

Sarab

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Day One

THE GAS BOMBS FORCED THE revolutionaries to abandon their positions guarding the huge gates and retreat to the cellars of the Grand Mosque. There, they hunkered down and prepared for the fight to the death.

Squadrons of paratroopers poured in torrents from the helicopters until they covered the courtyard of the Grand Mosque. They reminded the city of the flock of birds described in the Quran which cast handfuls of death on Abraha's army as it marched with an elephant at its head to destroy Mecca, but this modern flock proclaimed an unparalleled, modern horror. Soldiers in gas masks fanned out instantly to comb the halls and corridors of the mosque for pockets of resistance, and they opened the gates to the troops of the National Guard who were waiting outside.

That was on November 29, 1979. Thanks to the clouds of gas that hovered in the air over the Holy City, the National Guard had successfully regained control of the rooftops and halls of the Grand Mosque, despite the heavy losses they had sustained earlier in the battle.

Utter chaos gripped the revolutionaries when electrified water gushed in and swamped the cellars where they had taken refuge. With distorted vision and blood spouting from their eye sockets, the remaining members of the resistance scattered to seek out some form of protection in the network of cellars and prayer cells. The men stumbled away like blinded insects, defeated by the length of the siege and the severity of the battle. Its impending conclusion,

and their own end, was clear to all; they were aware their desperate war was only a postponement of the inevitable. The interconnecting cells hindered the spread of the electrified water, lengthening the hours of endurance—or, more accurately, prolonging their demise—but the fighters weren't permitted to catch their breath.

On December 3, they were woken by a thundering over their heads, and at once realized colossal drills were consuming the ceiling above them, creating a pit so deep and dark not even the sky would be visible. Soon containers of poisonous chemicals armed with timed detonators were dropped through these holes, one after another. The fighters were dispatched in pieces—fragments of darkness, limbs, the smell of warm blood, and remnants of skin stuck in the teeth of anyone destined to escape that rain of bombs.

The soldiers continued to vary their drilling sites, distributing holes like musical notes on a stave and dispatching containers of chemicals that blinded the revolutionaries. Even so, the resistance rushed to discharge fountains of bullets upward, riddling the workers' bodies with holes. The soldiers crawled forward to extract their bodies and free up the entrances to the hell below, but despite their caution a soldier's eye exploded here, another's skull there. A bullet hit a package of poison and gas erupted among the soldiers. The streams of blood and poison pouring downward were answered by renewed volleys of bullets rocketing upward, creating a violent and terrifying pandemonium, but it didn't take long for the chemical powder to resolve the battle to the advantage of the soldiers, and the hail of gunfire from the resistance disappeared. The coughing of the choking men escaped from the holes, along with hisses of rage and the souls that had perished by the dozen. Below ground, the sense of defeat was tangible. Truly, it had been the most elegant, ingenious move in the battle since its beginning; the bombs propelled the terrified combatants out of the cellars like puppets and hounded them through the maze of subterranean vaults pumped full of poisonous chemicals, bullets, and hand grenades. Hell itself was driving them out from behind their impregnable barricades in the cellars, and as soon as they

emerged into the courtyard, they were met by the sniper bullets. Stunned by daylight after days of darkness, the revolutionaries fell to the ground even before the hail of bullets annihilated them, and they died in total blindness.

All the while, Mujan continued to hold out in the hidden vaults. He mowed down attacking soldiers without mercy until the siege was concluded and he was seized.

The prayer cells belowground had become a fermenting slaughterhouse, its shadows reeking of human bodies. But in one of the sections the National Guard had already liberated from the revolutionaries, behind an abandoned minbar, there appeared a ghost, masked and smeared with blood. Suddenly it perceived a blue light piercing the screen of darkness like a scalpel and cautiously approaching the door. The ghost froze, eyes sparkling maliciously. It held its breath, waiting for the prey to approach its inevitable fate. The strip of blue light widened and a huge ghost in a blue military uniform appeared in the doorway, casting an interrogatory look inside. He advanced a step into the pitch-dark room, and directly in front of him, in the heart of the darkness rent by the blue light, he caught sight of the ghost squatting on the ground. At that moment, a body fell from the ceiling. The squatting ghost watched in terror as a supple piece of darkness detached from the ceiling of the pitch-black prayer cell and landed on the giant officer. As their bodies collided there was a sound of stone hitting stone, and the officer fell to the ground unconscious, as if struck by lightning. The light went out and darkness closed over the scene once more. It hadn't been a human body, but was more likely a piece of ceiling, or maybe one of the angels of punishment come to dispel the gas clouds and the darkness. The ghost was certain of this as the small piece of darkness disappeared within the greater darkness and its rescuer vanished as if it had never been. While the officer was incapacitated, the ghost seized the opportunity to leap up, confiscate his FAMAS rifle, and point it at his head. The ghost forced the officer to lift the drain cover, pushed him through first, and closed the cover behind them. Their masks were plunged into darkness.

As they set off in the pitch black, the ghost kept the gun aimed at the other, huge shadow. The slim ghost, lost inside in a stained National Guard uniform, urged the huge blue-suited officer forward. They hurried on like a stream bubbling in silence, fleeing the horror of Judgment Day, lost in the bowels of the earth. They panted, inhaling mold and the putrefaction of death as they stumbled blindly through the suffocating network of sewage tunnels that seemed to branch off at random.

At any sign of hesitation, the slim ghost would drop the rifle onto its victim's shoulder, threatening to blow his brains out and forcing him to hurry up and flee the death pursuing them both. Bombs were still falling from the ceiling according to an infernal plan, cutting off communication lines within the network of prayer cells. The last straggling remnants of the revolutionaries were isolated from their leader and exterminated one small group at a time. The stench of charred human flesh and mashed body parts made the shadows of that underground hell even darker.

The two fleeing ghosts burst out of the sewage tunnels to find themselves in the middle of Suq al-Mudaa, outside the confines of the Grand Mosque and the hellfire of battle within. They reeled as clean air rushed into their lungs, under the confused impression that the stinging sensation was the effect of the gas.

The two ghosts fled, groping their way through the narrow alleys of Suq al-Layla. The ominous silence of the normally bustling marketplace absorbed their footsteps, which seemed deafeningly loud here. Compelled by sudden panic, the ghost shoved forward its prey, still staggering from the effects of the gas, so that they disappeared into a narrow alley that turned off the suq. They entered a wooden doorway and walked into the shadowy vestibule of the abandoned house. Every door facing them on the lower floors was closed and they were driven up the stone stairs. An upper floor opened, welcoming them to a kitchen and one other room.

“God forgive me . . .” The slim rebel opened the door of a room that seemed like a playroom. The wall was papered in lemon yellow

and decorated with photographs of a girl about seven years old. She appeared to have been photographed from different angles as she leaped gleefully upward, and her short red skirt sailed through the air in harmony with the flying tendrils of her short black hair.

In the middle of the room a rocking horse stood a meter high. It neighed enthusiastically and soundlessly, facing the terrifyingly huge television screen. Row upon row of huge plastic dolls, in striking contrast to the smaller handmade cotton dolls, were scattered around the room. The gleaming white cotton faces stared ahead expressionlessly. They had large bulging eyes, decorated with large black buttons sewn on with black thread, and their eyebrows arched upward in mockery of the two ghosts who had rushed panting and uninvited into their forgotten world.

The ghosts trembled, thunderstruck by the peculiarity of the scene before them, and they drew closer together. Death rustled over the rebel like a second skin; like death itself, the ghost directed a powerful blow to the head of its victim, which sent him to the ground. His unconscious body stoked the rebel's kindling anger, and the stiff boots of the National Guard, which seemed a little too big for the feet wearing them, began to aim a series of kicks at the center of that masculine body. Vicious sadism overwhelmed the slim rebel, who appeared so overcome with bliss that he shuddered with every blow to the male member, so delicate and so vulnerable to violence. Every hatred, every fear that had disturbed the rebel while among the fighters was embodied in that organ; pulverizing it meant surviving the death that waited belowground.

The kicks escalated into a frenzy that could only be satiated by the annihilation of that masculinity.

A boot flew off the small foot of the rebel, who proceeded to kick the prone body with bare feet, giddy with the pleasure of crashing a foot directly into that symbol of masculinity and virility. He kicked in a feverish trance until woken by splashes of blood on the blue uniform; blood was gushing from wounds in his feet, which had been slashed open from wading barefoot through death, even before losing that shoe.

The rebel felt the huge body had surrendered like a bag of clay, and the satisfaction of kicking it abated. Driven by bloodlust, he knelt beside the body of the enemy, gazing at it blindly, unable to control the fingers that were trembling from his hunger to tear at his opponent's virility, at the chest webbed with muscles, to drink this enemy's blood and extinguish the hatred kindling within. But instead of ripping the officer to shreds, the rebel began to rip the clothes from the enemy's flesh, beginning with the blue military trousers.

Somewhere between unconsciousness and delirium, the French officer perceived the humiliation his body was being subjected to while a brutal hand ripped his shirt and peeled it away from his hidden survival kit: his wireless radio, his compass, headlamp, maps, grenades, ropes, emergency rations, and most importantly, his pride and the internal war machinery that kept him calm. When the claws reached his underwear, they froze suddenly. Without logic, they allowed him that last shred of dignity. The officer was inflamed; with a desire that tore deep into his guts, he craved more of the humiliation meted out by this violence, which was unlike any sexual gratification he had ever experienced before. Then, at last, he passed out completely.

The rebel knelt there, overcome with confusion by what he had done to that body; its splendor and perfection had been unexpected. The officer lay nearly naked, and the rebel's turmoil increased; none of the other revolutionaries had had these fiendish muscles braided with vice, or these slim hips. None of the other revolutionaries' bodies had borne this ominous danger, its inherent wickedness unalleviated by being unconscious. It occurred to the slim revolutionary to fall on those muscles and tear them apart fiber by fiber, to send them back to the hell they had come from. That would be a magnificent sacrifice to add to the victims left in their wake; that would make him worthy of joining the comrades who had achieved martyrdom in the past few days and doubtless found the gates of Heaven open to them.

Suddenly, the rebel was snatched from this blissful fantasy by the array of staring eyes; row upon row of doll's eyes were watching the scene without blinking. With a colossal effort the rebel dragged

his body upright and, careful all the while to avoid looking at the dolls, he moved forward defiantly to close the door and the four windows overlooking the walled roof terrace.

Gathering what remained of his flagging strength, the rebel dragged the captive to a wooden column in the middle of the room by the television set, sat him on a flowery quilt, and began to tie him to the pillar using some electricity cables he had found. Feverishly, even hysterically, he covered the dolls' faces with anything he could find at hand: scraps of paper, napkins. At last the rebel allowed his body to fall onto a spongy exercise mat that had been left in the room. The two men were sunk in a stupor, surrendered to the paralysis of the gas. The smell of the sweets in the piles of cartons in the corner wafted overhead, a delightful scent that contributed to the strangeness of the scene. Around them there rose a droning sound as giant flies, of a neon color somewhere between blue and green, buzzed among the cartons of sweets and the faces of the two men.



Day Two

THE OFFICER, RAPHAEL, WAS WOKEN by the twitching of his extremities and he released a string of curses in blunt French when he failed to free his hands from their restraints. With an iron will, he ignored the agony in his crotch, which had been crushed by the vicious kicking he had received. His eyes rested on the unconscious body lying on the tattered blue mat, and he was struck by the long black plaits slipping out from beneath the red-and-white head covering.

“Either these rebels are growing their hair to be like their ancestors or I’ve been tortured by an extremist fag.”

He felt he was floating in this unreal reality, as if his naked body were immersed in self-contempt and mockery, incapable even of sweating and drawing out the fever building within. He was blinded by a splitting headache from the blows of the rifle butt; the numbness creeping over his genitals indicated that he might have been made impotent; the gas was making his brain ring with frightening absurdity. His throat was as dry as ash, while his heart and lungs erupted with lava, promising the destruction of that skinny rebel who had wounded his colossal ego and then tied him up like a broken-down dog.

Prodded by the thunderous glare of the officer, the rebel suddenly emerged from sleep. He hurriedly covered his braids and tucked them inside his head covering as he jumped up from his bed. With steadily increasing attention, the giant officer observed the graceful movements of the rebel’s slim body, stoking his anger toward himself and his adversary.

Under the eyes of his captive, the rebel headed to the roof terrace the room looked onto. He walked doubled over so that his head was no higher than the wall, careful that no watchful eyes from the surrounding terraces should catch sight of him.

Fear and rage flared up inside him whenever he looked toward the Grand Mosque through the holes in the wall made by the decorative brick pattern. He was hunting desperately for information about the outcome of the siege, but the only indication he had that the siege was over was the cooing of doves mingling with the police and ambulance sirens; the gunfire at least had definitely ended. He could no longer prevent his body from convulsing as he realized that all his companions had been silenced forever.

Deranged with terror, Sayfullah rushed back to the room and headed straight to the cartons piled in the corner. Maddened by an attack of hunger, he tore off their covers blindly, dug out their contents, and began to gulp down the various sweets and biscuits. Officer Raphael was shocked at the contrast between the elegant little biscuits and the death manifest in the face of the rebel, the result of the long siege, starvation, and the final counterattack of gas and electrified water. Sayfullah's wandering gaze seemed unable to settle on anything, haunted as it was by the corpses of his fellow rebels and the piles of hostage victims.

Raphael glared at Sayfullah in fury; how the hell had such a worthless nothing managed to knock him down and strip him of his weapon?

Those Bedouin are possessed by jinn when they fight. He recalled that phrase from the hasty training sessions he and his comrades had attended in France before they were transported to break the siege on the Grand Mosque. That day, they had greeted the idea of jinn with roars of laughter; he and his iron-hard comrades considered the jinn an insult to their rock-solid Superman muscles and their sophisticated weaponry. The Groupe d'intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale, or GIGN for short, were sent all over the world to negotiate counter-terrorism and hostage rescue missions. They laughed at the idea that they could be scared by invisible beings.

When they don't fear death, they fight like demons. Their trainer warned them of underestimating the jinn and urged the GIGN officers to take them seriously.

As Raphael sat and watched the rebel devour sweets, he was consumed by a craving to rip the flesh off him with his bare hands, to uncover the jinni inside and tear it to pieces. If given the opportunity, he wouldn't stab or shoot; he would plunge steely fingers into those soft muscles.

Suddenly Sayfullah raced to the bathroom and vomited up everything he had swallowed, as if he were vomiting his very bowels.

When he returned to the room he seemed at a total loss, unsure what to do about his captive or the situation in general. With no particular aim in mind he brought a carton of biscuits to Raphael, freed his left hand from its restraint, and stood watching him eat. At the same time, he was angered at being so nerveless he was feeding his enemy.

“J'ai soif.” Raphael mimed drinking water while Sayfullah stood watching him impassively, reveling in his thirst, aware that he had probably vanquished his victim, this Western infidel. In an outburst of fury, Raphael flung the box of biscuits away from him; immediately Sayfullah responded with a series of violent kicks to his chest and thighs from his bare feet. With his free left hand, Raphael abruptly seized the attacking foot and launched Sayfullah into the air so that he landed on his back. Feverishly, Raphael turned his attention to the cables that bound him, and was on the brink of freeing himself when Sayfullah hurled himself upon him, yelping, “God curse you, you filthy infidel!”

It was a losing battle between the half-bound French GIGN officer and the slim rebel, who wasn't haunted by jinn, but by the will of death itself; his spine and muscles were accompanied by hundreds of others—the spines and muscles of the murdered comrades he had left behind.

“I am nothing unless I am Sayfullah, the Sword of God, and I slice with the will of God,” Sayfullah panted, regaining the upper hand and viciously retightening the cables around his opponent's

wrists. “Try to escape again and I will throw you back into the hell pit you came from.”

“You mad shit, you should be buried in those sewers with your cockroach friends!” the GIGN officer exploded in Arabic marked with a strong Algerian accent, much to Sayfullah’s surprise. Petrol had been poured onto Raphael’s hostility; he had felt the full insult of being called a filthy infidel.

“I’ll starve you to death, dog, and I’ll feed you to Hell piece by piece,” Sayfullah said.

“The police dogs will hunt you down soon, and I’ll enjoy watching them tear you limb from limb.”

Verbal abuse gave Raphael a brutal pleasure. He felt his words sinking into the flesh of the infuriating rebel, leaving behind fissures impregnated with his hatred.

Spitting in Raphael’s direction, Sayfullah headed for the stairs leading to the lower floors. Nervous, spasmodic movements revealed he was troubled in his mind and soul.

He descended the stairs, examining every floor. Like most houses around the Grand Mosque, the house was made from volcanic rock, and it was illuminated by a subdued light that crept in from windows covered with wooden latticework. All the ancient wooden doors had been replaced with iron doors, which were firmly locked, effortlessly mocking Sayfullah’s desperate attempts to force them. Sweat was dripping from the rebel’s face when he was forced to go back to the roof terrace. He felt he was falling into the trap of that warped playroom; it was a crude and derisive incongruity, a total discord with the scene of death he had wasted no time in escaping.

Hunger led Sayfullah to the kitchen connected to the playroom, where he was confronted with a farce: in all the drawers and on all the shelves, he found nothing but box after box of sweetened oatmeal for babies and high-fiber multi-seed Quaker Oats. He felt the insult to his comrades’ martyrdom when he gave in and prepared the porridge. Every spoonful deepened the pit buried inside him. He sat opposite Raphael and silently ate the bodies of his comrades. Without preamble, he surprised his adversary by offering him some,

and it was accepted without hesitation. The French officer obediently ate a spoonful of porridge, then another, faithful to his GIGN training to survive at all costs.

“I’m fattening you for the slaughter,” Sayfullah muttered, justifying this generous impulse to himself and his opponent in an attempt to avoid focusing on the other’s diabolical nakedness—the sinful nakedness that filled the room with hot, slick steam.

Although fear gave him a mounting lust for murder, Raphael was aware of the unreality and weirdness of the scene around him. He attributed it to the effects of the gas and the blows to his head. There was something ambiguous, something he couldn’t explain in the body of his opponent who had deprived him of his metal armor. Was it the beating he had undergone at the hands of this nonentity, this skinny extremist? Or was it the humiliation he was savoring now, after years of moving through battlefields like an untouchable god, taking and bestowing life according to his will? Or was there an invisible force in this country of jinn and ghosts; something that shattered the armor surrounding his pride and stripped his ego of its grandeur? Raphael was deeply troubled; of all the emotions hatching inside him, terror was the most prominent. Human frailty was a betrayal of the image he had created for himself: he was a tank, a war machine with legs. With every passing minute, Raphael had the increasing and uncomfortable feeling he was a tortoise that had been stealthily and involuntarily pushed outside its steel shell.

There was something in Sayfullah’s body and movements he couldn’t explain. It reminded him of his own body in its adolescence, before he joined the GIGN and surrendered his body to brutal training, bodybuilding exercises, and anabolic steroids, until the moment came when he incorporated his mother’s despotism and was able to kill the ghostly body of his father latent within him. Raphael’s body had thrown off its leanness; it bulged and swelled like a magical giant released from a bottle. He had succeeded in burying his skinny body so deeply it could never emerge, but now this Bedouin nonentity had come along and brought it out of its grave. It had been returned to life, and with it a temptation to give into the vulnerability he had

denied for so long. Raphael felt like a modern Narcissus, falling in love once again with an old image of himself.

Without realizing it, he was allowing something odd to weaken the killing mechanism constructed inside him by years of fighting on battlefields where people were worth no more than insects, where breaking a person's neck held the same satisfaction as smoking a cigarette after a rich meal, and where a human body crushed beneath your boots was a signature on a picture drawn in blood. The course of his life had been driven by anger till this point, but toward whom, or on account of what, he didn't know.

With profound self-contempt, the two enemies seemed to be floating inside a surreal hallucination, in a slippery, emotional nakedness, in such a way that the world, which had baptized them in blood, didn't touch them. Very gradually, their rhythm slowed, and they had no choice but to surrender to this snare, contemplating the world from above while they were separate from its laws and its restrictive templates.

The insurgents finally surrendered, more than two weeks after the first attack on the mosque. Clouds of dusty, disheveled, bearded ghosts were flung into the shadows of a locked truck. They were consumed by lice and filth, by starvation from the long siege and by the rage of the open-mouthed bodies all around them. They heaved a sigh of relief to be leaving a hell of their own making. The houses surrounding the Grand Mosque watched intently and in silence; none of the remaining inhabitants dared to feel safe or break the curfew until it was announced officially that the siege was over. News of the insurgents' surrender hadn't spread through the city yet, and whenever a bird landed, children and adults started in shock, deeply disturbed by the bullets, sights, and memories of those terrifying weeks; many residents still expected to be felled by a crazed bullet from one of the snipers who had been hunting them for a fortnight.

The courtyard of the Grand Mosque was sunk in total silence, spattered with blood and body parts, and human limbs blocked the

path of the attacking soldiers. Gas clouds hovered over the scene, protecting the troops in blue and khaki as they scoured the halls, corridors, cellars, and minarets of the Grand Mosque, purging them of the last pockets of resistance.

The houses trembled from the influx of armored cars and tanks crawling along the roads. From peepholes and cracks in windows, eyes peered out onto a string of military trucks carrying the bodies of the dead, thrown into indiscriminate piles; they had not been covered with khaki canvas. The vehicles proceeded along al-Khalil Street then turned south to Bir Yakhour, where their cargo would be thrown into a mass grave and forcibly forgotten.

Flocks of doves watched from the rooftops, unsure whether it was safe to resume flying over the Grand Mosque alongside the giant birds with metal rotors. Their memories still held images of bearded snipers in the minarets who had fired on every moving shadow.

Presently, a group of families overcame their terror. They rushed to assist in cleaning up the mosque, eager to hurry the moment when the minarets would shower them with the call to prayer, rather than random bullets. However, most houses remained paralyzed by rumors that some of the rebels on the outskirts of the mosque had escaped. These rumors were corroborated by the gunfire that broke out in various districts of the city, the result of attempts to capture them.



Day Three

SAYFULLAH WALKED THROUGH THE ROOM barefoot, his face and arms shining from his ablutions for prayer. He glanced around, looking for a spot where he could pray. Raphael watched, seeing Sayfullah's anxiety when he was unable to find a spot where he could escape seeing the girl who hunted him from the walls. Raphael closed his eyes, vanquished by the strong emotions swelling inside him. Growing rage was mixed with an attraction to the self he saw reflected in the mirror of that slim body. He was ashamed of admitting an intolerable need to squeeze and rend those arms, hairless and elegantly molded, and those long fingers, soft and as far from the fingers of a fighter as they could be; but despite their softness, they had left painful bruises on his body from their last struggle. The water from Sayfullah's ablutions softly illuminated his delicate features, and there was something in his movements while praying that unsteadied and hypnotized Raphael. The humiliation Raphael's body had endured, and the destruction of the steel shell that had protected him, had left him raw, and now he was in a state of excessive sensitivity; his senses were whetted to such a disorienting pitch that no movement or smell, not even the crawling of an ant, escaped him. His state of vigilance was painful.

Sayfullah stood as if nailed to the floor. He became conscious of the dolls, which he had pushed into the background and forgotten about. Now he felt the outlines of their faces were slipping out from beneath the covers he had placed on them and peering at him. Plastic arms and legs began to raise their coverings and writhe

lasciviously, with a sinuousness that was almost liquid, scattering the angels who had descended to witness and receive his prayers. The plastic nakedness filled him with horror, the more so as he felt the Devil in those malignant gyrations which mocked him and his attempts to be purified of death, to evoke God in this room so He could apportion the reward of that lost battle.

Rapidly, he turned around so he could pray at the entrance of the room overlooking the terrace, offering his defenseless back as a target for the stares of the dolls and Raphael, which focused mockingly on his round backside. As Sayfullah performed his prostrations, his entire abdomen quivered, his blood rushed burning to his ears, and he lost his balance. He tumbled onto his hands and knees and the moment his forehead touched the ground, his dry eyelids exploded with scorching tears that blinded him as they fell onto the cold floor, and his limbs plunged into a long prostration, while he yearned for a hole or a grave in whose dust he could find peace.

“Oh Lord, I am Your broken sword if You do not guide me with Your mercy. The Devil is filling me with doubts; God, do you see me fleeing from him? I am nothing but Your slave. I surrendered to Your will for us there, when You struck us with an earthquake in Your sacred house, and You were our witness when we fought to the last breath, and our hearts were in our throats and we looked into the eyes of Azrael the angel of death. I ran away so I could continue fighting, and here I am, in Your hands, but I am too weak for this test. It is beyond any test You sent me before.”

Something bombarded Raphael's heart when he caught Sayfullah's faint wail. He could hear the explosion in senses that for years he had thought impregnable, incapable of being moved or softened. The sight of Sayfullah squatting on his prayer mat made Raphael quiver uncontrollably. He had a vision not of Sayfullah's body, but of his own, Raphael's, squatting in exactly that position while he was mounted by countless destructive human monsters. Long-repressed memories escaped from the bottle where he had imprisoned them all these years, and here he was, confronting the incident that had occurred during the second month of the hellish exercise he had

embarked on in order to join the GIGN forces. For two months they had driven him beyond the limit of endurance; for two months, which lasted an eternity, he had been tempted to throw himself into the path of a stray bullet or an exploding bomb so the torture would end. Inevitably, his trainers caught the scent of his desperation, and it pushed them to ensnare him in even more violence so he would be driven to exceed his capabilities. It had happened during a survival exercise in the wild, when they were flown to the rainforests of Madagascar. Each of them was left to battle nature and find a way to survive. Raphael had found himself in a lost world, haunted by fabled creatures and turbulent conditions. This primitive theater had been carefully selected to pluck out the last roots of gentleness and humanity hidden within them, on both a physical and a psychological level.

Raphael had hardly jumped out in his parachute when he was swept away by a tropical storm and flung thousands of feet down a precipice into the flooded rainforests. Caverns ran underground where sunlight couldn't penetrate. Even if there had been light, Raphael wouldn't have been able to see; his senses were dulled after hours spent wandering through intersecting caves filled with darkness and damp, foul-smelling algae, and calcified rats. A hostile, implacable world snatched him up and he plunged deeper and deeper until he finally hit the bottom, shackled by mud and tree bark and creatures it was impossible to imagine.

Raphael stumbled on, trying to discover a path, any path, but he couldn't get far or even follow his compass. Every piece of equipment he was carrying proved ineffectual in his hands; he had fallen victim to his inner lack of direction. He was like an insect in the face of the forest of never-ending trees and rivers that suddenly gushed forth and then dried up, and vicious traps that multiplied all around him. Numb, Raphael curled up under a mass of roots that had grown into a sort of canopy, and he lit a sluggish fire that emitted no light or warmth and only succeeded in lengthening the threatening shadows all around. He didn't dare to move as his shadow bulged and spilled over everything, in every direction. Wherever he turned there was nothing but his own self, lying in wait, engorged and attracting

the endless monsters who roamed this island. Raphael couldn't lie down. Everything was slipping under his feet; the earth was covered with a carpet of lizards like miniature omens of misfortune, and over his head hung a bower of boas, of every snake from the seven continents, hissing and twining and staring at him. He didn't dare leave the canopy; all around his refuge he had been able to hear the bellowing of that mythical bull which moved relentlessly, fast as lightning, devouring everything in its path. Those myths provoked none of the mockery now that they had in the training programs. He and his comrades had laughed at those beings, those imaginary creatures that had risen from the heads of the primitive and naive Malagasy, but in these lethal forests those myths were more real and dangerous than the sophisticated weapons on his back.

An age seemed to pass while Raphael hoped the forest would retreat and leave him alone to rot—or that all its demons would descend on him and rip him apart. He was in the perfect place to give up and die, but the wait became more oppressive than dying itself. He had to move on through this nonexistence. Sometimes at a crawl, sometimes at a blind gallop, he began to push through cavities and hollows that contained no distinguishing features other than their skin-flaying humidity. It was difficult to determine whether it was night or day as sunlight couldn't reach the bottom of the trees, and Raphael spent days in the several caves he came across, letting his body slip from one humid womb to another even more dank and dark. Bladelike plants left deep wounds in his aching body, and once he turned away from a human corpse that had been dispatched to his pit to rot. As he walked, burdened with revulsion and despair, some ghost came between him and the discovery of a way out of this hell. Things had lost all meaning; the lines and the knowledge of the maps he carried were useless. He began to be convinced that all human life had vanished, everything had drowned in the darkness, nothing was left but ghosts hatched out of the nothingness that dug into the wounds he had unknowingly buried since childhood. He sat in the undergrowth and probed the scars made by his father's suffering, itself caused by his mother's repeated betrayals. He plunged into

the depths of his father's despair; the same despair that had possessed him as an adolescent and driven him to join the army with the aim of taking revenge on life in general. His father's anguish was infinite and it ate away at Raphael in the same way bones are crumbled by humidity, so that he was no longer sure how much time he had spent on this island. Minutes? Hours? An age? There was no time of any kind here, nor any will to go on. He didn't care about time. All his attention was concentrated in finding a ray of light, any light, even if it was the light of death, but he kept roaming through a nihilistic slice of pitch blackness. Minutes swelled into hours without noticeable alteration, like a fat black scorpion hiding from view.

Except for the moment when his heightened senses caught the sound of a twig breaking, a faint *tick* almost beyond hearing, and hope of survival re-awoke in Raphael. He wheeled around impatiently, only to find his body crushed onto a giant root that rose from the earth like a platform. He had been thrown so he was kneeling face downward, like a sacrificial offering to the demon now sucking his body, pinned down and open for desecration. His trousers were torn away, his guts congealed when claws scoured them, countless claws were plunging into his flesh; against all logic, he was certain they belonged to the demons of this forest, given physical form in order to punish him, and at the same time he heard wails breaking out all around like newborn babies. Faintly, a memory came back of their trainer telling them about Malagasy children born on inauspicious dates, who were left on anthills to be eaten alive. He could feel the soft flesh in his belly being gnawed by the fangs of a ruthless ant. However much he struggled, he couldn't succeed in freeing his body. It was pinned down for what seemed like an eternity while dry stalks burrowed into his guts and lecherous spears tore his anus mercilessly, answering his deeply rooted need to destroy his being and self beyond hope of repair, until the pain brought him to a climax that burst his heart and soul like a blister.

Afterward, he was left alone. A trail of blood trickled behind him as he walked, and not an insect, beast, or shadow dared to follow him. The entire forest was revolted by the rot of his bowels that had been infected by a demon's sperm.

The smell of semen guided him while he was at the summit of pain, beyond pain. He left his weapons behind, along with the state-of-the-art survival kit they had armed him with when they dropped him into this hell. Half-naked, he began to grope his way forward. He didn't bother with concealment; his feverish wound gave him additional senses that helped him decipher the darkness.

At some point, an enormous apparition appeared in front of him, layers of pitch-black wrinkles flowing over gleaming white bones. This skeleton was the first light to appear on his path; its burning eyes were like live coals, illuminating slack lips drawn like a short veil over long teeth.

The vision beckoned to Raphael, but its feet gave Raphael cause for doubt; they pointed backward. Raphael wanted to turn and run away but the giant clothed with wrinkles wouldn't let him retreat. It pointed, indicating that Raphael should cross the sea of crystal blades spreading out before him, sharp blades nature had formed so close together there was no way of passing between them and no way of walking over them. Raphael wanted to escape, but wherever he turned the wrinkled giant was there, guiding him deeper and deeper. Raphael followed, trampling the crystal knives in a state of numbness. He didn't care whether the apparition was leading him to his destruction. He followed automatically, as if he were following an instinct, until the vision brought him to the entrance of a huge cavern, a pit of nothingness like the depths of his soul at that moment, and invited him to enter. At once he was swept away into its flooded and endless tunnels, and although he couldn't see anything, he was sure that the walls of this cave were lined with corpses. A voice in his head affirmed that it was a mass grave left over from some colonial war or other, and he remembered his trainer's warnings of the taboos of the Malagasy. He had said, "Never point your finger at a grave, or that finger will fall off." It was a ridiculous superstition, but nevertheless Raphael was careful to keep his fist closed and avoided pointing at the graves arrayed close together around him. He wondered whether he had been forced into participating in *famadihana*, the ritual of bone-turning, when the Malagasy dug up the bodies

of their dead relatives and wrapped them in new shrouds to keep them happy. He was lightheaded at this moment of nonexistence, and wondered whether he should re-shroud his father; his mother deserved no such satisfaction.

Raphael realized he was surrounded by skeletons, white lined with black, crowned with skulls leaning at contemplative angles as they watched his passage and illuminated the cavern with their bones. As soon as Raphael exchanged a glance with them, their eye sockets began to resemble his father's eyes, gouged out by humiliation, and they sucked him in.

It was a moonlit night when he was launched back into life like a missile, and he found himself floating on the Indian Ocean. The night was calm and his feverish body, flayed and wounded, was gathered up by its cool touch. Tranquility eased his passage from the earth's crushing bowels to its surface, made resplendent by the reflections of the stars. He abandoned his body to the salty waves and the wind, realizing that he had found his way out of the forest at last.

When he was reunited with his division, he resisted all attempts to submit him to treatment. In silence, he endured fever, bowel rot, and the suspicion that it was his comrades who had raped him. They had overpowered him and bullied him since he joined the forces, seeing something twisted in him: the fragility created by his mother. It was a half-invitation to violation, and they had responded to that invitation, making sure to cure him of that fragility by their actions. But Raphael, newly formed by Madagascar, had severed every link with his past and his human weakness, aware that wherever he went, those forests and its demons would be carried living in his belly.

Afterward, he never allowed a single ray of sunlight to pierce the rot inside him and heal it.

Fury, inconducive to healing, caused him to excel at his training in extermination and turned him into something exceptional. One look at him no longer revealed a mortal man, but death itself.

Now this young, graceful rebel was praying and kneeling in front of him. It was his own past, violated body made manifest, and yet, like a mirror; it reflected his confusion about his true sexuality and

the mask of brutality that protected his fragility. The mask had fallen now, that mask of a GIGN killing machine, and out of the deeps, like a radiant bubble of humanity, the delicate adolescent he had buried in the caverns of Madagascar had emerged. He didn't know why, but he found himself ensnared in feelings of tenderness toward Sayfullah; or rather, he had fallen victim to the need to protect him.

Suddenly, Raphael was struck by the insight that he had once again succumbed to the idea of destroying himself. He realized that in surrendering to captivity without seriously attempting to escape, in allowing this rebel to bewitch him, he had betrayed the military training that had turned him into a machine driven by commands without reference to his own logic. He wondered whether, by disobeying commands, he had committed the suicide he had postponed for so long.

He sat there, observing the transformation he had submitted to. It was not merely a psychological transformation; even his muscles seemed to be contracting in his body's attempt to regain the grace he had lost when he joined the army. Was this the effect of the gas? Or had the jinn in this rebel's body cast their nets over him and put a spell on him?

Sayfullah remained still for a long time, his forehead touching the ground, his heart burning to repeat his prayer, while he trembled from the unbearable coldness in his soul.

“O Guide, O Path, guide me with a miracle, or help me to kill this infidel and surrender myself to the fire of my pursuers with a heart of stone.”

Finally Sayfullah finished his prayers. He turned to the rearrangement of the room. Frozen in flight on the walls, the little girl watched him while he began to clear the empty biscuit boxes and line them up neatly against the wall. As an ominous darkness fell on the room, Sayfullah seemed hypnotized, staring blankly ahead while his hand twisted a napkin. He began to gather up the dolls, trying not to touch them with his bare hands or look directly into their bright blue eyes. A gasp ran around the walls when he cut off the first head and threw it into the nearest box. A second head

followed, and a third, and for a long while he was absorbed in decapitating the hypnotic dolls. He filled three boxes to the brim with heads, but the imprisoned blue eyes bored through the boxes to witness the rest of the slaughter. When he had finished, Sayfullah piled the headless bodies in a corner and covered them with a red blanket. Then, full of revulsion, he began to rip the cotton dolls apart, one after another, emptying their cotton stuffing and filling the place with white dust as he threw their empty fabric skins and withered faces into the bin.

The girl on the walls quivered when he turned to face her. He took up a knife and began to scrape her off the walls; his violent blows left deep wounds on her joyfully flying feet, but he only succeeded in scraping the surface layer of color off her neck and face, which were too high for him to reach. A long way from the knife, the girl closest to the ceiling watched the disfigurement befalling her feet and her reflections nearer the ground in terror. But however much he scraped and stabbed, specters of the girl remained, perfectly whole and engrossed in the ecstasy of her unrestrained flight over the wall; she was wounded but still sparkling with joy, and free.

Raphael felt his demons reflected in these slaughtered dolls, but he resisted the temptation to fuel his disgust at the rebel who had been occupied with breathing life into the powerless dolls and turning them into an enemy army.

Mocking Sayfullah was Raphael's only way of reclaiming what he was: an officer of exceptional ability, master of the destinies of individuals and countries, capable of exterminating every living thing on the face of the earth.

Sayfullah felt Raphael's eyes on him. He stopped abruptly and turned a sullen face toward the officer. "Get ready to join them in Hell."

"You're hunting a girl on a wall? God, you're a nothing." He wanted that word to strike like a lightning bolt and reduce his enemy to ash. "Nothing."

But when no lightning bolt hit the room and his enemy was still standing, Raphael couldn't bring himself to continue the abuse.

“You’re nothing but a hostage to demons of your own invention, and the weapon you hold is tempting you to play God.”

Sayfullah closed his ears in the face of this blasphemy, murmuring, “Astaghfir Allah, astaghfir Allah, may God forgive me . . .”

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No Knives in the Kitchens of This City
by Khaled Khalifa, translated by Leri Price

The Unexpected Love Objects of Dunya Noor
by Rana Haddad

The Baghdad Eucharist
by Sinan Antoon, translated by Maia Tabet



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