension or to find something else to do. Michael had some connections at the Department of Homeland Security and was able to find him a desk job at the USCIS¹⁵ handling green card's applicants: "I can build a career out of this. It's actually up by a pay grade" he told him when Michael saw him shortly after Stanley started his new job. And although he thanked Michael many times, he could see that Stanley had a lot of healing ahead of him.

He was married now, a husband and a father. The last time Michael spoke with him he could hear a true happiness in Stanley's voice: "*How many times I thanked you?*" he asked before they hanged up the phone.

"About a million and frankly I'm getting tired of it, so please stop."

Stanley laughed "No can do pal" his voice became serious "I'm glad that I got so shaken up early on the road, you now, or I wouldn't be where I'm now. And you. If it weren't for you I wouldn't know what happiness means."

¹⁵ US Citizenship and Immigration Service

Michael smiled feeling good. Something that he didn't feel often "I'm glad Stanley, truly. Ok, I'll try to call you soon. Say hello to your wife for me."

"I will. When you coming home? I missed you. And Carol is dying to meet you."

"I'm sure you told her some story about me. I hope it'll be soon. But I can't be sure. You know how it is."

Stanley sighed "All to well, unfortunately. Alright, I'll be waiting for you to retire. Hope it'll be soon."

Michael laughed and hanged up the phone.

It was almost two years ago and since then he hardly had time to breathe, let alone keep in touch with his friends. So now he was all too excited to hear Stanley's voice again.

"Stanley Sims speaking. What can I do for you?"

"Hey Stan. I hope you still remember my voice."

"Wow, am I dreaming? Michael is it you?"

"Sure am buddy. Sorry I couldn't call to congratulate you on the birth of your son. Believe me I still feel guilty about it."

"Well, you should"

It was so refreshing to hear someone genuinely glad to hear him Michael could not stop smiling.

"But I'll forgive you on one condition." Stanley paused.

"What's that?"

"If you'll agree to become his godfather. Deal?"

Michael shook his head laughing "You got it buddy. It'll be my honour. By the way how did you name him?"

"Michael" Stanley said with a dead seriousness in his voice.

Michael kept silent for a moment "Thank you Stanley." He said finally, not knowing what else to say, emotions bubbling up inside him.

"So when to expect you? I heard you retired." A smile was back in Stanley's voice again.

"Just as of now. I actually called you because I'm coming home and I need your help."

"Who do I have to kill?"

"Giving couple of visas would suffice for now" Michael said laughing.

"Done and done. Just say for whom."

"Couple of kids of sixteen and of eight years old. Put me as a guardian."

“I must be dreaming after all. Are you adopting?” Staley asked disbelievingly.

“Just helping out. Wright down their names, will you. You always getting ahead of yourself.”

“Alright, sorry. Give them to me.”

“Ok. Nino and Sophia. Put them under my last name, can you do that?”

“For you I can. We just need to put them as your relatives.”

“That would be good.”

“Listen Michael, just give me a day, I’ll get visas ready by tomorrow.”

“Thanks buddy. I’ll see you soon.”

“Finally.”

When Michael hanged up the phone, he remained sitting with a smile still on his face. 'God, it was good to hear his voice' this thought brought the wave of homesickness. He would take the kids and go home, help them settle down. He himself would find a job, handling security for some company perhaps, who knows. Lead a quiet life. It all sounded perfect, but there was a hint of discomforting feeling. Michael couldn't picture himself having a normal life. 'Why can't I have that? It's not like I have any other option' smile slowly was replaced by the frown. This discomforting feeling was like a shadow in the back of his mind, spoiling everything. Michael's eyes grew cold and determined. The Answer was coming.

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He knew something was wrong the second he walked into the building. He saw the door to Mario's apartment was slightly open and stopped listening for any sound coming from the inside, but there was none. He opened the door and soundlessly walked in. To search the apartment took a little more than ten seconds and Michael hurried downstairs already knowing what he would find. The old man and bodies of two other men were lying on the floor of the room. Mario practically swam in a pool of his own blood. Michael quickly leaned over him not sure what wound to check first, there were so many. Mario was shot in his chest three times and two times in the stomach. He was dying. Only his extraordinary strength let him live for so long.

“Hold on old man. You’ll be alright” he lied, it was a lie of habit “What happened Mario, where are the kids?”

Mario didn't answer, only closed his eyes and if not for weak gasps the old man was making, Michael would have thought Mario passed away. Then suddenly he spoke. “I tried to stop them. Killed two of these bastards, but there were too many.... took the little girl.” Mario was talking without opening his eyes.

“Where is Nino?” Michael asked quickly, but it was too late. Mario could not hear him.

“I'm so tired of this life. I'm so tired.” this breath of the whisper drained the last drops of his will.

The old man died without saying another word.

Michael got up and scanned the room. He was about to call the police when he saw a white piece of paper under the table in the corner of the room. He quickly picked it up and read.

If you want to see you sister, bring the tape. Don't call the police or she's dead. Via belvedere you know which ranch.

Via Belvedere, he remembered it was Bruno's ranch outside of Milan. Michael frowned. He hated this feeling, the feeling of cold rage, the feeling of powerlessness. Well aware of what would happen to the kids (honour of the criminals existed only in the movies) he decided that Bruno was going to die, along with everyone who was involved in kidnapping. But he was also aware that most likely he was going to be too late and killing Bruno and others wouldn't bring kids back.

He arrived at the ranch an hour later. Deciding not to hide he walked openly to the front gate. As he came closer, Michael saw two guards laying on the ground with their throats cut open. He passed by glancing at them coolly with no empathy to the dead and yet, although his face was impassive, Michael felt bewildered. Something was very wrong and not in the way he was expecting. It seemed he somehow stepped into another reality. And everything was the same, looked the same smelled the same, felt the same, but the place was different. It was as if he was observing familiar surroundings through the eyes of an alien creature.

Michael tightened his jaws and pushed himself forward. Making his way to the entrance he saw another two men by the doors stabbed to death. Another one inside, three more further down the hall. It was a slaughter house. No sign of the kids, no sign of anyone alive, no sound of anyone alive, just a wind. Suddenly Michael sensed the faint smell of gas. He had no time to react when the far side of the house exploded throwing Michael through the doors to the street on the iron hedge, sharp edges of which pierced his chest through.

Before Michael died, with blurred vision, in the smoke of the explosion, he saw the dark figure - his phantom. And in some unexplained way he knew for certain that somewhere in the endless blackness of the hole that was phantom's face there was poor Nino entering the circle.

One thing in all this madness brought Michael some form of relief, it was the fact of him dying. Because that meant The Faceless Man wouldn't be coming for him. And whatever was waiting him in the afterlife, he would take it. He was not afraid of Hell any more. As bad as he was, Michael knew that he would still have a chance to find his redemption. It was time to move on to the next chapter. So he closed his eyes and with the last breath released the words "I am free."

Epilogue

Taking the first step on his porch Atlai suddenly stopped. The thunder roared with unusual intensity sounding too close to be regarded as normal. But that is not what froze Atlai in one place, as a matter of fact he hardly noticed it. What caused his stillness was far more shocking, far more horrifying. Atlai felt himself standing on the edge of the fall, staring into abyss.

The faceless rider was looking at him and the very first desire Atlai felt was to run as far away from here as possible. The whispers of his instinct were drawing the horrible pictures of the future, pushing Atlai to leave and to take his bad luck with him. Yet, as strong as this desire was, something made him stay. Atlai was not afraid any more, he knew he should be, but he wasn't. He felt he should be running, but he knew he wouldn't.

A sudden flash of certainty that he lived this moment before, hit him. And in a weirdest way it was mixed with the vision of the army coming to destroy the village. It was as if someone put this knowledge inside his head and knowing who did it, left Atlai with no room for a doubt. But strangely he remained unaffected and seeing all his fears in a different light Atlai realized now that they are nothing but an illusion he created himself. He realized that fear in its essence was nothingness, existed only for the reason that a man allowed it to. And because of that its emptiness could never be filled.

Atlai's fear ceased to exist in that instant. He could not see the faceless rider anymore. He raised his head up to the sky looking at the black formation that promised some nasty weather for tomorrow and taking a long breath Atlai turned to the front door of his house. Whatever bad news was coming he would deal with it. He couldn't understand how the thought of running away ever entered his mind, he must have been crazy. No, he would stay and protect his loved ones. And whoever was insane enough to threaten his world, well... bad for them.

Atlai went inside to get his blades.

THE END