

LOST CONTINENT

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1

Ali's uncle took hold of his right arm and offered it to the stranger, who gripped it firmly by the wrist. "From this moment on, you must obey this man," his uncle instructed him. "Obey him as you would obey your father. Your life depends on it."

"Yes, Uncle." Ali kept his eyes respectfully lowered.

"Come with me, boy," said the stranger, heading for the door.

"Yes, haji," Ali mumbled, following meekly. He could hear his mother still sobbing quietly in the next room, and he had to fight to hold back his own tears. He had said good-bye to his mother and his uncle, but he'd had no chance for any parting words with his cousins. It was halfway between midnight and dawn, and if anyone else in the household was awake, they were huddled beneath their blankets, straining to hear what was going on but not daring to show their faces.

The stranger strode out into the cold night, hand still around Ali's wrist like an iron shackle. He led Ali to the Land Cruiser that sat in the icy mud outside his uncle's house, its frosted surfaces glinting in the starlight, an apparition from a nightmare. Just the smell of it made Ali rigid with fear; it was the smell that had presaged his father's death, his brother's disappearance. Experience had taught him that such a machine could only bring tragedy, but his uncle had entrusted him to its driver. He forced himself to approach without resisting.

The stranger finally released his grip on Ali and opened a door at the rear of the vehicle. "Get in and cover yourself with the blanket. Don't move, and don't make a sound, whatever happens. Don't ask me any questions, and don't ask me to stop. Do you need to take a piss?"

"No, haji," Ali replied, his face burning with shame. Did the man think he was a child?

"All right, get in there."

As Ali complied, the man spoke in a grimly humorous tone. "You think you show me respect by calling me 'haji'? Every old man in your village is 'haji'! I haven't just been to Mecca. I've been there in the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him." Ali covered his face with the ragged blanket, which was imbued with the concentrated stench of the machine. He pictured the stranger standing in the darkness for a moment, musing arrogantly about his unnatural pilgrimage. The man wore enough gold to buy Ali's father's farm ten times over. Now his uncle had sold that farm, and his mother's jewelry—the hard-won wealth of generations—and handed all the money to this boastful man, who claimed he could spirit Ali away to a place and a time where he'd be safe.

The Land Cruiser's engine shuddered to life. Ali felt the vehicle moving

backward at high speed, an alarming sensation. Then it stopped and moved forward, squealing as it changed direction; he could picture the tracks in the mud.

It was his first time ever in one of these machines. A few of his friends had taken rides with the Scholars, sitting in the back in the kind with the uncovered tray. They'd fired rifles into the air and shouted wildly before tumbling out, covered with dust, alive with excitement for the next ten days. Those friends had all been Sunni, of course. For Shi'a, rides with the Scholars had a different kind of ending.

Khurosan had been ravaged by war for as long as Ali could remember. For decades, tyrants of unimaginable cruelty from far in the future had given their weapons to factions throughout the country, who'd used them in their squabbles over land and power. Sometimes the warlords had sent recruiting parties into the valley to take young men to use as soldiers, but in the early days the villagers had banded together to hide their sons, or to bribe the recruiters to move on. Sunni or Shi'a, it made no difference; neighbor had worked with neighbor to outsmart the bandits who called themselves soldiers and keep the village intact.

Then four years ago, the Scholars had come, and everything had changed.

Whether the Scholars were from the past or the future was unclear, but they certainly had weapons and vehicles from the future. They had ridden triumphantly across Khurosan in their Land Cruisers, killing some warlords, bribing others, conquering the bloody patchwork of squalid fiefdoms one by one. Many people had cheered them on, because they had promised to bring unity and piety to the land. The warlords and their rabble armies had kidnapped and raped women and boys at will; the Scholars had hung the rapists from the gates of the cities. The warlords had set up checkpoints on every road, to extort money from travelers; the Scholars had opened the roads again for trade and pilgrimage in safety.

The Scholars' conquest of the land remained incomplete, though, and a savage battle was still being waged in the north. When the Scholars had come to Ali's village looking for soldiers themselves, they'd brought a new strategy to the recruitment drive: they would take only Shi'a for the front line, to face the bullets of the unsubdued warlords. Shi'a, the Scholars declared, were not true Muslims, and this was the only way they could redeem themselves: laying down their lives for their more pious and deserving Sunni countrymen.

This deceit, this flattery and cruelty, had cleaved the village in two. Many friends remained loyal across the divide, but the old trust, the old unity was gone.

Two months before, one of Ali's neighbors had betrayed his older brother's hiding place to the Scholars. They had come to the farm in the early hours of the morning, a dozen of them in two Land Cruisers, and dragged Hassan away. Ali had watched helplessly from his own hiding place, forbidden by his father to try to intervene. And what could their rifles have done against

the Scholars' weapons, which sprayed bullets too fast and numerous to count?

The next morning, Ali's father had gone to the Scholars' post in the village to try to pay a bribe to get Hassan back. Ali had waited, watching the farm from the hillside above. When a single Land Cruiser had returned, his heart had swelled with hope. Even when the Scholars had thrown a limp figure from the vehicle, he'd thought it might be Hassan, unconscious from a beating but still alive, ready to be nursed back to health.

It was not Hassan. It was his father. They had slit his throat and left a coin in his mouth.

Ali had buried his father and walked half a day to the next village, where his mother had been staying with his uncle. His uncle had arranged the sale of the farm to a wealthy neighbor, then sought out a mosarfar-e-waqt to take Ali to safety.

Ali had protested, but it had all been decided, and his wishes had counted for nothing. His mother would live under the protection of her brother, while Ali built a life for himself in the future. Perhaps Hassan would escape from the Scholars, God willing, but that was out of their hands. What mattered, his mother insisted, was getting her youngest son out of the Scholars' reach.

In the back of the Land Cruiser, Ali's mind was in turmoil. He didn't want to flee this way, but he had no doubt that his life would be in danger if he remained. He wanted his brother back and his father avenged, he wanted to see the Scholars destroyed, but their only remaining enemies with any real power were murderous criminals who hated his own people as much as the Scholars themselves did. There was no righteous army to join, with clean hands and pure

hearts.

The Land Cruiser slowed, then came to a halt, the engine still idling. The mosarfar-e-waqt called out a greeting, then began exchanging friendly words with someone, presumably a Scholar guarding the road.

Ali's blood turned to ice; what if this stranger simply handed him over? How much loyalty could mere money buy? His uncle had made inquiries of people with connections up and down the valley and had satisfied himself about the man's reputation, but however much the mosarfar-e-waqt valued his good name and the profits it brought him, there'd always be some other kind of deal to be made, some profit to be found in betrayal.

Both men laughed, then bid each other farewell. The Land Cruiser accelerated.

For what seemed like hours, Ali lay still and listened to the purring of the engine, trying to judge how far they'd come. He had never been out of the valley in his life, and he had only the sketchiest notion of what lay beyond. As dawn approached, his curiosity overwhelmed him, and he moved quietly to shift the blanket just enough to let him catch a glimpse through the rear window. There was a mountain peak visible to the left, topped with snow,

crisp in the predawn light. He wasn't sure if this was a mountain he knew, viewed from an unfamiliar angle, or one he'd never seen before.

Not long afterward they stopped to pray. They made their ablutions in a small, icy stream. They prayed side by side, Sunni and Shi'a, and Ali's fear and suspicion retreated a little. However arrogant this man was, at least he didn't share the Scholars' contempt for Ali's people.

After praying, they ate in silence. The mosarfar-e-waqt had brought bread, dried fruit, and salted meat. As Ali looked around, it was clear that they'd long ago left any kind of man-made track behind. They were following a mountain pass, on higher ground than the valley but still far below the snow line.

They traveled through the mountains for three days, finally emerging onto a wind-blasted, dusty plain. Ali had grown stiff from lying curled up for hours, and the second time they stopped on the plain, he made the most of the chance to stretch his legs and wandered away from the Land Cruiser for a minute or two.

When he returned, the mosarfar-e-waqt said, "What are you looking for?"

"Nothing, haji."

"Are you looking for a landmark, so you can find this place again?"

Ali was baffled. "No, haji."

The man stepped closer, then struck him across the face, hard enough to make him stagger. "If you tell anyone about the way you came, you'll hear some more bad news about your family. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, haji."

The man strode back to the Land Cruiser. Ali followed him, shaking. He'd had no intention of betraying any detail of their route, any secret of the trade, to anyone, but now his uncle had been named as hostage against any indiscretion, real or imagined.

Late in the afternoon, Ali heard a sudden change in the sound of the wind, a high-pitched keening that made his teeth ache. Unable to stop himself, he lifted his head from beneath the blanket.

Ahead of them was a small dust storm, dancing across the ground. It was moving away from them, weaving back and forth as it retreated, like a living thing trying to escape them. The Land Cruiser was gaining on it. The heart of the storm was dark, thick with sand, knotted with wind. Ali's chest tightened. This was it: the pol-e-waqt, the bridge between times. Everyone in his village had heard of such things, but nobody could agree what they were: the work of men, the work of djinn, the work of God. Whatever their origin, some men had learned their secrets. No mosarfar-e-waqt had ever truly tamed them, but nobody else could find these bridges or navigate their strange depths.

They drew closer. The dust rained onto the windows of the Land Cruiser, as fine as any sand Ali had seen, yet as loud as the hailstones that fell

sometimes on the roof of his house. Ali forgot all about his instructions; as they vanished into the darkness, he threw off the blanket and started praying aloud.

The mosarfar-e-waqt ignored him, muttering to himself and consulting the strange, luminous maps and writing that changed and flowed in front of him through some magic of machinery. The Land Cruiser ploughed ahead, buffeted by dust and wind but palpably advancing. Within a few minutes, it was clear to Ali that they'd traveled much farther than the storm's full width as revealed from the outside. They had left his time and his country behind, and were deep inside the bridge.

The lights of the Land Cruiser revealed nothing but a handsbreadth of flying dust ahead of them. Ali peered surreptitiously at the glowing map in the front, but it was a maze of branching and reconnecting paths that made no sense to him. The mosarfar-e-waqt kept running a fingertip over one path, then cursing and shifting to another, as if he'd discovered some obstacle or danger ahead. Ali's uncle had reassured him that at least they wouldn't run into the Scholars in this place, as they had come to Khurosan through another, more distant bridge. The entrance to that one was watched over night and day by a convoy of vehicles that chased it endlessly across the desert, like the bodyguards of some staggering, drunken king.

A hint of sunlight appeared in the distance, then grew slowly brighter. After a few minutes, though, the mosarfar-e-waqt cursed and steered away from it. Ali was dismayed. This man had been unable to tell his uncle where or when Ali would end up, merely promising him safety from the Scholars. Some people in the village—he kind with a friend of a friend who'd fled into the future—spoke of a whole vast continent where peace and prosperity reigned from shore to shore. The rulers had no weapons or armies of their own but were chosen by the people for the wisdom, justice, and mercy they displayed. It sounded like paradise on Earth, but Ali would believe in such a place when he saw it with his own eyes.

Another false dawn, then another. The body of the Land Cruiser began to moan and shudder. The mosarfar-e-waqt cut the engine, but the vehicle kept moving, driven by the wind or the ground itself. Or maybe both, but not in the same direction: Ali felt the wheels slipping over the treacherous river of sand. Suddenly there was a sharp pain deep inside his ears, then a sound like the scream of a giant bird, and the door beside him was gone. He snatched at the back of the seat in front of him, but his hands closed over nothing but the flimsy blanket as the wind dragged him out into the darkness.

Ali bellowed until his lungs were empty. But the painful landing he was braced for never came: the blanket had snagged on something in the vehicle, and the force of the wind was holding him above the sand. He tried to pull himself back toward the Land Cruiser, hand over hand, but then he felt a tear run through the blanket. Once more he steeled himself for a fall, but then the tearing stopped with a narrow ribbon of cloth still holding him.

Ali prayed. "Merciful God, if you take me now, please bring Hassan back safely to his home." For a year or two his uncle could care for his mother, but he was old, and he had too many mouths to feed. With no children of

her own, her life would be unbearable.

A hand stretched out to him through the blinding dust. Ali reached out and took it, grateful now for the man's iron grip. When the mosarfar-e-waqt had dragged him back into the Land Cruiser, Ali crouched at the stranger's feet, his teeth chattering. "Thank you, haji. I am your servant, haji." The mosarfar-e-waqt climbed back into the front without a word.

Time passed, but Ali's thoughts were frozen. Some part of him had been prepared to die, but the rest of him was still catching up. Sunlight appeared from nowhere: the full blaze of noon, not some distant promise. "This will suffice," the mosarfar-e-waqt announced wearily.

Ali shielded his eyes from the glare, then when he uncovered them the world was spinning. Blue sky and sand, changing places.

The bruising thud he'd been expecting long before finally came, the ground slapping him hard from cheek to ankle. He lay still, trying to judge how badly he was hurt. The patch of sand in front of his face was red. Not from blood: the sand itself was red as ochre.

There was a sound like a rapid exhalation, then he felt heat on his skin. He raised himself up on his elbows. The Land Cruiser was ten paces away, upside down, and on fire. Ali staggered to his feet and approached it, searching for the man who'd saved his life. Behind the wrecked vehicle, a storm like the one that the mouth of the bridge had made in his own land was weaving drunkenly back

and forth, dancing like some demented hooligan pleased with the havoc it had wreaked.

He caught a glimpse of an arm behind the flames. He rushed toward the man, but the heat drove him back.

"Please, God," he moaned, "give me courage."

As he tried again to breach the flames, the storm lurched forward to greet him. Ali stood his ground, but the Land Cruiser spun around on its roof, swiping his shoulder and knocking him down.

He climbed to his feet and tried to circle around to the missing door, but as he did the wind rose up, fanning the flames.

The wall of heat was impenetrable now, and the storm was playing with the Land Cruiser like a child with a broken top. Ali hacked away, glancing around at the impossible red landscape, wondering if there might be anyone in earshot with the power to undo his calamity. He shouted for help, his eyes still glued to the burning wreck in the hope that a miracle might yet deliver the unconscious

driver from the flames.

The storm moved forward again, coming straight for the Land Cruiser. Ali turned and retreated; when he looked over his shoulder, the vehicle was gone and the darkness was still advancing.

He ran, stumbling on the uneven ground. When his legs finally failed him and he collapsed onto the sand, the bridge was nowhere in sight. He was alone in a red desert. The air was still, now, and

very hot.

After a while he rose to his feet, searching for a patch of shade where he could rest and wait for the cool of the evening. Apart from the red sand there were pebbles and some larger, cracked rocks, but there was no relief from the flatness: not so much as a boulder he could take shelter beside. In one direction there were some low, parched bushes, their trunks no thicker than his fingers, their branches no higher than his knees. He might as well have tried to hide from the sun beneath his own thin beard. He scanned the horizon, but it offered no welcoming destination.

There was no water for washing, but Ali cleaned himself as best he could and prayed. Then he sat cross-legged on the ground, covered his face with his shawl, and lapsed into a sickly sleep.

He woke in the evening and started to walk. Some of the constellations were familiar, but they crossed the sky far closer to the horizon than they should have. Others were completely new to him.

There was no moon, and though the terrain was flat he soon found that he lost his footing if he tried to move too quickly in the dark. When morning came, it brought no perceptible change in his surroundings. Red sand and a few skeletal plants were all that this land seemed to hold.

He slept through most of the day again, stirring only to pray. Increasingly, his sleep was broken by a throbbing pain behind his eyes. The night had been chilly, but he'd never experienced such heat before. He was unsure how much longer he could survive without water. He began to wonder if it would have been better if he'd been taken by the wind inside the bridge or perished in the burning Land Cruiser.

After sunset, he staggered to his feet and continued his hopeful but unguided trek. He had a fever now, and his aching joints begged

him for more rest, but he doubted if he'd wake again if he resigned himself to sleep.

When his feet touched the road, he thought he'd lost his mind. Who would take the trouble to build such a path through a desolate place like this? He stopped and crouched down to examine it. It was gritty with a sparse layer of windblown sand; beneath that was a black substance that felt less hard than stone, but resilient, almost springy.

A road like this must lead to a great city. He followed it.

An hour or two before dawn, bright headlights appeared in the distance. Ali fought down his instinctive fear; in the future such vehicles should be commonplace, not the preserve of bandits and murderers. He stood by the roadside awaiting its arrival.

The Land Cruiser was like none he'd seen before, white with blue markings.

There was writing on it, in the same European script as he'd seen on many machine parts and weapons that had made their way into the bazaars, but no words he recognized, let alone understood. One passenger was riding beside the driver; he climbed out, approached Ali, and greeted him in an incomprehensible tongue.

Ali shrugged apologetically. "Salaam aleikom," he ventured. "Bebakhshid agha, mosarfar hastam. Ba tawarz' az shoma moharfazat kharesh mikonam."

The man addressed Ali briefly in his own tongue again, though it was clear now that he did not expect to be understood any more than Ali did. He called out to his companion, gestured to Ali to stay put, then went back to the Land Cruiser. His companion handed him two small machines; Ali tensed, but they didn't look like any weapons he'd seen.

The man approached Ali again. He held one machine up to the side of his face, then lowered it again and offered it to Ali. Ali took it, and repeated the mimed action.

A woman's voice spoke in his ear. Ali understood what was happening; he'd seen the Scholars use similar machines to talk with each other over great distances. Unfortunately, the language was still incomprehensible. He was about to reply, when the woman spoke again in what sounded like a third language. Then a fourth, then a fifth. Ali waited patiently, until finally the woman greeted him in stilted Persian.

When Ali replied, she said, "Please wait." After a few minutes, a new voice spoke. "Peace be upon you."

"And upon you."

"Where are you from?" To Ali, this man's accent sounded exotic, but he spoke Persian with confidence.

"Khurosan."

"At what time?"

"Four years after the coming of the Scholars."

"I see." The Persian speaker switched briefly to a different language; the man on the road, who'd wandered halfway back to his vehicle and was still listening via the second machine, gave a curt reply. Ali was amazed at these people's hospitality: in the middle of the night, in a matter of minutes, they had found someone who could speak his language.

"How did you come to be on this road?"

"I walked across the desert."

"Which way? From where? How far did you come?"

"I'm sorry, I don't remember."

The translator replied bluntly, "Please try."

Ali was confused. What did it matter? One man, at least, could see how weary he was. Why were they asking him these questions before he'd had a chance to rest?

"Forgive me, sir. I can't tell you anything; I'm sick from my journey."

There was an exchange in the native language, followed by an awkward silence. Finally the translator said, "This man will take you to a place where you can stay for a while. Tomorrow we'll hear your whole story."

"Thank you, sir. You have done a great thing for me. God will reward you."

The man on the road walked up to Ali. Ali held out his arms to embrace him in gratitude. The man produced a metal shackle and snapped it around Ali's wrists.

2

The camp was enclosed by two high fences topped with glistening ribbons of razor-sharp metal. The space between them was filled with coils of the same material. Outside the fences there was nothing but desert as far as the eye could see. Inside, there were guards, and at night everything was bathed in a constant harsh light. Ali had no doubt that he'd come to a prison, though his hosts kept insisting that this was not the case.

His first night had passed in a daze. He'd been given food and water, examined by a doctor, then shown to a small metal hut that he was to share with three other men. Two of the men, Alex and Tran, knew just enough Persian to greet Ali briefly, but the third, Shahin, was an Iranian, and they could understand each other well enough. The hut's four beds were arranged in pairs, one above the other; Ali's habit was to sleep on a mat on the floor, but he didn't want to offend anyone by declining to follow the local customs. The guards had removed his shackles, then put a bracelet on his left wrist—made from something like paper, but extraordinarily strong—bearing the number 3739. The last numeral was more or less the same shape as a Persian nine; he recognized the others from machine parts, but he didn't know their values.

Every two hours, throughout the night, a guard opened the door of the hut and shone a light on each of their faces in turn. The first time it happened, Ali thought the guard had come to rouse them from their sleep and take them somewhere, but Shahin explained that these "head counts" happened all night, every night.

The next morning, officials from the camp had taken Ali out in a vehicle and asked him to show them the exact place where he'd arrived through the bridge. He'd done his best, but all of the desert looked the same to him. By midday, he was tempted to designate a spot at random just to satisfy his hosts, but he didn't want to lie to them. They'd returned to the camp in a sullen mood. Ali couldn't understand why it was so important to them.

Reza, the Persian translator who'd first spoken with Ali through the machine, explained that he was to remain in the camp until government officials had satisfied themselves that he really was fleeing danger and hadn't merely come to the future seeking an easy life for himself. Ali

understood that his hosts didn't want to be cheated, but it dismayed him that they felt the need to imprison him while they made up their minds. Surely there was a family in a nearby town who would have let him stay with them for a day or two, just as his father would have welcomed any travelers passing through their village.

The section of the camp where he'd been placed was fenced off from the rest and contained about a hundred people. They were all travelers like himself, and they came from every nation Ali had heard of, and more. Most were young men, but there were also women, children, entire families. In his village, Ali would have run to greet the children, lifted them up and kissed them to make them smile, but here they looked so sad and dispirited that he was afraid the approach of even the friendliest stranger might frighten them.

Shahin was a few years older than Ali, but he had spent his whole life as a student. He had traveled just two decades through time, escaping a revolution in his country. He explained that the part of the camp they were in was called "Stage One"; they were being kept apart from the others so they wouldn't learn too much about the way their cases would be judged. "They're afraid we'll embellish the details if we discover what kind of questions they ask, or what kind of story succeeds."

"How long have you been here?" Ali asked.

"Nine months. I'm still waiting for my interview."

"Nine months!"

Shahin smiled wearily. "Some people have been in Stage One for a year. But don't worry, you won't have to wait that long. When I arrived here, the Center Manager had an interesting policy: nobody would have their cases examined until they asked him for the correct application form. Of course, nobody knew that they were required to do that, and he had no intention of telling them. Three months ago, he was transferred to another camp. When I asked the woman who replaced him what I needed to do to have my claims heard, she told me straightaway: ask for Form 866."

Ali couldn't quite follow all this. Shahin explained further.

Ali said, "What good will it do me to get this piece of paper? I can't read their language, and I can barely write my own."

"That's no problem. They'll let you talk to an educated man or woman, an expert in these matters. That person will fill out the form for you, in English. You only need to explain your problem, and sign your name at the bottom of the paper."

"English?" Ali had heard about the English; before he was born they'd tried to invade both Hindustan and Khurosan, without success. "How did that language come here?" He was sure that he

was not in England.

"They conquered this country two centuries ago. They crossed

the world in wooden ships to take it for their king."

"Oh." Ali felt dizzy; his mind still hadn't fully accepted the journey he'd made. "What about Khurosan?" he joked. "Have they conquered that as well?"

Shahin shook his head. "No."

"What is it like now? Is there peace there?" Once this strange business with the English was done, perhaps he could travel to his

homeland. However much it had changed with time, he was sure he could make a good life there.

Shahin said, "There is no nation called Khurosan in this world.

Part of that area belongs to Hindustan, part to Iran, part to Russia."

Ali stared at him, uncomprehending. "How can that be?"

However much his people fought among themselves, they would never have let invaders take their land.

"I don't know the full history," Shahin said, "but you need to understand something. This is not your future. The things that happened in the places you know are not a part of the history of this world. There is no pol-e-waqt that connects past and future in the

same world. Once you cross the bridge, everything changes, including the past."

With Shahin beside him, Ali approached one of the government officials, a man named James, and addressed him in the English he'd learned by heart. "Please, Mr. James, can I have Form 866?"

James rolled his eyes and said, "Okay, okay! We were going to get around to you sooner or later." He turned to Shahin and said, "I wish you'd stop scaring the new guys with stories about being stuck

in Stage One forever. You know things have changed since Colonel Kurtz went north."

Shahin translated all of this for Ali. "Colonel Kurtz" was Shahin's nickname for the previous Center Manager, but everyone, even the guards, had adopted it. Shahin called Tran "The Rake," and Alex was "Denisovich of the Desert."

Three weeks later, Ali was called to a special room, where he sat with Reza. A lawyer in a distant city, a woman called Ms. Evans, spoke with them in English through a machine that Reza called a "speakerphone." With Reza translating, she asked Ali about everything: his village, his family, his problems with the Scholars. He'd been asked about some of this the night he'd arrived, but he'd been very tired then and hadn't had a chance to put things clearly.

Three days after the meeting, he was called to see James. Ms. Evans had

written everything in English on the special form and sent it to them. Reza read through the form, translating everything for Ali to be sure that it was correct. Then Ali wrote his name on the bottom of the form. James told him, "Before we make a decision, someone will come from the city to interview you. That might take a while, so you'll have to be patient."

Ali said, in English, "No problem."

He felt he could wait for a year, if he had to. The first four weeks had gone quickly, with so much that was new to take in. He had barely had space left in his crowded mind to be homesick, and he tried not to worry about Hassan and his mother. Many things about the camp disturbed him, but his luck had been good: the infamous "Colonel Kurtz" had left, so he'd probably be out in three or four months. The cities of this nation, Shahin assured him, were mostly on the distant coast, an infinitely milder place than the desert around the camp. Ali might be able to get a laboring job while studying English at night, or he might find work on a farm. He hadn't quite started his new life yet, but he was safe, and everything looked hopeful.

By the end of his third month Ali was growing restless. Most days he played cards with Shahin, Tran, and a Hindustani man named Rakesh, while Alex lay on his bunk reading books in Russian. Rakesh had a cassette player and a vast collection of tapes. The songs were mostly in Hindi, a language that contained just enough Persian words to give Ali some sense of what the lyrics were about: usually love, or sorrow, or both.

The metal huts were kept tolerably cool by machines, but there was no shade outside. At night the men played soccer, and Ali sometimes joined in, but after falling badly on the concrete, twice, he decided it wasn't the game for him. Shahin told him that it was a game for grass; from his home in Tehran, he'd watched dozens of nations compete at it. Ali felt a surge of excitement at the thought of all the wonders of this world, still tantalizingly out of reach: in Stage One, TV, radio, newspapers, and telephones were all forbidden. Even Rakesh's tapes had been checked by the guards, played from start to finish to be sure that they didn't contain secret lessons in passing the interview. Ali couldn't wait to reach Stage Two, to catch his first glimpse of what life might be like in a world where anyone could watch history unfolding and speak at their leisure with anyone else.

English was the closest thing to a common language for all the people in the camp. Shahin did his best to get Ali started, and once he could converse in broken English, some of the friendlier guards let him practice with them, often to their great amusement. "Not every car is called a Land Cruiser," Gary explained. "I think you must come from Toyota-*stan*."

Shahin was called to his interview. Ali prayed for him, then sat on the floor of the hut with Tran and tried to lose himself in the mercurial world of the cards. What he liked most about these friendly games was that good and bad luck rarely lasted long, and even when they did it barely mattered. Every curse and every blessing was light as a feather.

Shahin returned four hours later, looking exhausted but satis-

fied. "I've told them my whole story," he said. "It's in their hands now." The official who'd interviewed him had given him no hint as to what the decision would be, but Shahin seemed relieved just to have had a chance to tell someone who mattered everyting he'd

suffered, everything that had forced him from his home.

That night Shahin was told that he was moving to Stage Two in half an hour. He embraced Ali. "See you in freedom, brother."

"God willing."

After Shahin was gone, Ali lay on his bunk for four days, refusing to eat, getting up only to wash and pray. His friend's departure was just the trigger; the raw grief of his last days in the valley came flooding back, deepened by the unimaginable gulf that now separated him from his family. Had Hassan escaped from the Scholars? Or was he fighting on the front line of their endless war, risking death every hour of every day? With the only mosarfar-e-waqt Ali knew now dead, how would he ever get news from his family or send them his assistance?

Tran whispered gruff consolations in his melodic English.

"Don't worry, kid. Everything okay. Wait and see."

Worse than the waiting was the sense of waste: all the hours trickling away, with no way to harness them for anything useful. Ali tried to improve his English, but there were some concepts he could get no purchase on without someone who understood his own language to help him. Reza rarely left the government offices for the compound, and when he did he was too busy for Ali's questions.

Ali tried to make a garden, planting an assortment of seeds that he'd saved from the fruit that came with some of the meals. Most of Stage One was covered in concrete, but he found a small patch of bare ground behind his hut that was sheltered from the fiercest sunlight. He carried water from the drinking tap on the other side of the soccer ground and sprinkled it over the soil four times a day.

Nothing happened, though. The seeds lay dormant; the land would not accept them.

Three weeks after Shahin's departure, Alex had his interview, and left. A week later, Tran followed. Ali started sleeping through the heat of the day, waking just in time to join the queue for the evening meal, then playing cards with Rakesh and his friends until dawn.

By the end of his sixth month, Ali felt a taint of bitterness creeping in beneath the numbness and boredom. He wasn't a thief or a murderer, he'd committed no crime. Why couldn't these people set him free to work, to fend for himself instead of taking their charity, to prepare himself for his new life?

One night, tired of the endless card game, Ali wandered out from Rakesh's hut earlier than usual. One of the guards, a woman named Cheryl, was

standing outside her office, smoking. Ali murmured a greeting to her as he passed; she was not one of the friendly ones, but he tried to be polite to everyone.

"Why don't you just go home?" she said.

Ali paused, unsure whether to dignify this with a response. He'd long ago learned that most of the guards' faces became stony if he tried to explain why he'd left his village; somewhere, somehow it had been drummed into them that nothing their prisoners said could be believed.

"Nobody invited you here," she said bluntly. "We take twelve thousand people from the UN camps every year. But you still think you're entitled to march right in as if you owned the place."

Ali had only heard mention of these "UN camps" since his arrival here. Shahin had explained that there'd probably been a dusty tent-city somewhere on the border of his country, where—if he'd survived the journey across the Scholars' heartland—he could have waited five, or ten, or fifty years for the slim chance that some beneficent future government might pluck him from the crowd and

grant him a new life.

Ali shrugged. "I'm here. From me, big tragedy for your nation? I'm honest man and hard worker. I'm not betray your hospitality."

Cheryl snickered. Ali wasn't sure if she was sneering at his English or his sentiments, but he persisted. "Your leaders did agreement with other nations. Anyone asking protection gets fair hearing." Shahin had impressed that point on Ali. It was the law, and in this society the law was everything. "That is my right."

Cheryl coughed on her cigarette. "Dream on, Ahmad."

"My name is Ali."

"Whatever." She reached out and caught him by the wrist, then held up his hand to examine his ID bracelet. "Dream on, 3739."

James called Ali to his office and handed him a letter. Reza translated it for him. After eight months of waiting, in six days' time he would finally have his interview.

Ali waited nervously for Ms. Evans to call him to help him prepare, as she'd promised she would when they'd last spoken, all those months before. On the morning of the appointed day, he was summoned again to James's office, and taken with with Reza to the room with the speakerphone, the "interview room. A different lawyer, a man called Mr. Cole, explained to Ali that Ms Evans had left her job and he had taken over Ali's case. He told Ali that everything would be fine, and he'd be listening carefully to Ali's interview and making sure that everything went well.

When Cole had hung up, Reza snorted derisively. "You know how these clowns are chosen? They put in tenders, and it goes to the lowest bidder." Ali didn't entirely understand, but this didn't sound encouraging. Reza

caught the expression on Ali's face, and added, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. Fleeing from the Scholars is flavor of the month."

Three hours later, Ali was back in the interview room.

The official who'd come from the city introduced himself as John Fernandez. Reza wasn't with them; Fernandez had brought a different interpreter with him, a man named Parviz. Mr. Cole joined them on the speakerphone. Fernandez switched on a cassette recorder and asked Ali to swear on the Quran to give truthful answers to all his questions.

Fernandez asked him for his name, his date of birth, and the place and time he'd fled. Ali didn't know his birthday or his exact age; he thought he was about eighteen years old, but it was not the custom in his village to record such things. He did know that at the time he'd left his uncle's house, twelve hundred and sixty-five years had passed since the Prophet's flight to Medina.

"Tell me about your problem," Fernandez said. "Tell me why you've come here."

Shahin had told Ali that the history of this world was different from his own, so Ali explained carefully about Khurosan's long war, about the meddlers and the warlords they'd created, about the coming of the Scholars. How the Shi'a were taken by force to fight in the most dangerous positions. How Hassan was taken. How his father had been killed. Fernandez listened patiently, sometimes writing on the sheets of paper in front of him as Ali spoke, interrupting him only to encourage him to fill in the gaps in the story, to make everything clear.

When he had finally recounted everything, Ali felt an overwhelming sense of relief. This man had not poured scorn on his words the way the guards had; instead, he had allowed Ali to speak openly about all the injustice his family and his people had suffered.

Fernandez had some more questions.

"Tell me about your village, and your uncle's village. How long would it take to travel between them on foot?"

"Half a day, sir."

"Half a day. That's what you said in your statement. But in your entry interview, you said a day." Ali was confused. Parviz explained that his "statement" was the written record of his conversation with Ms. Evans, which she had sent to the government; his "entry interview" was when he'd first arrived in the camp and been questioned for ten or fifteen minutes.

"I only meant it was a short trip, sir, you didn't have to stay somewhere halfway overnight. You could complete it in one day."

"Hmm. Okay. Now, when the smuggler took you from your uncle's village, which direction was he driving?"

"Along the valley, sir."

"North, south, east, west?"

"I'm not sure." Ali knew these words, but they were not part of the language of everyday life. He knew the direction for prayer, and he knew the direction to follow to each neighboring village.

"You know that the sun rises in the east, don't you?" "Yes."

"So if you faced in the direction in which you were being driven, would the sun have risen on your left, on your right, behind you, where?"

"It was nighttime."

"Yes, but you must have faced the same direction in the valley in the morning, a thousand times. So where would the sun have risen?" Ali closed his eyes and pictured it. "On my right."

Fernandez sighed. "Okay. Finally. So you were driving north. Now tell me about the land. The smuggler drove you along the

valley. And then what? What kind of landscape did you see, between your valley and the bridge?"

Ali froze. What would the government do with this information? Send someone back through their own bridge, to find and destroy the one he'd used? The mosarfar-e-waqt had warned him not to tell anyone the way to the bridge. That man was dead, but it was unlikely that he'd worked alone; everyone had a brother, a son, a cousin to help them. If the family of the mosarfar-e-waqt could trace such a misfortune to Ali, the dead man's threat against his uncle would be carried through.

Ali said, "I was under a blanket, I didn't see anything."

"You were under a blanket? For how many days?" "Three."

"Three days. What about eating, drinking, going to the toilet?" "He blindfolded me," Ali lied.

"Really? You never mentioned that before." Fernandez shuffled through his papers. "It's not in your statement."

"I didn't think it was important, sir." Ali's stomach tightened. What was happening? He was sure he'd won this man's trust. And he'd earned it: he'd told him the truth about everything, until now. What difference did it make to his problem with the Scholars, which mountains and streams he'd glimpsed on the way to the bridge? He had sworn to tell the truth, but he knew it would be a far greater sin to risk his uncle's life.

Fernandez had still more questions, about life in the village. Some were easy, but some were strange, and he kept asking for numbers, numbers, numbers: how much did it weigh, how much did it cost, how long did it take? What time did the bazaar open? Ali had no idea, he'd been busy with farmwork in the mornings, he'd never gone there so early that it might have been closed. How many people came to Friday prayers in the Shi'a mosque? None, since the Scholars had arrived. Before that? Ali couldn't remember.

More than a hundred? Ali hesitated. "I think so." He'd never counted them, why would he have?

When the interview finished, Ali's mind was still three questions behind, worrying that his answers might not have been clear enough. Fernandez was rewinding the tapes, shaking his hand formally, leaving the room.

Mr. Cole said, "I think that went well. Do you have any questions you want to ask me?"

Ali said, "No, sir." Parviz had already departed.

"All right. Good luck." The speaker phone clicked off. Ali sat at the table, waiting for the guard to come and take him back to the compound.

3

Entering Stage Two, Ali felt as if he had walked into the heart of a bustling town. Everything was noise, shouting, music. He'd sometimes heard snatches of this cacophony wafting across the fenced-off "sterile area" that separated the parts of the camp, but now he was in the thick of it. The rows of huts, and the crowds moving between them, seemed to stretch on forever. There must have been a thousand people here, all of them unwilling travelers fleeing the cruelties

of their own histories.

He'd moved his small bag of belongings into the hut allocated to him, but none of his new roommates were there to greet him. He wandered through the compound, dizzy from the onslaught of new sights and sounds. He felt as if he'd just had a heavy cloth unwound from around his head, and his unveiled senses were still struggling to adjust. If he was reeling from this, how would he feel when he stepped onto the streets of a real city, in freedom?

The evening meal was over, the sun had set, and the heat outside had become tolerable. Almost everyone seemed to be out walking, or congregating around the entrances of their friends' huts, taped music blaring through the open doorways. At the end of one row of huts, Ali came to a larger building, where thirty or forty people were seated. He entered the room and saw a small box with a window on it, through which he could see an oddly-colored, distorted, constantly changing view. A woman was dancing and singing in Hindi.

"TV," Ali marveled. This was what Shahin had spoken about; now the whole world was open to his gaze.

An African man beside him shook his head. "It's a video. The TV's on in the other common room."

Ali lingered, watching the mesmerizing images. The woman was very beautiful, and though she was immodestly dressed by the standards of his village, she seemed dignified and entirely at ease. The Scholars would probably have stoned her to death, but Ali would have been happy to be a beggar in Mumbai if the streets there were filled with sights like this.

As he left the room, the sky was already darkening. The camp's floodlights had come on, destroying any hope of a glimpse of the stars. He asked someone, "Where is the TV, please?" and followed their directions.

As he walked into the second room, he noticed something different in the mood at once; the people here were tense, straining with attention. When Ali turned to the TV, it showed an eerily familiar sight: an expanse of desert, not unlike that outside the camp. Helicopters, four or five, flew over the landscape. In the distance, a tight funnel of swirling dust, dancing across the ground.

Ali stood riveted. The landscape on the screen was brightly lit, which meant that what he was watching had already happened: earlier in the day, someone had located the mouth of the bridge. He peered at the small images of the helicopters. He'd only ever seen a broken one on the ground, the toy of one warlord brought down by a rival, but he recognized the guns protruding from the sides. Whoever had found the bridge, it was now in the hands of soldiers.

As he watched, a Land Cruiser came charging out of the storm. Then another, and another. This was not like his own arrival; the convoy was caked with dust, but more or less intact. Then the helicopters descended, guns chattering. For a few long seconds Ali thought he was about to witness a slaughter, but the soldiers were firing consistently a meter or so ahead of the Land Cruisers. They were trying to corral the vehicles back into the bridge.

The convoy broke up, the individual drivers trying to steer their way past the blockade. Curtains of bullets descended around them, driving them back toward the meandering storm. Ali couldn't see the people inside, but he could imagine their terror and confusion. This was the future? This was their sanctuary? Whatever tyranny they were fleeing, to have braved the labyrinth of the pol-e-waqt only to be greeted with a barrage of gunfire was a fate so cruel that they must have doubted their senses, their sanity, their God.

The helicopters wheeled around the mouth of the bridge like hunting dogs, indefatigable, relentless in their purpose. Ali found the grim dance unbearable, but he couldn't turn away. One of the Land Cruisers came to a halt; it wasn't safely clear of the storm, but this must have seemed wiser than dodging bullets. Doors opened and people tumbled out. Weirdly, the picture went awry at exactly that moment, clumps of flickering color replacing the travelers' faces.

Soldiers approached, guns at the ready, gesturing and threatening, forcing the people back into the car. A truck appeared, painted in dappled green and brown. A chain was tied between the vehicles. Someone emerged from the Land Cruiser; the face was obscured again, but Ali could see it was a woman. Her words could not be heard, but Ali could see her speaking with her hands, begging, chastising, pleading for mercy. The soldiers forced her back inside.

The truck started its engines. Sand sprayed from its wheels. Two soldiers climbed into the back, their weapons trained on the Land Cruiser. Then they

towed their cargo back into the storm.

Ali watched numbly as the other two Land Cruisers were rounded up. The second stalled, and the soldiers descended on it. The driver of the third gave up and steered his own course into the mouth of the bridge.

The soldiers' truck emerged from the storm, alone. The helicopters spiraled away, circling the funnel at a more prudent distance. Ali looked at the faces of the other people in the room; everyone was pale, some were weeping.

The picture changed. Two men were standing, indoors somewhere. One was old, white haired, wizened. In front of him a younger man was talking, replying to unseen questioners. Both were smiling proudly.

Ali could only make sense of a few of the words, but gradually

he pieced some things together. These men were from the government, and they were explaining the events of the day. They had sent the soldiers to "protect" the bridge, to ensure that no more criminals and barbarians from the past emerged to threaten the peaceful life of the nation. They had been patient with these intruders for far too long. From this day on, nobody would pass.

"What about the law?" someone was asking. An agreement had been signed: any traveler who reached this country and asked for protection had a right to a fair hearing.

"A bill has been drafted, and will be introduced in the House tomorrow. Once passed, it will take force from nine o'clock this morning. The land within twenty kilometers of the bridge will, for the purposes of the Act, no longer be part of this nation. People entering the exclusion zone will have no basis in law to claim our protection."

Confused, Ali muttered, "Chi goft?" A young man sitting nearby turned to face him. "Salaam, chetori? Fahim hastam."

Fahim's accent was unmistakably Khurosani. Ali smiled. "Ali hastam. Shoma chetori?"

Fahim explained what the man on the TV had said. Anyone emerging from the mouth of the bridge, now, might as well be on the other side of the world. The government here would accept no obligation to assist them. "If it's not their land anymore," he mused, "maybe they'll give it to us. We can found a country of our own, a tribe of nomads in a caravan following the bridge across the desert."

Ali said nervously, "My interview was today. They said something about nine o'clock—"

Fahim shook his head dismissively. "You made your claim months ago, right? So you're still covered by the old law."

Ali tried to believe him. "You're still waiting for your decision?" "Hardly. I got refused three years ago."

"Three years? They didn't send you back?"

"I'm fighting it in the courts. I can't go back; I'd be dead in a week." There were dark circles under Fahim's eyes. If he'd been refused three years before, he'd probably spent close to four years in this prison.

Fahim, it turned out, was one of Ali's roommates. He took him to meet the other twelve Khurosanis in Stage Two, and the whole group sat together in one of the huts, talking until dawn. Ali was overjoyed to be among people who knew his language, his time, his customs. It didn't matter that most were from provinces far from his own, that a year ago he would have thought of them as exotic strangers.

When he examined their faces too closely, though, it was hard to remain joyful. They had all fled the Scholars, like him. They were all in fear for their lives. And they had all been locked up for a very long time: two years, three years, four years, five.

In the weeks that followed, Ali gave himself no time to brood on his fate. Stage Two had English classes, and though Fahim and the others had long outgrown them, Ali joined in. He finally learned the names for the European numbers and letters that he'd seen on weapons and machinery all his life, and the teacher encouraged him to give up translating individual words from Persian, and reshape whole sentences, whole thoughts, into the alien tongue.

Every evening, Ali joined Fahim in the common room to watch the news on TV. There was no doubt that the place they had come to was peaceful and prosperous; when war was mentioned, it was always in some distant land. The rulers here did not govern by force; they were chosen by the people, and even now this competition was in progress. The men who had sent the soldiers to block the bridge were asking the people to choose them again.

When the guard woke Ali at eight in the morning, he didn't complain, though he'd had only three hours' sleep. He showered quickly, then went to the compound's south gate. It no longer seemed strange to him to move from place to place this way: to wait for guards to come and unlock a succession of doors and escort him through the fenced-off maze that separated the compound from the government offices.

James and Reza were waiting in the office. Ali greeted them, his mouth dry. James said, "Reza will read the decision for you. It's about ten pages, so be patient. Then if you have any questions, let me know."

Reza read from the papers without meeting Ali's eyes. Fernandez, the man who'd interviewed Ali, had written that there were discrepancies between things Ali had said at different times, and gaps in his knowledge of the place and time he claimed to come from. What's more, an expert in the era of the Scholars had listened to the tape of Ali talking, and declared that his speech was not of that time. "Perhaps this man's great-grandfather fled Khurosan in the time of the Scholars, and some sketchy information has been passed down the generations. The applicant himself, however, employs a number of words that were not in use until decades later."

Ali waited for the litany of condemnation to come to an end, but it seemed to go on forever. "I have tried to give the applicant the benefit of the

doubt," Fernandez had written, "but the overwhelming weight of evidence supports the conclusion that he has lied about his origins, his background, and all of his claims." Ali sat with his head in his hands.

James said, "Do you understand what this means? You have seven days to lodge an appeal. If you don't lodge an appeal, you will have to return to your country."

Reza added, "You should call your lawyer. Have you got money for a phone card?"

Ali nodded. He'd taken a job cleaning the mess; he had thirty points in his account already.

Every time Ali called, his lawyer was busy. Fahim helped Ali fill out the appeal form, and they handed it to James two hours before the deadline. "Lucky Colonel Kurtz is gone," Fahim told Ali. "Or that form would have sat in the fax tray for at least a week."

Wild rumors swept the camp: the government was about to change, and everyone would be set free. Ali had seen the government's rivals giving their blessing to the use of soldiers to block the bridge; he doubted that they'd show the prisoners in the desert much mercy if they won.

When the day of the election came, the government was returned, more powerful than ever.

That night, as they were preparing to sleep, Fahim saw Ali staring at the row of white scars that criss-crossed his chest. "I use a razor blade," Fahim admitted. "It makes me feel better. The one power I've got left: to choose my own pain."

"I'll never do that," Ali swore.

Fahim gave a hollow laugh. "It's cheaper than cigarettes."

Ali closed his eyes and tried to picture freedom, but all he saw was blackness. The past was gone, the future was gone, and the world had shrunk to this prison.

4

"Ali, wake up, come see!"

Daniel was shaking him. Ali swatted his hands away angrily.

The African was one of his closest friends, and there'd been a time when he could still drag Ali along to English classes or the gym, but since the appeal tribunal had rejected him, Ali had no taste for any-

thing. "Let me sleep."

"There are people. Outside the fence."

"Escaped?"

"No, no. From the city!"

Ali clambered off the bunk. He splashed water on his face, then followed his friend.

A crowd of prisoners had gathered at the southwest corner of the fence, blocking the view, but Ali could hear people on the outside, shouting and banging drums. Daniel tried to clear a path, but it was impossible. "Get on my shoulders." He ducked down and motioned to Ali.

Ali laughed. "It's not that important."

Daniel raised a hand angrily, as if to slap him. "Get up, you have to see." He was serious. Ali obeyed.

From his vantage, he could see that the crowd of prisoners pressed against the inner fence was mirrored by another crowd struggling to reach the outer one. Police, some on horses, were trying to stop them. Ali peered into the scrum, amazed. Dozens of young people, men and women, were slithering out of the grip of the policemen and running forward. Some distance away across the desert stood a brightly colored bus. The word freedom was painted across it, in English, Persian, Arabic, and probably ten or twelve languages that Ali couldn't read. The people were chanting, "Set them free! Set them free!" One young woman reached the fence and clung to it, shouting defiantly. Four policemen descended on her and tore her away.

A cloud of dust was moving along the desert road. More police cars were coming, reinforcements. A knife twisted in Ali's heart. This gesture of friendship astonished him, but it would lead nowhere. In five or ten minutes, the protesters would all be rounded up and carried away.

A young man outside the fence met Ali's gaze. "Hey! My name's Ben."

"I'm Ali."

Ben looked around frantically. "What's your number?" "What?"

"We'll write to you. Give us your number. They have to deliver the letters if we include the ID number."

"Behind you!" Ali shouted, but the warning was too late. One policeman had him in a headlock, and another was helping wrestle him to the ground.

Ali felt Daniel stagger. The crowd on his own side was trying to fend off a wave of guards with batons and shields.

Ali dropped to his feet. "They want our ID numbers," he told Daniel. Daniel looked around at the melee. "Got anything to write on?"

Ali checked his back pocket. The small notebook and pen it was his habit to carry were still there. He rested the notebook on Daniel's back, and wrote, "Ali 3739 Daniel 5420." Who else? He quickly added Fahim and a few others.

He scabbled on the ground for a stone, then wrapped the paper around it. Daniel lofted him up again.

The police were battling with the protesters, grabbing them by the hair,

dragging them across the dirt. Ali couldn't see anyone who didn't have more pressing things to worry about than receiving his message. He lowered his arm, despondent.

Then he spotted someone standing by the bus. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. He, or she, raised a hand in greeting. Ali waved back, then let the stone fly. It fell short, but the distant figure ran forward and retrieved it from the sand.

Daniel collapsed beneath him, and the guards moved in with batons and tear gas. Ali covered his eyes with his forearm, weeping, alive again with hope.