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ESCAPE FROM BAGHDAD! A NOVEL

SAAD Z. HOSSAIN

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PRESS

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Glossary

A NOTE ON THE GLOSSARY AT THE END OF THIS BOOK

There is a glossary of mostly factual terms and names at the end of this book (“factual” being a relative idea open to loose interpretation (“loose interpretation” meaning we’re aiming for a 50% chance of something on the page tallying with someone else’s verified opinion.)) So, if you find yourself wondering: What’s a Druze? Or who’s Moqtada Al-Sadr again? Or what does JAM stand for? Or IED? Just refer to the helpful, mostly factual glossary at the end of the book.



1: SOUTH GHAZALIYA

“WE SHOULD KILL HIM,” KINZA SAID. “BUT NOTHING TOO ORTHODOX.”

Silence then. A kind of scathing, derisive, stifling silence expanding to fill the room, crowding out the detritus of previous conversations, leaving two blackmarketeers drinking in a darkened space, the back of a battered house, with nothing much to say. The room was dark because they had used fool paper to blacken the windows. The lights were off because outside, the JAM militia, known as the Mahdi Army, had just torn through 13th Street, which was rare, because 13th Street in Ghazaliya was a dead-end nothing suburban thoroughfare.

“Out of principle alone, it should be done,” Kinza sipped his Jack Daniels, which he had bartered from the US Marine Ted Hoffman for a piece of Chemical Ali’s skull. “Not because I hate this man. It is nothing personal for me. I am merely an agent of fate, like the Count of Monte Cristo.”

Kinza’s partner Dagr received this comment without surprise or apparent concern. Though he had once been a professor of economics, it turned out the wartime shift in profession had been ridiculously easy for him.

The JAM normally preferred 14th Street, as it allowed them access to the northern Shi’a neighborhood of Shulla, but in this excursion they had run into the South Ghazaliya Defense Brigade, sworn to defend South Ghazaliya. The JAM often won these encounters, but recently their firebrand Shi’a patron, Moqtada Al-Sadr, had cut down their bullet rations, and today the SGD had produced a black market US army M60 and risen to their youthful promise. All this defense had forced the JAM into Kinza’s street, a hail of smoke and diesel and bullets, AK47s popping. Kinza had brokered the sale of the M60 to the SGD in the first place, *provided they fought on 14th Street*.

“My friend, we have a moral duty in this situation,” Kinza said.

The situation was indeed demanding of their attention, moral or otherwise. Two days ago, Kinza and Dagr, purveyors of medicine, gossip, diesel, and specialty ammunition, had inherited the living person of Captain Hamid, formerly of the 8th “As Saiqa” Special Forces Division, of the Republican Guard. He had been the chief savant of interrogators, vigilant against traitors to the party, known especially for his signature style and a certain personal flair to the work—an artistic flourish to the branding, undoubtedly the star striker on the torture pitch, the number 10 of all 10s, the 23 of all 23. Now this Mother Teresa of black holes, this living spit of Torquemada, belonged to them.

This inheritance had come to Kinza and Dagr by a circuitous route. Kinza’s cousin twice removed, Daoud, had been a second lieutenant in the All Martyrs of Anbar Army, an offshoot of retired Republican Guard types who had agreed to shelter the notorious Captain Hamid. This brave battalion had lasted for all of two weeks before a combined (but wholly coincidental) US and Shi’a pincer attack had fulfilled their dearest wish of martyrdom. Both wounded, Daoud and the captain had taken refuge with Kinza. The captain had survived, Daoud had not.

“Morality is for the Aztecs,” Dagr said. “We should sell Hamid to the Americans. We could probably retire on the reward.”

“Was he on the deck of cards?”

“He almost made it,” Dagr said. “I think he was ranked 56th. There was some talk of putting him the second round, but I guess he just slipped through the cracks.”

“Funny, I thought he would have ranked higher,” Kinza said. “Not the face cards, maybe, but in the deck, at least.”

“We could just let him go. In Shulla, maybe,” Dagr offered quickly. “Let nature sort it out.”

Kinza made a face. That was not a solution he favored.

“We could sell him to the Mahdi Army,” Dagr scratched his head tiredly. “Sadr might have put him on *his* deck.”

“Sadr has a deck?”

“I think he made one,” Dagr said. “But he left out the queens and changed the hearts to little crescents.”

“I hate dealing with the Mahdi Army. Last time they made me pray all day and then woke me up at night to pray again,” Kinza murmured.

“You’re a product of your race. Self-loathing defeatist,” Dagr scraped back his chair. “You hate everyone. You hate the Sunnis for killing Hassan. You hate the Shi’as for breaking up the Ummah. You hate the Americans for being crass. You hate the Palestinians for being beggars. You hate the Saudis for being cowards. And because of this, you piss on rational self interest.”

“Thank you, professor,” Kinza saluted him with an empty glass. “Condescending as usual. You still live in a tower. A shitty tower, but a tower nonetheless. Hatred is a physical thing. It comes from the gut. I physically need to kill Hamid.”

“Because he is a torturer.”

“Yes.”

“Then you become a torturer as well, and therefore you deserve a similar death, by virtue of your own logic.”

“Which is why I am hesitating,” Kinza refilled his glass. Next to the bottle was a 38 caliber revolver, police issue, now black-market issue, soon to be Shi’a or Sunni or Coalition issue—so many issues it was impossible to decide. These days, every house in Ghazaliya had a confused gun. “Would it fundamentally alter our relationship, professor, if I tortured and killed Hamid?”

Dagr smiled sourly. “I am a market parasite. I help corrupt soldiers steal medicine from the Thresher, our friendly neighborhood American military base so I can sell it at huge profits to needy people who were once my friends. I have shot at a 14-year-old boy who was probably related to me just for jumping out of an alley. I have...”

“Ok,” Kinza held up a hand. “I am not speaking of you now. I am speaking of the professorial you. Would the man who taught economics at the Abu Bakr Memorial have a problem with what I want to do?”

“That fool would have shit his pants.”

“Yes, but the problem is, when normalcy returns, then the pants shitters are all back on top, and I would probably have to answer to all of them for everything I do today to survive. And in that time, my friend, I would hate to have you pointing a great shitty finger at me.”

“Today, I would help you kill Hamid,” Dagr said finally. “Tomorrow I would hate myself for it. The next day, I would hate you for it as well.”

“Then what do you suggest for comrade Hamid?” Kinza asked. “Seriously, I want to know.”

“He should have a trial,” Dagr said.

“A hanging trial or a firing trial?” Kinza asked.

“A fair trial.”

“What the hell is that?”

“I’m not joking,” Dagr shrugged. “Give him a trial. Round up a few dozen people from the neighborhood and try him.”

“I like it, a kangaroo court.”

“A *fair* trial.”

“How do you give a torturer a fair trial?” Kinza asked. “What possible judge would be predisposed to favor him?”

“He followed orders didn’t he?” Dagr shrugged. “Everyone followed orders.”

“Look, he didn’t shoot a bunch of random Kurds,” Kinza said. “He killed our own people. Academics, professionals, businessmen. People like you, in fact. What if it was your father he had his cigar into? Wouldn’t you like to be the judge then?”

“I agree with you,” Dagr said wearily. “It’s just that in passing judgment, in executing the judgment, you become tainted yourself.”

“So you’re saying pass it on to someone else?”

“Precisely,” Dagr said. “That is why we have professional judges.”

“Difficult to find an impartial judge at this point.”

“Unless we find one from the old days,” Dagr said.

“They’d probably be friends with him,” Kinza said. “Look, let’s at least interrogate him a little bit.”

A bell at the door then, the Ghazaliya bell, they called it, the knock of rifle butts against splintered wood, the three-second grace time before boots and flashlights, lasers and automatic rifle barrels. Better than the Mahdi Army, who didn’t bother to knock, and who had never heard of the three-second rule. Dagr surged toward the front of the house, already sweating, thrusting Kinza back. It was his job to face the American door to doors because he still looked like a professor, soft jawed, harmless, but some chance the exact composite of the innocent Iraqi these farm boys from Minnesota had come to liberate. And Kinza...with his hollow-eyed stare, Kinza would never survive these conversations.

He barely got there in time to save the door. Sweaty, palsied fear, as he jerked his head into the sunlight, facing down two of them, and three more in the Humvee behind. They were like big, idiot children in their heavy armor and helmets, capable of kindness or casual violence as the mood took them, unreadable, random, terrifying.

“Door-to-door, random check, sir,” a Captain Fowler said.

“Good morning,” Dagr said. Panic made his voice a croak. Door-to-door searches...they would find Kinza, and then Hamid, and it would be a rifle butt to the mouth, burst teeth, no Guantanamo for them, just hands tied behind the waist and a bullet to the head, right here...

“Had some violence down here this morning,” Captain Fowler was saying. “Understand the Mahdi Army came down this road, had a tussle with the boys from the SGD. Know anything about that, sir?”

“I was hiding, lying on the floor here,” Dagr said. He looked desperately from face to face, sunglasses, helmets, flashlights, all hard edges. Where the hell was Hoffman? Kind, innocent Hoffman, who shared cigarettes and jokes and tipped off Kinza about door-to-door searches...

“You sweating, my man,” Fowler casually shifted his weight, his foot blocking the door open, his gun angled just so, changing everything.

“It’s hot, we have no water,” Dagr said. “No water, nothing in the tank, no flushes working, no electricity either. One fan, and the bastards shot it today...”

“Ok, sir, we’re rigging the electricity back. We’ve had reports of this problem,” Fowler stared at him for a little while. “Sir, who else lives in this house? Are you alone in there?”

“Alone,” Dagr felt his voice give way. “My house. I live here. Do you want it? Take it, take it, just shoot me, and take it. No water for three days, toilets blocked up for two months, I have to shit in a bucket, bullet holes in every damn wall.”

“Calm down, sir,” Fowler tapped his gun on the door. “We are looking for one man known to be an arms dealer. We believe he has a safehouse somewhere in this grid.”

Dagr sagged against the door, the sweat pouring out of him, his mind a panicky Babel of voices, eyes swiveling from helmet to helmet, trying to find some weakness, some glimmer of the folk charm they used when they weren't in the killing mood. *Hoffman, where are you for God's sake?*

“You seem to be looking for someone, partner,” Fowler said. “Looking for Sergeant Hoffman any chance?”

“Hoffman? I don't know him. Maybe. He gave me a cigarette once I think. Tall and white? Don't know any Hoffman. There was a nice black man before.”

“Hoffman ran patrols here,” Fowler said. “He got busted for fooling around with a very bad man. An arms dealer called Kinza. Don't happen to know him?”

“Kinza? Sounds Japanese. I don't know, I hardly go out, Mahdi Army shooting up the streets every day, I've eaten bread and eggs for the last three days, can't even get out to the store, it's three blocks down on 14th, not that they have anything there anyway.”

“Alright, sir.”

“Please, so rude of me, please come in,” Dagr began to step back. “I have a nice couch, no TV though, got robbed last week, I could hear them from my bedroom, but I just stayed in my blanket. I could make you a cup of tea, no milk or sugar, I'm afraid, but, well...”

Fowler stuck his upper body into the room, swiveling his head around. The flashlight on his helmet cut a tight swathe through the gloom, illuminating the pathetic attempts at normalcy: a faded couch, a table loaded with coffee cups, a radio, a pile of textbooks hugging the floor along one wall. The moment hung on a seesaw, Dagr staring at Fowler's foot, willing it to inch back, dreading the one step forward that would signal the end.

“Alright, sir,” Fowler stepped back. “You be careful now. Give us a call if this Kinza is spotted anywhere. You can ask for Captain Fowler at the Thresher.”

“Yes, captain, yes, I will,” Dagr said. “Absolutely. I hope you catch him. He sounds like a bastard Sadr sympathizer. You're doing a good job. Long live America!”

They left and he sagged against the door, aghast at how weak his legs felt. And then he stumbled back inside, remembering that he had left Kinza and Hamid alone for far too long, Kinza drunk and brooding, a man capable of anything. They were in the bathroom, Hamid fetal in the cracked bathtub, hands and legs bound, a filthy handkerchief choking his mouth, two inches of tepid water sloshing with a pink tinge. Kinza had a screwdriver and pliers, and his bottle in the crook of his arm, humming.

“Kinza, they're gone,” Dagr said, out of breath.

“I think he's ready to tell me all sorts of things,” Kinza said. He removed the gag.

“Fuck you,” Hamid said. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Holding back are you?”

“Fuck you. You haven't asked me anything yet.”

“Right,” Kinza laughed. “I don't believe you. You're lying.” He started again with the screwdriver.

“Kinza, stop it,” Dagr said. “The Americans are looking for you. *They know your name.*”

“Hoffman?”

“Caught, reprimanded, I don't know,” Dagr said. “Busted. We have to run, Kinza. They know about the guns.”

Hamid started laughing, a whistling sound because he had recently lost a tooth. “You two are the stupidest fuckers alive.”

“No problem,” Kinza put away his tools. “I’ll shoot him and then we’ll go.”

“Where, Kinza?” Dagr asked.

“North, to Shulla,” Kinza shrugged. “I have a friend. Or maybe head over to Baqouba. Start again.”

“Idiots,” Hamid spat out blood. “I know where to go.”

“Where?” Dagr asked.

“Shut up,” said Kinza.

“Take me to Mosul,” Hamid said. “And I will show you the secret bunker of Tareq Aziz.”

“Like a sightseeing tour?” Dagr asked, momentarily puzzled.

“It’s full of gold, you fool! Bullion bars and coins. I am the only living man who knows its location.”

“How?”

“I once served on his personal staff. I’m the only survivor. Everyone else died in peculiar accidents.” Hamid seemed particularly proud of that.

“Do you believe this idiot?” Kinza looked at Dagr.

The insectile head of the American soldier haunted him. “Who cares?” Dagr said. “Let’s go to Mosul.”

2: BARRIERS

“THEY’RE LOOKING FOR YOU, BUDDY.” HOFFMAN WAS SMOKING A joint, slumped in the rubble of a destroyed house.

“I know,” Kinza took it off him. “You in trouble?”

“Verbal reprimand,” Hoffman shrugged. “All them old boys appreciate how much hash I’ve flowed their way.”

“Not for long,” Kinza threw a small packet to his friend. “We’re off. Make it last.”

“Yo, where you all going?”

“North. Anbar. Mosul maybe. Who knows?” Kinza said. “Want to come? There might be a bunker full of gold. We’ll cut you in.”

“Sure,” Hoffman said. “Professor, you gonna teach me some more math along the way?”

“We need some help, Hoffman.” Dagr had taught him calculus for the past two weeks, at first as a joke. The Marine looked deceptively stupid, *was* stupid in all likelihood; yet he had picked up integration unerringly. “Get us past the checkpoints into Shulla.”

“Sure,” Hoffman said. “Hell, I’d go all the way with you boys, but they’d probably nail me for desertion. Call me when you find that bunker. I’ll fence it for you.”

“Hoffman, you really think there’s a bunker in the desert waiting for us?” Kinza laughed. “Who knows, maybe it’s filled with 72 virgins as well. Stranger things have happened. We can’t stay here anymore. That’s for sure.”

The Iraqi Army 2nd Cavalry Battalion checkpoint was built into the rubble of no man’s land between north and south Ghazaliya, Shi’a and Sunni, the bewildered Iraqi soldiers trying to keep calm and courteous, desperate to still believe the drumming message that there was one Al Qaeda, one insurgency, one enemy. In truth, they kept panicky fingers tight on their triggers, wary of women and children, knowing they were the eternal target, nobody’s friend, traitors in every book. Dagr and Hoffman stayed to the front, Hoffman doing the talking. After a desultory search, they were through parting ways with a slap and a casual smile.

“They should put Hoffman in charge of Baghdad,” Dagr said, as they cleared the searchlights in the relieving darkness of evening. “We’d have a lot less tension.”

“Forget it,” Kinza said. “They should give him Rumsfeld’s job.”

“Maybe he’ll be president one day.”

“He could be the joint president of Texas and Iraq.”

“Imperialist lapdog,” Hamid mumbled.

Hamid was not a happy man these days. His face had puffed up to a misshapen Quasimodo lump where eyes, nose, and mouth were swimming in irregular proximity to each other. A once vain man he could no longer bear to look at any reflective surfaces and thus wore dark glasses at all times. He was in constant nagging pain, a condition Kinza was in no hurry to leaven. Too, he had a clearer idea now of the route Kinza planned to take, hopping from bastion to bastion of Shi’a dominance. Not a Saddam sympathizer in sight, his life worth a toothpick in a gunfight in these streets.

In the evening, they walked along a boulevard of garbage and open sewage, traversed by lines of people who looked neither left nor right, hurrying along to their bolt-holes. There were calls for prayer from the mosque nearby, a building wrecked by gunfire and mortar from a desperate battle two weeks

ago. They walked in single file, Hamid in the middle, Dagr leading the way because he was Shi'a, and had once lived in the area and people trusted him for some reason.

He recognized a few people but did not hail them as he would have in the old days. It was not certain who was who anymore, which camp, which informant, how many dead in each family, and by whose hand. As night fell, the streets rapidly cleansed themselves of civilians and took on a wholly different breed of walkers. Men with guns circled each block, Insurgents, or civil guards, or JAA militia, or even men who were bewilderingly all three, Iraqi army during the day and everything else at night.

Men with guns lounged in pools of light, unwilling to leave that hazy, pathetic safety, the fear palpable fog streaming into Dagr's eyes and nose, making him stagger along like a marathon runner. The night belonged to the Ghazaliya dogs, bald and mad, shrapnel marked, barking through garbage. Their shadows capered against the walls, three men on a solitary path, marked by the hopeless stoop of their shoulders.

"We are being watched," Kinza said, as they moved into a wrecked alley. "Be prepared, Dagr."

A short surge, and two men came out of the rubble, guns out, faces wrapped in checkered scarves. At the same time, an old Fiat pulled up behind them.

"Shi'a, Shi'a!" Dagr said, hands raised. "Don't shoot for God's sake."

"Take your hands out of your pockets," the leading gunman said.

Hamid was already on the floor, shielding his face. Kinza stood still, his jacket zipped to his neck, hands jammed into pockets, every line of his body uncompromising.

"Hands out, you."

"You don't want me to do that, friend," Kinza said softly.

"Get your fucking hands out!"

"Kinza, for God's sake," Dagr said, shaking. "Just do as he says."

Kinza shrugged, raised his hands. There was a grenade in his fist. Dagr could see the tension on his thumb, as it pushed down on the pin. Iraqi army standard shrapnel grenade, used to clear rooms during house to house fighting. Somewhere on the checkpoint was a very careless soldier.

"What the hell?" Dagr felt his voice rising sharply.

"You wouldn't." The lead gunman swiveled his pistol from head to head like a metronome, fingers tight and trembling, the gun held lopsided in an amateur grip. Behind him, his partner began to edge back surreptitiously. "You wouldn't."

"Come and find out," Kinza said.

"Let's all relax," Dagr tried to soothe the fever out of his voice. "Look, what do you want?"

"We saw you coming past the checkpost," the gunman said, eyes darting wildly from face to face. "With the American."

"We are just going north, to Shulla," Dagr said. "We don't want this trouble."

"Trouble?" the gunman laughed. "Nobody wants trouble. Trouble comes by itself. Do I want to be like this? We need help. There is no one to help us. You help us, and we'll take you into Shulla."

"Funny way to ask for help," Kinza said. "With guns."

"Is there any other way?"

"Kinza, let me handle this," Dagr slowly lowered his arms. "What makes you think we can help you? We're just ordinary men. I am an economics professor at..."

"You might be normal," the man said. He pointed a stubby finger at Hamid and Kinza. "But those two are jackals. It's them we want. We need beasts to hunt a beast. Plus, you are cozy with Americans."

“Listen, let’s talk like reasonable men. What is your name?”

“My name is Amal.” The gunman unwound his scarf to reveal an ugly, grizzled face. “There is a man here, called the Lion of Akkad. He is a murderer. We want you to make him go away.”

“Go away?”

“The American who helped you cross,” Amal said. “Have him deal with it.”

“We cannot do that,” Dagr said.

“Then have your army friends arrest him,” Amal said. “Or you three kill him. We don’t care.”

“I thought the Jaish Al Mahdi patrol these streets.”

“They have been pulling back,” Amal said. “And recently they were beaten badly in the south, by the SGD. They’re back in Shulla now.”

“So, you have guns,” Kinza said. “Are you cowards?”

“His brother is in the Mahdi Army, they say,” Amal hawked and spat. “If he finds out we did anything, they will kill us all, and our families.”

“And we don’t have families?”

“You do not look like family men.”

“The Lion of Akkad?” Kinza laughed. “What the hell, we’ll do it.”

“Sit down, Hoffman.”

“Sir!”

“Hoffman, we are in a quandary.” Captain Fowler’s office at the SS Thresher was a textbook military room, no rings on the desk, no overflowing ashtrays, no sticky joysticks, not a file out of place, a room so alien to the rest of the base that even the air seemed crisper, standing to attention, a salute that was on the constant verge of saluting.

“Sir!”

“It appears, Hoffman, that the investigation into your misconduct has hit a snag.”

“Snag, sir!”

“Yes, a snag,” Fowler said. “It appears that all of the potential witnesses have disappeared.”

“Disappeared, sir!”

“Poof.”

“Sir!”

“Hoffman, it is unnecessary to yell at the top of your voice every time I say something,” Fowler said.

“Sir!”

“Well, Hoffman, what do you suggest I do with you now?”

“Permission to suggest, sir!”

“At ease, soldier,” Fowler said. “Speak your mind.”

“Requesting an immediate return to patrol duty, captain!” Hoffman said. “The streets are pretty frisky these days. Something *evil* in the air.”

“Hoffman, surely you know that you have been accused of over-fraternizing with the locals,” Fowler said, “and specifically, with known criminals. Returning you to regular duty is exactly what I am determined not to do.”

“I was gathering intelligence, captain,” Hoffman said, offended. “Building bridges with the community. All there in our handbook, captain.”

“Hoffman, we’ve received reports of a certain black-market mastermind brokering heavy weaponry for the local insurgent groups,” Fowler said. “A man called Kinza. What do you know about him?”

“A few words here and there, whispered in back alleys,” Hoffman said. “He’s like a ghost. No one even knows what he looks like. The insurgents think of him as some kind of hero. The JAM find him pretty useful too.”

“Is he a ranking member of Al Qaeda in Iraq? Is he Sadr’s man in Ghazaliya?”

“No idea, captain.”

“Something to investigate further,” Fowler said wisely. “We need this man instantly, Hoffman.”

“Captain, he’s a merchant who plays both sides,” Hoffman said. “Sunnis or Shi’as themselves will kill him sooner or later if we sit tight. Even the atheists might get him.”

“I have noticed that you understand these A-rab sects,” Fowler said. “More than the average soldier. Is that a fair statement?”

“Sir.”

“I have noticed that you hang around with these A-rabs during off-duty hours. Is that correct?”

“Yes, sir, gathering vital intelligence, sir.”

“Hoffman, are you a homosexual?”

“No, sir!”

Fowler frowned. “Queer? Gay?”

“No, sir!” Hoffman said. “I was married once, sir! She left me for a taxidermist, sir.”

“Right,” Fowler said. “So what is it you do with these A-rabs, Hoffman?”

“We drink tea and smoke, sir!” Hoffman said. “Good American cigarettes.”

“Right,” Fowler said.

“And gather intelligence, too,” Hoffman said quickly.

“And you can tell the difference between all of them?” Fowler asked, “These Sunnis and Shiites?”

“Mostly, captain,” Hoffman said. “Can I ask what this is about?”

“We have an immense opportunity here, Hoffman,” Fowler said. “And despite my misgivings about your character, you appear to be the man for the job.”

“It is an honor to serve my country! God bless America!”

“Listen closely, Hoffman. We have intel from our informants in Sadr City,” Fowler lowered his voice. “It appears that the JAM have been tracking a certain high level member of the A-rab Republican Guard.”

“High level?”

“Lunching with Saddam Hussein kind of level,” Fowler said. “Now the JAM boys had lost their character, going by the name of Col. Hamid, in a skirmish; they have reliable evidence that he was smuggled into south Ghazaliya by the insurgent Arabs a few days ago. Are you following me, soldier?”

“Yes, sir!”

“The name Kinza has been mentioned. He seems to be harboring this high level A-rab,” Fowler said. “It is imperative that we capture these two immediately.”

“Right, captain, we need to comb the streets for them,” Hoffman jumped up. “I can get a squad together immediately!”

“Hoffman, sit down.”

“Sorry, sir,” Hoffman said.

“Why am I telling you all this?”

“I don’t know, captain.”

“Hoffman, I have been directed by HQ to take any steps necessary to apprehend these two dead insurgents. Gigantic steps! Extrajudicial steps!”

Hoffman, unable to resist, relapsed back to his modus operandi for dealing with high officials. “Extraordinary, sir!”

“I am transferring you to a special command, Hoffman,” Fowler said. “You know the streets; you seem to know how these A-rabs think. Capture these two miscreants, and I’ll get you a purple heart.”

“Right, captain,” Hoffman said. “Serve and protect.”

“Sign these papers here, soldier,” Fowler thrust out a sheaf of high quality paper, wrapped in blue and red military ribbon. “You are now officially part of the Special Forces Unit, Section: Great Ghazaliya. You report directly to me and my superior, Col. Bradley. I am sure you have heard of Col. Bradley.”

“Col. Bradley, sir!”

“The man has single-handedly tamed the wild A-rabs of Baghdad,” Fowler said, his eyes glazing over. “You do not want to disappoint Col. Bradley, Hoffman.”

“No, sir.”

“SFU intelligence indicates that the JAM are desperate to get their hands on Hamid. They think he carries valuable information,” Fowler tapped his nose. “And what is valuable to Mr. Sadr is valuable to Col. Bradley. Valuable information, Hoffman. This man Hamid was with all the high ups of the old regime. This could be it, Hoffman. This could be our golden goose.”

“The big fish, sir.”

“Hoffman, what do you think this Hamid knows?”

“Er, weapons of mass destruction?”

“Precisely, Hoffman,” Fowler scowled. “Col. Bradley believes they exist, the president believes they exist, and God himself believes they exist.”

“Semper fidelis!”

“Hoffman, get a squad together and get your ass out there,” Fowler said. “You find us these two and some WMDs, and I’ll personally make sure there’s a Nobel Peace Prize in it for you.”

3: THE LION OF AKKAD

AMAL OWNED AN AUTOPARTS SHOP IN THE STREET OF NAKAF, IN the very heart of the Lion's territory. He sold tires, rims, and filters, as well as an assortment of used and new batteries. Sometimes, he had engine oil, depending on supply. The Amal empire had not prospered in the war. He had once been a rich man. He had owned two car showrooms, four spare parts dealerships, and stock in an insurance company. One of the showrooms had been obliterated by tank shells during the American liberation. The second had been mistakenly raided as a bomb factory by the Americans and subsequently looted. With profits sliding, his hitherto loyal managers had ransacked three of the four spare parts shops, absconding with the revenue and leaving behind a host of unpaid suppliers.

The insurance company, meanwhile, had not paid. Beset by random acts of destruction, outlandish claims, impossible force majeure, they had done the only sensible thing and filed for bankruptcy. The directors had subsequently fled to their villas in Beirut. And so went the bulk of Amal's stock portfolio. In the end, the man had been reduced to this single shop, which was, incidentally, the one he had first started out with, a piece of circular fate that drove Amal to despair often enough. He lived upstairs in a one bedroom flat with his son. The room at the back of the store had been converted into his office, where he still kept accounts of his many assets, now mainly fictional, a wistful passing of the time, a fiscal fantasy train set providing both employment and misery.

All of this Dagr soaked up as he sat with Amal, cramped in the back room in a haze of stale smoke plotting and drinking coffee. Kinza sat in the far corner, half asleep, watching football on a tiny screen. There was a static tension in the air, the unease of too many strange men in a small place, desultory conversation, the memories of guns and grenades a palpable white elephant, neither side quite believing they are now allies. Hamid was a sullen, oozing wound in the middle of the office, a black hole that swallowed up all normal forms of bonding, the swapping of war stories and misfortune sympathies, and secrets.

"You men are young," Amal was saying, after a paltry lunch. "You two can start again, make something of yourselves."

Dagr shrugged. His stomach churned slightly with hunger, and he considered breaking out some chocolate, but he did not want to embarrass his host.

"My life is almost over," Amal continued. "What can I do now, but endure and hope to die in peace? My entire fortune, my whole history, erased. You know the worst thing? I dream about food every night, the scraps I used to throw away from my table. Never did I think I would go hungry again."

"Surely you have savings?"

"Savings, yes," Amal lowered his voice. "But I also have a father with Parkinson's. He used to be in a great nursing home. Fully paid for. Very exclusive. But it went bankrupt after the invasion, and the Americans converted it into a triage. Now I have to keep him in the hospital ward most of the time, not even a private room, and it's still too expensive," Amal grasped Dagr's forearm. "Every day they threaten to throw him out. What can I do? Me and my son live upstairs in one measly room. We eat the rotten stuff that doesn't get sold. Every penny I have, I give for medicine. Now this Lion Akkad haunts us every day. How can we live?"

"How does anyone live?" Dagr said. "Badly."

“Too right,” Amal said. “In days like these, who helps a stranger, eh? Who *asks* help from a stranger?”

“Only the desperate,” Dagr said.

“The bastards are all the same,” Amal shook his head. “Every bastard with a gun walks the same. We used to have lives before, you know? All that taken away...for what?”

“I used to teach economics, at the university,” Dagr said. “My wife taught mathematics. We met there. I had friends, students—hundreds of students. I don’t even know what happened to any of them.”

“There’s no place for people like us,” Amal said. “No place safe. This city belongs to them now. He lowered his voice. “Men like your friend.”

“He does what he must,” Dagr said softly. “Same as you or I.”

“Not the same,” Amal said. “Not the same. In the alley last night, I believed. I saw his finger on the pin, and I believed, more than in any bastard god, that he would kill us all; that he would rather die than take one step back.”

“Kinza is not suicidal,” Dagr said. “He just wants to see the world end.”

“Then maybe he will be a hero before the end,” Amal said. “And rid us of our enemy.”

“Who is this Lion of Akkad?”

“No one knows. Six months ago he just appeared in the night,” Amal said. “There were random murders, thefts. Some say he works for the Jaish Al Mahdi, here to settle scores and collect debts.”

“The Mahdi Army does not collect rent.”

“We know,” Amal shrugged. “What can we do? Some say that he has a brother in the JAM. Whatever the truth, we asked them for help and received none.”

“The police?” Dagr said. Even to him that sounded dubious. No one in Iraq went to the police. That was like asking to be extorted.

Amal snorted. “This man is a killer. He strikes suddenly, in the darkness, knocking on your door, holding a knife to your throat, a gun to your head. No one knows where he eats or sleeps or anything. In the day, poof! He is gone, like a ghost.”

“He comes only at night?” Kinza, woken up now, joined them with a faint stir of interest.

“Mostly after the evening patrols,” Amal said.

“How often?” Kinza asked. “Once a week?”

“Sometimes more or less,” Amal shrugged. “There is no pattern. In the beginning, some of us tried to ambush him. He took a bullet in the chest and kept on walking. Two days later, he cut a little girl’s throat. Last week, he threw my neighbor down the stairs. Broke his legs for no reason. We don’t even know what he wants. I think he’s one of those American serial killers like they have on TV.”

“Excellent tactics,” Dagr said. “Terror in the night. Random violence. Swift, excessive retribution. Sort of thing the Spartans used to do to the Helots to keep them in line.”

“You said you shot him?” Kinza asked. “Did he bleed?”

“It was dark,” Amal said. “We couldn’t see. He kind of stumbled but then kept on coming. We scattered.”

“Kevlar,” Kinza said. “Our boy has body armor. Does he use a gun?”

“He carries a revolver,” Amal said. “But he prefers to use his knife. It’s the size of my arm, almost like a sword. And his fists. He has the strength of ten men.”

“Ten Shi’as or ten Americans?” Kinza asked, straight faced.

“What?”

“Just saying,” he said. “It might make a difference. Americans are very strong.”

“Knives are psychologically more frightening than bullets,” Dagr said.

“He wants to stay silent,” Kinza said. “He’s using the darkness and the fear of these people, the sudden violence, to keep them off balance.”

“No one knows what he looks like?” Dagr asked.

“He wears a hood,” Amal said. “And he’s fast, silent. One minute you’re sleeping peacefully in your bed and the next you’re on the floor with a knife in your eye.”

“Ok, we’re getting a picture here,” Dagr said. “This Akkadian works alone. He’s well armed and wears Kevlar. Probably some kind of military training, too.”

“You left out super strength and super speed.”

“You mock us,” Amal said. “But you have not faced him yet.”

“He slinks around at night picking on infants and the elderly,” Dagr continued. “He wears a hood. He wants to protect his identity. This suggests that his position with the JAM is not official, at least.”

“So, professor, how do we find him?”

“We could always wait,” Dagr said. “Camp out here. He’s bound to come sooner or later.”

“Yeah, maybe in a month,” Kinza said. “Not a good option. Plus he will find out about us sooner or later. I’m guessing he lives somewhere in this neighborhood.”

“Then?” Amal asked.

“He hunts at night,” Kinza said. “So must we. We’ll take to the streets. Give us a map of the area he covers and all your volunteers. There is an old way to hunt wild game. Let’s see if we cross paths with any lions.”

The darkness in the streets was a smear of tar, a discombobulating colorant turning harmless daylight noises into the snickering of hyenas. Lights were absent, windows bricked or boarded mostly shuttered at least against this most deadly hour. The Joint Forces stayed far away in their reinforced boxes; this was not their half of the day, not the time for pretend patrols and breaking down empty fortresses. Nor the time for Mahdi Army men to parade in their black scarves and AK47s, holding aloft their pages of calligraphy. This was the business end of the hour, where the real predators of each side mingled, open season for the ones in the know, springtime for men with guns, when the harmless cowered in their beds and hoped to hear nothing.

It had seemed a fine plan to Dagr, sitting cramped and safe in Amal’s fantasy office two days ago. Now the darkness sucked everything out of him, and he was a walking husk, hands jammed into his jacket pocket to stop the shaking. Kinza was ahead, sure-footed, wolfish, snapping into place like the last piece missing from the jigsaw street. Dagr worried at the ancient gun in his pocket, the snout muzzle poking through the silk lining of his coat, fretting that it would go off and cripple him, that he would shoot the wrong person.

They did not belong here, and their convoy of three was disturbing the routine of the regular. Dagr felt men shuffle close in the darkness, veering off in tangents after a sniff, split second decisions demarking victims and victimizers. Dagr too fell infected with their mindless aggression, hearing whimpers and ragged wet tears from far corners, felt with shame some of the exhilaration of walking the night with a gun.

They were following tiny pinpricks of light, a system Dagr himself had designed. Men and women tired of the depredations had risen up in this meager rebellion. Small lamps hung in high, street-facing windows, staggered in a mathematical pattern that Dagr had memorized. The idea was simple

Watchers lined each of these windows. Whoever recognized the Lion of Akkad would put out the light. If he moved away, they would turn their light back on. The blink in the pattern would follow the Akkadian throughout the night, hopefully leading them straight to him.

The first few nights had been unsuccessful. The tracking system had been refined, the watchers reinforced, his probable routes calculated. It worked well on paper, but humans were fallible. Watchers fell asleep or were too scared to act fast. The advantage of the terrain was also with the Lion, as myriad routes became available at night, sudden shortcuts that allowed him to cut the pattern in half.

In the hour just before dawn, luck finally favored them. Weary with nerves, they were resting against a shattered streetlamp when a sliver of light abruptly disappeared from the horizon. Five minutes and another light blinked off, this time closer, barely half a kilometer away. It was unmistakable. Kinza was on his feet, moving swiftly, a quick word behind him, telling his companion to fan out across the street. Dagr felt every neuron firing simultaneously with something akin to terror. The colossal stupidity of this plan smashed the breath out of his ribs. He fought the urge to slink back, making his legs move forward until he was parallel with his friend. Behind him, to the left, he could hear Hamid make similar, reluctant steps, well back. The torturer had little intention of taking part.

The blinking came closer, closer, until he could imagine the entire street lined up and watching him judging. A few hundred meters more and he could almost see the Lion of Akkad, a tall man in a dark coat, an indistinct blur, ensconced no doubt in his Kevlar, a one man tank. In spite of himself, Dagr felt his steps faltering, his stride shortening until he was barely mincing along. Kinza broke ahead, slinking along the walls, two, four, then ten meters away. In some glint of moonlight he actually saw the face, hawk like nose jutting out, a black scarf wound around the rest of his features.

Kinza crouched into the hollow of a doorway winking abruptly out of sight, even as Dagr continued edging forward, his mind frozen into a kind of panicky inertia. A flicker of darkness, a slight bend in the street, and suddenly the Akkadian was gone, disappeared in a breath, leaving Dagr standing paralyzed. He began to edge his gun out, and it caught in the lining; a second later he was face to face with the Lion of Akkad, yellow eyes glinting with feral madness.

A blur of motion and the man was spinning into him, the blade of his knife caught in Dagr's sleeve, buttons popping, slicing a shallow groove along his forearm. Dagr bulled forward, desperate, trying to grapple, his knee giving away even as he heard Hamid's pus-ridden voice shouting, "Down down you fool." Guns barked in close range, blinding and deafening him. A heavy blow knocked him sideways as his hands clawed across the Lion's greatcoat, and Dagr fell away useless. He saw Kinza leaping out of the darkness, a split second of struggle before he was *thrown* back, skittering through the street.

Dagr wrenched himself up on one knee. The street was empty, silent once more. Hamid lay curled nearby, cradling a mangled hand, his fingers blown off by a soft revolver shell. The Lion of Akkad was gone.

A pall hung over their makeshift command center, crowded now with the scents of the triage and the gloom of their co-conspirators.

"Do you believe me now?" Amal was aggrieved.

"You've failed," a nondescript shopkeeper cried. "And now the Lion of Akkad will start killing children again."

“We have to run!” A truck driver said. “To Shulla! I’m getting my truck.”

“It did not go as planned,” Dagr said. His body was a mass of cuts and bruises.

“You did nothing, you fool,” Hamid snapped. “He shot my fingers off.”

“The man is strong,” Kinza said.

“And fast,” Dagr said. “He kind of just appeared in front of me before I could clear my weapon.”

“You’ve made everything worse,” Amal said. A dozen men rumbled in agreement. “He will become more brutal now. Our lives are worth shit.”

“He’s human,” Kinza said. “He bleeds. I shot him in the leg. The blood on the street is not ours only.”

“So we have some time,” Dagr said, thinking again, furiously. “He won’t come out wounded. Not when he knows he’s being hunted.”

“You boys should just leave,” Amal said. “I curse the day I stopped you.”

“Yes,” Hamid hissed into Dagr’s face, so close that he could smell the sweet rot of his wound. “Why the fuck are we wasting time with these yokels? You’re supposed to take me to Mo…”

“We’re going nowhere,” Kinza said. “I said I’d kill this man, and so I will.”

“He will become cautious now,” Dagr said. He glanced at the watchers. “And I doubt the grid will catch him out again. Even if he doesn’t figure out how we tracked him, he’ll take steps to counter us. We must devise a new method.”

“Oh, what’s the use if you *do* catch him?” Amal asked. “He nearly killed the three of you.”

Kinza stared him down. “Do you think I can’t take a hit? I never walk away from a fight.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Look,” Dagr said. “We won’t catch him on the streets again. We have to find out where he hides. We have to attack him in his lair, while he’s still wounded.”

“There’s a reason he works these particular streets,” Kinza said. “He moves on foot. He must live within this zone.”

“We could send the watchers to canvass the neighborhood,” Dagr said. “Look for something suspicious, blood stains perhaps?”

“Get real. You are in Ghazaliya,” Amal said. “Which door doesn’t have blood on it?” He seemed almost proud of it.

“We need to narrow the area down,” Kinza said.

“Two things struck me,” Dagr said slowly. “When he was beating the crap out of me, I felt a backpack under his coat. He was carrying something heavy. And he smelled funny. I can’t describe it.”

“That would be Hoj’s candlesticks,” Amal said. “Pure silver. He was saving them for his grandsons.”

“You said he’s a serial killer.”

“He does whatever he damn well pleases,” Amal said.

“What difference does it make? Often he takes random things,” the shopkeeper shrugged. “He has to eat, I guess.”

“It might make a big difference, Amal,” Dagr sat up straight, weariness disappearing. “A huge difference! Quick, what else has he taken?”

“He took a gilded statue from Ibrahim,” the truck driver said. “And he took my iPod.”

“Look at the map,” Dagr said. “I need exact times and locations for each of his strikes for as far back as possible. And most importantly, I need to know what he took each time.”

Amal looked bewildered.

“It’s simple mathematics,” Dagr began scribbling formulas on the map, cursing how rusty he was.

“We know he’s on foot, he only hunts in this area, and he works only at night. We calculate his route each night for as far back as we can, data given by his victims. Now we have his average speed. Even if he constantly varies his schedule, we’ll find him hitting an average number of victims per night. Given his starting and ending hits, we might be able correlate where he lives. But every time he takes something extra, there will be a deviation. There are a finite amount of candlesticks he can carry, after all. I predict every time he takes something heavy, there will be an unexplained lag. In effect, *he will go home to put away his loot* before moving onto the next house.”

Dagr beamed at them. They stared back slack jawed.

“I didn’t understand a word of that,” Amal said.

4: BLACKBOARD RAGE

DAGR HAD APPROPRIATED THE OFFICE ENTIRELY NOW, RUNNING data, fine tuning his equation. The computer was old, the software almost obsolete. It had taken Dagr half the day to jerry-rig it into doing what he wanted. Amal had fixed a blackboard on the wall, unearthed pieces of orange chalk. It helped him think, the board covered in symbols, calmed him into something like functionality. Men and women were dropping by all day, feeding him bits of data, suspicious until they saw him, his head and arms bandaged, chalk dust on his clothes, something fey in his eyes. They treated him like an idiot savant, talking to him slowly, old women pressing bits of fruit into his hands, taking on faith entirely that he was doing something useful.

The chalk brought him intensely happy memories. The lull of an empty classroom, Dagr perched on his desk, making furious equations all over the board; a grad student walking by, stopping to watch him with gold flecked eyes, a smile crooking her mouth, lighting up a face so achingly earnest. The thin perfume alerted him, and he swiveled, almost falling, falling. She took the chalk and corrected his mistakes, still smiling, at some point getting on the desk, edging him aside, until she arrived at a point she could not reach on tiptoes, and Dagr grabbed her shirt, and they nearly fell over laughing.

That much and no more and he stood bereft, staring, sliding slowly into dismay, awaiting the inevitable reconstruction of reality with its soul-killing loneliness. Blackboard, chair, table, computer, doorframe. Autistic fumbling, as his brain tried to fit them into something palatable and failed repeatedly, and the grayness seeped in. They slipped into his day, these moments, in the most unreasonable of times, pieces from some elusive mirror world, a past that he was unsure had even existed at all. Surely that classroom stood somewhere, still, chalk dust and laughter.

He saw Kinza approaching, eyes averted, reality tethering him back in.

“Coffee,” he said, offering a cup. Neutral.

“I’m alright,” Dagr said, “just light-headed.”

“Any luck?”

“It’s working,” Dagr said. “Slowly. I have some patterns. Too many assumptions to be sure.” He knew there was an impatient crowd outside, held in check by Kinza’s face alone.

“I got word from Shulla,” Kinza said. “They are looking for Hamid. We cannot stay here long.”

“We can be ready tonight, perhaps,” Dagr hesitated. “I have an area narrowed down. An abandoned building, I guess.” He pointed to the board, “This equation approximates his speed on foot. The map is plotted with all his stops on any given night. The program catches any big gaps in his schedule and posits where he could have gone during that time. Data from a large period of time narrow the options. Taking into account first and last stops in each night, along with times, and we get a picture.”

“Your arm is bleeding,” Kinza said. “You don’t need to come tonight. Hamid and I will be sufficient.”

“No,” Dagr said, fighting back a temptation to agree. “No, you can’t trust Hamid. We should stick together.”

“I am not afraid of Hamid,” Kinza said.

“He could shoot you in the back,” Dagr said. “There’s a look in his eyes, something like religious fervor, except he is certainly not a man of God. Sometimes I think he’s completely insane.”

“Even madmen know fear.”

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